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Narrating the City

Documentary or Fiction in
Harrikrisna Anenden's *La Cathédrale*

*La Cathédrale*¹ was released in 2006, though its creation dates back to 1975. It was written by a then unknown teenage girl. The collection in which it appeared in 1976 was to launch Ananda Devi as a writer to be contended with. Today, she is a prolific author and an acknowledged member of the Mauritian intelligentsia, indeed of the Indian Ocean (as categories go). The truth is that Ananda Devi is, arguably, one of the most aesthetically engaged writers of the French language today. Refusal to conform and the will to push the limits of narrative possibilities at the level of genre, sentence, word, and image were already evident in the story written by the young girl. Now the author of works such as *Le sari vert* or *Eve de ses décombres*, which have gained critical acclaim, Devi is a sought-after writer well beyond the confines of her "regional" ascription to which the publishing and academic world might still hold strong.

The film version, however, is a strong instantiation of particularity, presenting the capital city of Port-Louis. *La Cathédrale* was filmed and produced by Devi's husband, Harrikrisna Anenden. While the subject of this essay is the film itself, I will make some references to the textual source material in pursuing further the question of genre. The film is a sensitive documentary of Port-Louis city life as much as, or even more than, it is the story of its protagonist Lina. The capital city is presented in this film as a "[s]ocial space [which] contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information. Such 'objects' are thus not only things but also relations. As objects, they possess discernible peculiarities, contour and

form."² Lina serves as a figure to trace such relations and her movements give them a particular form that is quite literally tangible in the cinematic medium. Yet, despite such connection to the reality of the city, there remains an implicit quest for an untouched space that might change the course of history. Port-Louis was an important colonial port on the "inner route" for ships rounding the Cape of Good Hope and bound for India or the Indonesian islands: While the spice route had already made this port a halt, it was British and French interest in India and the subcontinent that gave the island its strategic importance in naval history. Port-Louis had a safer harbor than the neighboring island of Réunion offered, and thus it changed hands as a valuable halt for ships on this route. First "discovered" by the Portuguese and officially taken over by the Dutch, Mauritius was French and then claimed by Britain in 1810. This date definitively marked British supremacy on the Indian Ocean and, subsequently, in India. However, the long presence of French administration continued to be felt, with Britain preferring to leave most French systems intact in the ensuing years for the various populations that made up its colony: French, African, Indian, and Chinese.

It is no coincidence that Anenden has made numerous documentaries himself during his long employment with the World Health Organization (WHO). In fact, the film is most satisfying when considered in its subtle interrogation of documentary and fiction rather than as solely the story of Lina who is "in search of her identity," as the jacket description of the DVD informs the would-be spectator. The story is indeed of the young adolescent high-school dropout Lina, who roams the streets of Port-Louis to escape her unhappy home situation with a hypochondriac mother and a father who is engrossed in his work as a cobbler and seems to pay attention to nothing else. At the level of story, then, the film is rather idealistic. Lina is not materialistic, seems dreamy and unrealistic about her future, despises the busy people who forget to "live" and dances on the steps of the cathedral while living off the generosity of her acquaintances—more specifically, the *dhal puri* seller, who gives her some food she does not pay for, and the ice-lolly man from whom she freely takes refreshing ice and enjoys intimate conversation that is lacking with her parents. Even her act of charity derives from the charity of another: we learn that it is her daily practice to hand over the coin that her friend the ice-lolly man, Ram, gives her,

to a mendicant woman who has watched Lina grow up. The conversation with the old woman throws the film into a mood of nostalgia, with the idea that things have changed in Port-Louis, as the woman philosophically opines amidst wise words about living in the moment and appreciating the present. If one considers the sole plot, the film is almost disappointing, offering a pivotal moment that seems easily anticipated: Lina decides not to go out with the French photographer, who is very taken with this carefree "native" girl he encounters.

Set in 1970's Port-Louis, the film gives few signs of its more recent shooting. Some new buildings do distract, particularly in the first panoramic shot. Of course it would have been quite possible to refrain from showing these if the intent were to recreate "exactly" the fictional setting. Clearly, the idea of truth becomes that of the film as a totality (the reality of filming, the impossibility for any kind of "return," and a sense of history as a living thing), rather than this or that fact being accurately captured mimetically. This filmic truth encompasses, amongst other things, Anenden's life away as a diasporic Mauritian, "returning" to film his native city, his recreation of another Mauritian, Ananda Devi's version of the fictional truth of the same city, and his aspirations as a filmmaker within the fraught context of independent filmmaking today. Thus framed, the film tracks an exciting journey and provides a beautiful testimonial for a close-to-impossible dream that is presented in a form that we might say could most "honestly" express both the dream and the thick historical reality from which it stems. *La Cathédrale*, as we shall see, is an instantiation of what "art" looks like from a very particular place and how it speaks to audiences well beyond that place.

