Un monde flottant

Depth is Real

A Conversation with Jean-Claude Rousseau

BY BLAKE WILLIAMS

"Listen, darling, you're imagining too much."
—Oyoshi (Sugimura Haruko) in *Floating Weeds* (1959)

My second opportunity to experience the work of French filmmaker Jean-Claude Rousseau—whose patient, curious, and altogether cleansing sensibility is as radiant, pure, and necessary as that of any active filmmaker I can think of—came at the 2017 Locarno Festival, where he unveiled two new medium-length pieces, *Arrière-saison* and *Si loin, si proche*. This pairing, the first of what now amounts to three completed works that he shot in Japan, marked the most significant evolution in his otherwise remarkably consistent aesthetic tendencies. Namely, they were shot in HD video, and therefore in the comparatively wide 16:9 frame—an ironic gesture given that these films saw Rousseau explicitly announcing his debt to Ozu, who so famously poohpoohed CinemaScope by likening it to a piece of toilet paper.

I bring up and quantify this encounter for a couple of reasons, the first of which is to underline an increasingly inexplicable fact regarding Rousseau's exposure in North America—that it is largely nonexistent. There are myriad excuses that might be made for this, chief among them being that his project is heavily weighted toward the kind of medium-specific formalism that often gets dismissed as art for its own sake. Further, while one can find in his work significant commonalities with some of North America's premier experimental film practitioners from the latter half of the 20th century—Benning's exploration of the reel and its structural

principles, Snow's preoccupation with framing, Beavers' metaphorical and metatextual alignment with the camera's parts and operations, Dorsky's faith in a poetic, mysterious, extralinguistic cinema—this is a line of inquiry that has dipped under the radar on these shores for more than a decade now. Lately, perhaps necessarily, this medium is for messages, and as Rousseau makes perfectly clear whenever he speaks about art and/or his practice, he is interested in anything but.

The other reason I evoke Rousseau's Japan films is because his latest work, the nearly hour-long *Un monde flottant*, was likewise shot there, and is easily among the most rapturous and accessible expressions of his aesthetic concerns yet. Shot in Nara (the other two take place in Kyoto), the film offers a stream of scenes that Rousseau captured in the prefecture's parks, sidewalks, bars, and subway cars, not to mention the pseudo-domestic, purgatorial nowhere/anywhere that is his hotel room, a common motif throughout his filmography. Although he takes great care to describe his creative process as being opposed to the strictures of mental images, his arrangement of scenes here affords the images a feeling not at all unlike an impressionistic production of memory; to echo some words by the Spanish poet José Ángel Valente that have been of some importance to Rousseau, "perhaps the only thing the artist creates is the space for creation." While Rousseau's frames are as attentive as ever to the banal beauties offered by his locations, his camera inhaled an exceptional degree of vibrancy and serenity this time, traits embodied, especially, by the deer that unflinchingly roam Nara's forests and streets. The film begins with them, steadily and attentively, and they occupy a generous portion of the subsequent running time as well, re-emerging to balance out the system whenever it starts to become too modern, conscious, or grounded. Rousseau's almost primitive methodology for making his movies has already been accurately compared to Méliès, but the interplay between materiality and grace that he unearthed with this material may be his greatest magic trick yet.

Cinema Scope: You've been making films since the early '80s, when you were in your early 30s. What brought you to filmmaking at that time?

Jean-Claude Rousseau: I'm not sure there is an entrance. I was born, there was art, and I just had to deal with it. It's not always comfortable, encountering works of art; some are ancient, some are recent, and some of them just speak to you. For me, this happened when I was a teenager with painting, specifically Vermeer's. I learned about art and the importance of the frame through Vermeer. It is interesting to look at his different paintings, because even though they aren't showing the same thing, the relation between the lines is the same. I don't feel that when looking at other Dutch painters, like Pieter de Hooch, who is an interesting painter that painted very similar motifs as Vermeer and others in the 17th century did. De Hooch showed interiors of houses, which is exactly what Vermeer showed, yet they don't feel the same. Stand in front of a Vermeer painting, even for a short time, and you lose the feeling of time. Look at de Hooch's work and you don't have this feeling at all, because everything about it that's interesting can be described. Describe a Vermeer and you'll totally miss the painting; it isn't limited to what it shows. This is what I call—I guess the English word is "depth?"

Scope: *Profondeur*, in French?

