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Marine Hugonnier

Chisenhale Gallery/MW Projects, London, UK

BY MARK GODFREY

A third of the way into her film *Ariana* (2003) Marine Hugonnier's voice narrates over a blank screen the failure of the initial project that had brought the artist and her crew to the Panjsher Valley, north-east of Kabul. Unable to reach a mountain summit, they were now just frustrated tourists. As she speaks the words, pictures emerge on the screen - Afghan market stalls, a birdcage, men in kaftans drinking sweetened tea. It's pure National Geographic - but Hugonnier knows it. This section of the film is a representation of the tourist's gaze, but the images in it lose none of their beauty for their clichéd familiarity.

Hugonnier travelled to the Panjsher Valley to make a film investigating the historical agency of its landscape. Long described as an earthly paradise, the valley had been broached by neither Soviet

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nor Taliban forces. Irrigated by streams running from the impenetrable surrounding mountains, it had remained a natural, self-sustaining Utopia, protected from political upheavals. Hugonnier intended to take a camera to a look-out point and film a 360° pan of the valley.

The project began with the acknowledgement that landscape is never innocent, but, as Hugonnier learnt, nor is the means of representing it. Locals informed her that the route to the viewpoint was blocked by a landslide. Remaining in the valley, she began to question her ambition: to make the panoramic shot as planned would have been to exercise a form of control through surveillance. It would have been to rupture the very resistance she wanted to describe.

Giving up, Hugonnier and crew returned to the capital, where the new utopia of Western capitalism was taking shape. Hugonnier was briefly drawn to the possibilities of making an alternative panorama, this time from the 'Television Hill' above Kabul. This was readily accessible, and she was escorted by a soldier from the new Afghan army. Looking down on the city, she felt 'euphoric' but relinquished the plan to film the panorama: such a shot risked homogenizing a city that she experienced as being so fragmented. A continuous sweep would hardly represent the traces of different ideologies still evident at ground level, but would instead function as propaganda, like the television programmes transmitted from that same hill.

As Hugonnier's voice is heard recounting this narrative and explaining these decisions, Ariana emerges as the 'making of' a film that was never made. It is a meditation on restraint and responsibility, on what it means to decide not to carry out a project. Most of all it is a rigorous, reflexive investigation of cinematic language. As we hear Hugonnier's voice recounting the problems described, so on the screen we witness an anatomization of film. Rarely has an artist articulated with such scrutiny what forms of power are assumed by a cameraman and an editor, how meaning is manipulated by a pan, a close-up, a shift in focus, a voice-over, a blank screen, a choice of lens. It becomes clear eventually that it is not just the 360° shot that has been resisted here but the very illusionism that underpinned the panoramas of the 19th century and their progeny - the movies. Panoramas were cylindrical paintings installed in purpose-built environments where every effort was made, through architecture and lighting, to enhance the fantasy that the viewer was seeing the real thing. Ariana, in total contrast, is anti-illusionistic, drawing critical attention throughout to its language, to its means of making meaning.

So might Hugonnier fall into the trap of didacticism by so clearly outlining the camera's relationship to power? Worse, might the work risk self-righteousness, even absurdity? (After all, what does restraint count for at a moment when images of Afghanistan are taken by American satellites?) Hugonnier side-steps such traps by showing the extent to which she remained attracted to the exciting possibility of filming the panorama even as she questioned it. But more importantly, she denies neither herself nor her viewers the visual pleasures of the trip. For the narrative of the project's failure plays out against stunning images - blue rivers crashing through dry mountains, makeshift goalposts set up on verdant meadows, a white landscape of undulating hills which we only slowly realize to be a close-up of a woman's silken veil. The film at the Chisenhale was complemented with a gallery show, while at MW Projects, Hugonnier installed an album of exquisite small photographs, a kind of visual diary of the project. There were also large-scale photographs of the Panjsher mountains - importantly, though, shot from below - lush and colourful, but not Sublime.

To suggest that the visual pleasure of the works mitigates didacticism is not quite enough; for this doesn't describe the way the work makes the possibility of beauty, the persistence of fantasy, into a

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subject. Just before leaving the valley for Kabul, Hugonnier was invited to a film screening. In a darkened room locals had set up an old projector that beamed flickering images of tropical fish swimming through coral reefs. Hugonnier filmed the room and the film itself, which looked scratchy from (one assumes) frequent projection. This pivotal film-within-the-film (which, in fact, comes midway through Ariana) allegorizes the universality of cinematic fantasy.

It's not just Hugonnier or her viewer who enjoys lush and moving images. This fascination is shared by these villagers; and in suggesting this Hugonnier avoids treating the local population as unknowable and draws them close to her own viewers, while at the same time reminding us that, despite a common fascination with the fantastic, the only real Utopia is a dream-world no-place to which humans have but flickering access - like the submarine world of the reef.

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