A graduate of the London Film school, and trained in film criticism at the University of London, Harikrisna Anenden has worked, among other capacities, as a photographer and lab technician in various settings including the University of Mauritius. His numerous films cover a wide range and most often carry a pedagogical function that continued with his employment by the WHO (for example, his 1999 *Blood, the Gift of Life*, or *Facing up to AIDS* the following year). These experiences feed quite directly into this film. The presentation of place, time, geography, and the main characters—basic information for the viewer—are given up front and clearly. Given that the spectator shares the camera's view, the cinematic creation of this postcolonial context

is treated here with sensitivity for the latter's past in order to release the possibility for collective dreams from within nationhood. True close-up shots are rare, as the director seems to prefer the wide angle in general or the two-shot for conversations, while the zoom is highly restricted—all tactics that line up very well with the idea of distance, objectivity, and wide context provided to the spectator with minimal "judgment" or ideology. Knowing all the while that these are tricky generalizations, that they crumble and dissolve with technique, editing, spectatorship, and context, Anenden nevertheless goes for unexpected timing, superb editing, effective use of sound, and capitalizes on other elements of the composition rather than pure camera work to bring the movements of the city to life.

It is illuminating to learn that Anenden filmed Lina in the house in which he grew up in Port-Louis.³ For Gaston Bachelard, "[t]he house, even more than the landscape, is a 'psychic state,' and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy."⁴ Several scenes include Lina's home from both the inside and the outside. It is a modest, outdated apartment, parts of it quite dilapidated, and having only the bare minimum in terms of furniture. The very first image of Lina occurs in the establishing shot for giving the context of her home: the shot is interesting in that we encounter her as someone living in the neighborhood on the street. The camera focuses on the closed grey wooden window that is opened from the inside to the sound of birds chirping. The doors swing outward with a squeak to reveal a young woman in a crisp white nightgown, as she revels in the morning sunlight of a day that will comprise the length of the film.

The inimitable T-Frère croons quietly over the radio while the young woman prepares tea in a saucepan: water, tea leaves, milk, and then sugar are all added meticulously until she strains some into a cup to take to her father, passing through a doorway that does not fail to recall the window as, this time, she moves away from the camera and into the distant room, to where her father is already at work. The entire film takes place between dawn and dusk of one day in the life of Lina, which might be an allegory less for the city of Port-Louis than for an entire waning possibility within post-independent modernity for Mauritius and a host of similar new nations. While these nations do not find themselves in the type of position occupied by, say, China or India in the current system of world capitalism, they are equally

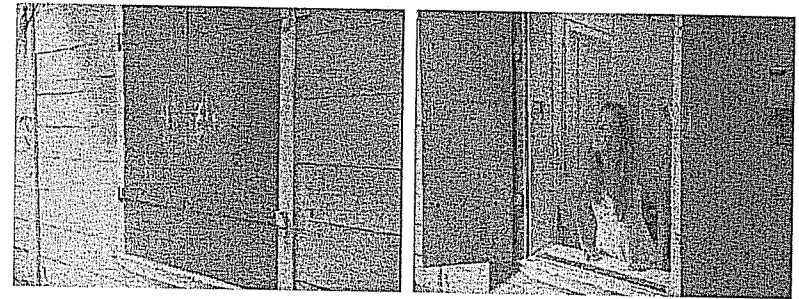


Fig. 1. *Left*, Closed window to be opened from inside; *right*, Lina at window

pulled in to accommodate and anticipate the consequential changes that economic globalization seems to offer. Lina might be an allegory for the type of filming in which she appears, necessarily in situ and therefore inextricably bound to her context. It is perhaps this aspect of the filmmaking itself, occurring without the luxury of the studio, that provides for its inventiveness in conveying what an alternative dream might be. *La Cathédrale* is a utopian film in theme but also in form as it places itself outside the commercially viable films now produced well within the African continent. There is a long history in Egypt, that has been rivaled and overtaken by Nigerian and, more recently, Ghanaian video productions, whose satisfactions are worldly, whose dreams are tangible, and whose audiences are growing.