Rousseau: Ah, you speak some French! Okay, because I was a bit worried about this word, "depth," and I was sure I'd have to use it. What you feel in front of a Vermeer is the *profondeur*. You don't get that from other painters of that period. The *profondeur* means that your act of looking doesn't stop at the surface of the painting, at what it's showing. This is why *le regard*—this word, too, is difficult, because if I say "looking," it's not really what I mean—goes very, very deep in Vermeer. This feeling is the *profondeur*, and it lasts across time. If I say this feeling lasts ten seconds, or 30 seconds, it doesn't mean anything, because in these few seconds that you're looking at it you are outside of time.

Scope: When you use *profondeur*, does it have any relation to perspectival depth?

Rousseau: It is a relation between lines. I'll repeat what I was first saying: when I started to become interested in Vermeer's painting, I took an opportunity to compare lines in two different paintings by him. The paintings weren't the same size, or the same subject or motif, yet the relation between the lines was the same. I have no interest in the "golden ratio," as it's called. The fact is, a frame becomes "right"—in French I would say *juste*—because of the relation between the lines. Perspective is about creating an illusion of a space, but this is not the truth! The truth is that they are lines on a flat surface. What is so great in Vermeer is that while he respects the rules of perspective—there is nothing revolutionary about his way of painting space—the lines that create the perspective also make the *profondeur*.

Scope: This is something that Godard grapples with in his 3D films, too, stating, in *Les trois désastres* (2013), "The conquest of space made everyone lose their memories," and then, in *Adieu au langage* (2014), citing Céline: "It is difficult to fit flatness into depth." It doesn't help that the word "depth" is often used to comment on either space, feeling, or an abundance of meaning.

Rousseau: Regarding 3D in movies, it's difficult for me to say anything because I have never experienced that, but I have to emphasize this distinction between *profondeur* and perspective. For me they are not only complete opposites, but one is an obstacle for the other. Perspective is not real; *depth* is real. If you look for perspective, you miss the deepness. You have to accept the flatness of the image, because this is the only way you can see the lines that make the frame. Bresson addresses this topic twice in *Notes sur le cinématographe*. First, he says you can't forget that the finished film will ultimately be seen on a flat cinema screen. And in the other, he says the image should be flattened as you would a garment when you iron your clothes. This flattening is how you can see the relations between lines on a surface.

One of the first articles that was published about my films was an interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which I did a few weeks after a screening in Locarno of *La vallée close* (1995). The title they used for the piece was "L'œil du cyclope." As everyone knows, the cyclops has only one eye, so for him everything is flat. When you see an image there is—in French I would say *la mise à plat*—a "flattening." Seeing an image, in either a painting, a film, or in reality,

Un monde flottant

the environment becomes flattened, because you are taken by the lines.

Scope: Did you paint before filmmaking?

Rousseau: I did, though I'm not sure I can call this work "painting." This was when I got back from New York City, where I stayed for one year when I was 30. What I felt when I would go there from Paris was very strong, and when I returned to France I started to make something that one might call "works of art." I worked with paper, first. I burned the paper, then I started to fold it, because when you fold paper, the creases give you lines. It was my way of finding the right relation between lines with respect to the frame. This lasted for a few years, and some of this work was exhibited.

After that I started to make images with my parents' Super 8mm camera. I was writing a screenplay that I had started when I was 21 or 22, and I worked on it for probably ten years, because I was still working on it when I was in New York City. This screenplay, called *Le concert champêtre*, I wrote by hand, then later again on a typewriter in the typical format used by the industry, when you need to get commissions and funding.

Scope: Did it have a story, a narrative?

Rousseau: Actually, yes, but in fact it's not so easy to say what it is about, because the story is the story of itself. By this I mean the screenplay tells the story of the writing of the screenplay; it is the story of a screenplay that cannot be realized and is never made into a film. Fortunately, I never got the money to make it, just as it happened in the story! I sent it to Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet in Rome, and when they received it, Jean-Marie told me, "I don't read screenplays." Then, because Jean-Marie mentioned it when speaking about *La vallée close* at the Cinémathèque française, someone at *Paris Expérimental* became aware of it and now it has been published. But it was only after I finally finished this screenplay that I could start to make films.

Scope: Which have all been made without screenplays, correct?