Speaking of the city and film inevitably places emphasis on the notion of "space." In most studies, this connection connotes the city centers of filmmaking such as Los Angeles, but also Paris, London, and their counterparts in the Third World, the most emblematic being Bombay's Bollywood. The aim is to understand the sociology of filmmaking and the city alongside the textual aspect of the film. Evidently questions of production, distribution, and so forth become important. Here, it would be less pertinent to speak of Port-Louis in these precise terms because much of the filmmaking that showcases it occurs elsewhere. Although much production and finishing might occur elsewhere in various African contexts as well, particularly when considering "art" films, the very distant setting of Port-Louis from any filmmaking context is striking. Anenden, a filmmaker from Mauritius, lives in Ferney-Voltaire on the Swiss border, and the view he provides of Port-Louis shows acute awareness of the changes marking

this former colonial city as it is drawn into an increasingly "globalized" world. By the same token, his film is marked, much like other small productions from the "Third World," by its doubly configured audience. In other terms, while Hollywood films, even when tackling topics "as American as apple-pie," so to speak, can presume a certain cultivated (now global) audience, these films address an audience that is not yet cultivated (nor perhaps was it intended to be cultivated) for the same kind of ease of reception. While these points have been part of (and perhaps even over-determining in) the understanding of European national cinemas, it remains true that like many independent films, particularly those from "different" cultures or subcultures, this film simultaneously develops a new cinematic language, whose pedagogy is contained within the totality of the specific film, which by its very orientation shares with other such films having similar pedagogical impulses. In addition, these films call out to particular spectators in order to develop a public that necessarily goes well beyond the context in which they are firmly anchored. Put simply, the film must teach how it is to be read even while continuing to exhibit itself; at the same time it must seduce its audience, however indirectly, to hold its interest and have it come back for "more" (Anenden himself continues to work closely with the author and is currently completing a second adaptation of her novels). It goes without saying that coming "back" is a hazy concept since the group of films to which viewers might be returning is not so easily classifiable, nor even available. These films are most often seen at film festivals or at other such screenings, before they become available through distributors or, more recently, through the directors' own websites. Therefore, this virtual audience is also a "dream" that the film projects. In moving from novella to film, we will briefly consider *La Cathédrale* as providing the pedagogical key for its own reading. While the process is incremental and ongoing throughout the film, it is possible to isolate quite early on the way the spectator is "interpellated" or called upon to be a spectator of it. As we shall see, the most pivotal scene of the film also turns out to be dramatic in this conversation with the spectator.

From novella to film

The film captures the imperfect tense of the novella which describes Lina's daily schedule and gives a sense of the girl in the city: "elle

venait s'asseoir [. . .] elle distribuait son sourire [. . .] et savait se faire pardonner [. . .] elle partageait les repas des jeunes garçons [. . .]."⁵ While the novella brings to life the cathedral gradually, with the personification culminating in the last few pages, in the film the cathedral opens the setting dramatically, claiming personhood from the opening voice-off: "Port-Louis is not a city, it's a living thing." The film version thus announces quite unambiguously the city as protagonist, and privileges space in ways that allow us to move, quite logically, from seeing "story" to perceiving documentation. The next sentence from the narrating voiceover is: "Over the years I've seen it spread out and grow," thus announcing both a narrating protagonist and a reference to a well-grounded reality that is unfolding in the pan toward the left, scanning the city from above. Furthermore, the pronunciation Port (English) and Louis (French), rather than using one language for both words, immediately encapsulates its bi-colonial history for those who know of it, and otherwise estranges anyone more used to either French or English. Although the various "ethnic" divisions in Mauritius are necessarily "named" in the novella, the film provides insight into many of these divisions through space. The most significant difference between the novella and the film in terms of plot comes from the identity of the male "outsider." In the novella, although Lina is tempted to spend a night with the sailor who shows interest in her, she unambiguously rejects that path, despite the stark lack of hope that her home surroundings inscribe. There, the cathedral is cast as her savior, who gives the nod of approval, and who comforts the sobbing girl within its nave, in its shadow, and with the coolness of its stone. On the other hand, in the film, it is a white, French photographer, rather than the sailor of the novella, who shows interest in the girl. The novella presents a closed ending with Lina's dramatic rejection of the sailor who, she says, "would have betrayed" her. Prior to this Lina shouts out to him that she will not go with him, "There's no point. . . I don't want to. . . go away."⁶ As we shall see in greater detail below, the film references its own form by calling attention to its images and drawing a strong connection between the media of photograph and film as bearing witness to phenomena without itself being burdened by the wish or demand for objectivity. In these ways the film seems to make an overt statement about fiction and documentary, in effect demonstrating that fiction is born of documentary but that the latter

does not need loud proclamations of its autonomy. These remarks on documentary, the city, and fiction frame this reading of the film *La Cathédrale*, a joint effort by the filmmaker and the author of the original novella, published more than two decades prior.