Rousseau: Yes, without a screenplay—or maybe I would say, all my films have the same screenplay, which is *Le concert champêtre*. I started filming my first film, *Jeune femme à sa fenêtre lisant une lettre* (1983), at my studio, where I was already doing other kinds of artworks, and I started to shoot the back of a painting without any idea for a film. I simply wanted to capture the natural sunlight as it landed on it. I made many different shots, all without any idea, only a direction—that direction being Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*.

I had all these Super 8mm reels, and my first idea was to use them to create shots that I thought were interesting and then edit them. The Super 8 format is tiny, so it's very difficult to edit that footage. For this reason, I didn't feel like cutting or choosing which shots to remove. It would be more interesting, I thought, to use each reel as its own element, and the film would establish relations between the different reels. The construction happened like this, with a fictional aspect related to defenestration—you know this word, for when a person is thrown through a window? This action, of course, you can only do one time. I wanted something like this that I could repeat. I thought, instead, I can enter the image; to me, entering the image is a defenestration. Because entering the image, becoming the figure of the frame, is always a disappearance if you can manage not to destroy the lines. You get taken by the lines into eternity.

In all the films I made after, it's the same. If you look at *Lettre à Roberto* (2002), my first film shot on video, there are only two shots. I am in the first one, initially in front of a desk before I go to sit on a bed facing the window. Since I was shooting on video, I was able to watch it as soon as it was done, and I could see it didn't work. Why? Because—and this relates to what I just said about disappearance—I had destroyed the lines! So I made another shot, it was perfect, and it's the one in the film.

Scope: Is this why you started working only in video after finishing *La vallée close*? So you could perfect your movements and do as many takes as you wanted until you were satisfied?

Rousseau: As you can imagine, most of the time that I saw my Super 8 footage I was disappointed, because what the camera re-

Un monde flottant

corded wasn't what I had in mind. This is wrong, though. I was looking for what I thought I wanted, and you can't get the image you want. This especially happens when you make a film that was written as a screenplay. If you try to catch an image that you wrote down, when you see the shot you aren't seeing an image at all; they are just signs. That's why in most films there are no images, only signs. And there are many reasons why I may feel that the image I shot doesn't fit what I wanted. Maybe there is some technical problem, it's out of focus or the lighting is wrong, but this doesn't mean anything! A technically "bad" image doesn't have to be a bad image, which is why I never throw away these shots, and also why it takes me a very long time to include a shot in a film. Sometimes I have to wait five years or more before a shot finds its place. I have to first forget the film I had in mind when I was shooting, and then I can move behind the veil of my mental image and see the image for what it is.

I made my second film, *Venice n'existe pas* (1984), using four Super 8mm reels, and the final reel shows a postcard of Venice. For the first minute, the shot is out of focus. I was trying a new movie camera, and I used a reel to do some tests. I received the material back from the lab, and this reel, which I thought wouldn't be useful for anything, was made *juste* by the sound. The image met with the sound of me opening a curtain and then a window, and because these sounds occur *exactly* when the image comes into focus, everything was made right. I wasn't looking for that, I *found* that, and suddenly this reel became necessary. In fact, without this reel the film wouldn't exist—*Venice n'existe pas* would not exist. It's more than a title.

Scope: Considering how your methodology is predicated on *not* having an idea in mind when you're filming, and on using images only several years after you've created them or finding these kinds of accidental sound-image pairings, at what point do you realize, "Ah, I know what film I'm making?"

Rousseau: It's good you're asking this question, because it means you understand. It starts something like this: I was in Japan three times in the last several years. The second time I went, I brought my new HD Canon camera. I made some shots, and months later when I was back in Paris, I found within those shots two short films: *Arrière-saison* and *Si loin, si proche*. My third and last time there, I made new shots when I saw a *juste* frame, but still without an idea of a film. I was there with two Japanese men, one in Kyoto and the other in Tokyo, and I filmed them. It felt like a problem at first, because I thought, "How can I make a film from only this?" The shots I made had no reason to stand together, so it took a very long time for them to become a film. It can be painful, because I think that it will be impossible. I *hoped* it would be a film, and fortunately, after a period of gestation, it happened. It's the same when I make shots. Most filmmakers are looking for an image and they try to catch it, but you cannot catch an image. It's the image that catches *you*.

Imagine you're walking together with someone, and suddenly you notice that this person isn't present with you anymore. Maybe it's because they are looking at something. You have no idea what they are looking at, but for a while you feel they aren't with you anymore. You ask them, "What are you looking at?" and the answer is almost always, "Nothing," and immediately they are back with you again. For a short time, though, they weren't there. It's because they were taken, caught. To me, this is what the image does. You are caught by it.

Scope: Is your approach different when you make a film in which you appear in the frame? How do you film yourself performing an action without having a preconceived idea of the image you want?

Rousseau: These films are based on ideas for movements that I can do in a frame, a frame that has to capture me first. In *L'Appel de la forêt* (2008), for instance, I saw a green wall with a deep black corridor to the right of it, in which there was hanging a tapestry of a deer. I saw in this frame a movement that I could do: I would walk into the corridor, remove the tapestry from where it was hung, and place it onto the green wall. It's correct that I had an

intention of doing this movement before making the shot, but the frame is what captured me first. I cannot tell you how many takes I did. There were probably quite a few.

Scope: A lot of your material is shot while you're travelling, living out of hotel rooms around the world. Like everyone else, you probably haven't left home much in the past year. Has this prolonged period of lockdowns and quarantining had a significant impact on your productivity?

Rousseau: Regarding the pandemic, someone recently asked me to write something about the effect this has had on me. I didn't write anything, because actually I don't mind. I mean, of course I mind, because of the problems for everyone's health and security. But I live near a busy street with a lot of traffic, and now it's quiet! But, no, I have material for many different films; I wouldn't have shot anything over these last several months anyway. For instance, I'm waiting for some shots I did by Lake Como in Italy years ago with my mini-DV camera to hopefully become a film; I am expecting a film from that. I also have shots that I made in New York about three years ago. I'm expecting three or four films to come from what I already have shot.

Scope: With multiple projects always on the horizon, what does a typical editing or work session look like for you?

Rousseau: Sometimes I sleep very badly, because I have a film in mind that doesn't want to show itself. I'm constantly thinking about how and why these shots will agree to stand together and show me the film. This is happening now, in fact, and it's very uncomfortable. Every day I have time at my computer to see what's happening. I move some shots in front of another one, or vice versa. I need to do this each day. When I have shots in front of me and I'm expecting a film, this is when I am really alive. Even though some days I come in, see what I did the previous day, and find out it just doesn't work—even though I was pleased with it yesterday. This is all in Final Cut Pro, do you know it?

Scope: I do! I used it to make all my movies, until I switched to Adobe Premiere last year.

Rousseau: Okay, well if you remember how it works, you have a timeline and all the different sequences. With this Prague film I am making, I currently have 18 sequences! This doesn't mean what it usually means, though. In each sequence, I make "blocks" from the shots that are pleased to stand together. I will make several blocks like this, and then I go from one sequence to another, bringing over the blocks from the previous sequence that are working, and then add new shots and blocks to that. After so many sequences, I will see the film.

Scope: The agreements you find between shots are very intuitive, and I always feel a great deal of confidence and wisdom emanating from your work. I want to ask how much you think of the audience. There are films you've made, like *Faux départ* (2006), that seem to be directly addressing a hypothetical viewer in an almost pedagogical way, while others feel like they don't need a viewer to witness them—they are content to simply exist.

Rousseau: Making films is a matter of necessity for me—a necessity for beauty. It sounds silly, but that's what it is. It's a question of, do you have this necessity or not? That's it! You need to be eager for it, because it's the thing that keeps you alive. There can be no consideration for how anyone else will receive it, or if they will be pleased. I cannot make these films if I first have to tell a producer what the film will be. If I did, then from their point of view they would be right to tell me, "Yes, but if you do that it won't be good for the audience, it would be better if you cut this..." For this I'd have to have a project, and I have no project. I only have this necessity for shooting. This is the only real thing about making movies. You don't have to be strong-willed to make films this way. You can be weak and make films like I do. After all, being weak doesn't mean you are stupid. Whether you are weak or not, you need to feel some "abandon"—a freedom to lose your mind. You must have the capacity for forgetting ideas.

I never know if a film works for everyone. Perhaps someone who watches my film won't feel the connection, because it's a question of feeling. I'll repeat something that I said to Jean-Marie Straub after a projection of *La vallée close*. He asked me, how did you get this *fulgurance,* this "spark?" At first I didn't know what to tell him; I had no answer. But later, at the same screening, I understood and I told him this happened because of how the sound touched the image. It creates something dazzling, a kind of spark. When it happens you don't think it, you feel it. If it is shown this way, I would think that anyone who watches the film will feel the same.

Scope: In *Un monde flottant*, there is an abundance of these moments. Despite the patient flow of images, to me this movie feels particularly spirited.

Rousseau: It's the way musical sounds meet natural sounds, which often have the same rhythm as music. This happens several times in this film. For example, we see people walking in the forest, and then we are back in a small room in a bar. There is music in the bar, and the passing from the forest to the bar scene connects because they have the same rhythm. It is the same music, in fact, even if the natural sound in the forest isn't music. This is a *fulgurance*.

Scope: After *Un monde flottant*'s end credits there is something unusual, which is that you place a final shot of a Nara deer, followed by a title card that briefly explains the mutilation ritual that resulted in the removal of their antlers. I don't recall other instances of this kind of coda in your work. What motivated you to include this note?

Rousseau: You can imagine that I spent some time wondering whether or not to include this. I didn't want to be complicit with what they do to these deer, which is done because of the tourists and residents who come to see them and, on a couple occasions, these animals weren't pleased to have so many people around and they became aggressive. It's amazing because Nara is an important site for the Shinto religion, which is very concerned with nature. They have a great respect for all expressions of the natural world, yet they cut the antlers off the deer. I think it's terrible, and I didn't want anyone who sees the film to think that I feel okay with it. I don't like putting words at the end of a film, but finally I decided it had to be done. There is beauty, but there is also conscience, and I would say that this kind of depth I've been talking about—the *profondeur*—it includes conscience.

I should say that inside the film, all the different shots of the deer are not connected with this feeling of culpability. I didn't capture these shots to show the fact that the deer were mutilated. They were done as I've always done them; they had the right movement of the animals or the people within a right frame. When you see the deer coming from the left side of the image and moving out through the right side...this is perfect. I didn't ask it to do that, and it is all about the movement, not any feelings of my culpability. But I do have to have this feeling of *consentement*—this "consent." It's the images that have to consent to be together, to show that they are pleased to stay where they are. In a cosmic sense, it is as though there is a gravitation that keeps them in orbit together. A shot may be nice, and maybe it will work in another film, but if they cannot stand to be in this orbit, then they must leave.

Scope: You tend to revisit a shot several times across a film's duration, especially in *Un monde flottant*, though you leave it unclear as to whether the different sections of that shot are presented chronologically. I never know if you're revisiting an image at an earlier or later moment than when it last appeared.

Rousseau: You have this uncertainty because all of us are eager for a story. We *need* it. This applies to me, too; I'm just like everybody when it comes to this. Of course, this need can be satisfied by thinking of the images in a chronological way. If you need it, you can get it, but I don't force it because the image can only subsist outside of linearity and chronology. Linearity is needed to tell a story, and this is very bad. That is literature, not art. I'm back to Vermeer again, because this is how the subject is shown in his paintings. If you are looking for representation, you can get that. You are given a representational image of a woman reading a letter by her window, if that's what you want. It's also quite something else. The elements exist by themselves, they don't need a story.

I should say, recently I heard of a terrible thing happening right now in Dresden with *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*. Part of the painting shows just a wall, as is often the case in Vermeer, and while doing a restoration they found that underneath the wall there is an image of Cupid. In two or three of his other paintings, you can see a small image of Cupid on the wall, and they have used an X-ray to find this large painting of a Cupid hidden under the wall, and now the restoration team is taking away the wall that Vermeer painted to show this other image. This Cupid is not at all at the right scale in relation to the woman reading the letter, it's unbelievable that they are doing this! If we are talking about stories, this is quite a story, no? It could be a documentary.

Scope: Maybe you should make it?

Rousseau: I couldn't make a documentary because I don't believe in documentaries. As you know, a lot of documentaries, maybe most of them are done from a screenplay and have some kind of fiction or something. My films are not documentaries, I'm sure you've realized.

Scope: I have, yes.

Rousseau: Thank you. Nothing has to be explained, because you don't need to have an intellectual point of view to make a film. If you look, again, in Bresson's *Notes sur le cinématographe*, you'll see his final note at the back of the book. He directly addresses his materials—the camera and his recorder. He says, "Camera, tape recorder, take me far away from intelligence, which complicates everything." You see? It's purely sensual. Very sensual.

Un monde flottant