The film opens with a beautiful aerial of the city, with the harbor visible in the distance beyond the high-rise buildings. The first sound is the familiar horn of a ship, followed by various city sounds and a chanting of prayers that are visually accompanied by a slow pan to the left. At this time, we discern that the buildings are not as high, nor as modern as we might have assumed, while the sound of a church bell chimes in. The camera then becomes motionless while a series of superimpositions, fading in, trace the advancing morning hour. The first words are from a female voice-over: "Port-Louis is not a city," she begins, as we see the roof of the cathedral not looking particularly impressive amongst other slanting roofs, "it's a living thing." The narrator then takes on an "I" that keeps the visual searching for its embodiment, so to speak. For the spectator, the anticipation is likely the image on the cover of the DVD of the young woman in the foreground wearing an orange printed dress, flared out in the motion of her dancing, with the city of Port-Louis stretching out to one of the peaks of the emblematic hills of the "trois mamelles" in the distance. But a dramatic cut to a low-angle shot of a stone tower rising up toward the clouds above it interrupts the almost mesmerizing flow established by the mellifluous tone of the soft voice of the narrator, the gentle sounds, and the slow camera movement panning to the left before the fade-ins, to capture the cathedral as narrator.

Following this, a quite dramatic series of shots of people's feet that are recognizably either male or female introduces the crowds of Port-Louis as observed by the cathedral, who witnesses chance and fate. The story we are going to witness, the narrator tells us, comprises one decisive day in the life of a young girl who has grown up before the cathedral. This opening sets the story in a fascinating combination of fantasy (the narrating cathedral) and reality (people as they are seen through their feet). What could be more real than the grime and sweat of feet that anchor people to the earth? And how to reconcile this with a talking building, albeit a church?

This very worldly aspect is brought out in the conversation between Lina and her father when she serves him his morning tea. The old

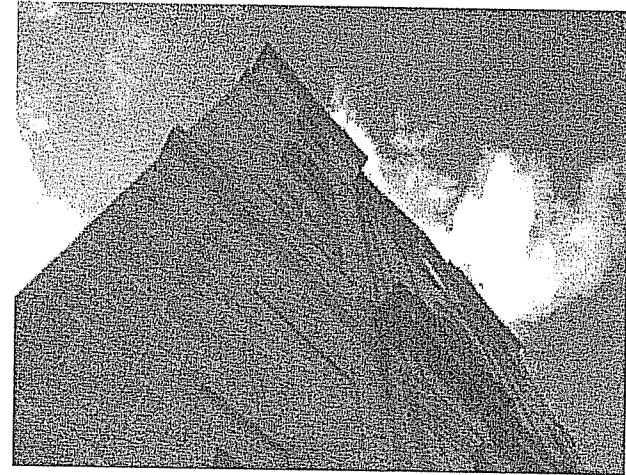


Fig. 2. Low-angle shot cathedral tower

cobbler shows her a variety of shoes that have been brought to him for repair. Examining the specific qualities or defects, the father tells about the owner of the pair in question, reconfiguring the earlier shots of the feet seen at the beginning of the film. The theme is repeated a little later when we hear the clicking of a camera and a dramatic series of stills that melt into motion or movement that freezes into a still: of feet that then match up to a stray person crossing the street, another getting out of a vehicle, and so forth. The unmistakable thematic linking through the images of feet in the narrative of the two voices heard in "off" mode creates a tension between inside and outside. The cathedral is indigenous, belongs to the city while the photographer is an "outsider." Yet we cannot forget that the photographer also comes from the culture under which the church flourished in Île de France, as Mauritius was then known.

An ordinary-looking man walks away from the camera in a crowd crossing the street, then moves over to the unpaved side (left of frame) to turn around and kneel down, thus revealing to the spectator the camera he is carrying, before he proceeds to take pictures of the crowd. The camera dollies toward him before there is an abrupt cut to a pair of manicured feet in open black sandals. In quick succession, we see six different pairs of feet (amongst them, a pair of cracked

feet in open slippers and a pair of polished men's dress shoes) in a series of stills. Then the camera lets us observe the movement of a pair of silver women's clogs. However, several moving body parts in the crowd pass in front of the camera and obscure our view of the feet in question until there is a thinning of the crowd. This allows recapturing of the clogs. This is then transformed into a freeze frame, thus calling attention to precisely the entire problematic of shooting on-site in the city of Port-Louis. In these ways, the transformed novella is thoroughly cinematized.

A protagonist for a collective spectator

At the level of "story," Lina's particularity is firstly linked to the everyday in Port-Louis city life and secondly to her quite crafted insertion as a specific character within the anonymity of the city. In other words, if the novella presented Lina as quite exceptional in a Port-Louis driven by the newfound channels for success for its middle class, the film subverts Lina's possibility to be the protagonist in quite the same way. In the film, Lina is linked through image, sound, light, and theme to the movement of the city between dawn and dusk, thus making her an integral part of it in a way we do not experience through the novella. Although reference is made to her "inner light" by various characters in the film, including the narrative voice of the cathedral, it is transformed into filmic reality in a very contrived manner. In the film, Lina is unable to escape "commerce," that is the pulse of the city, rendered to the spectator with the sound of various popular Creole songs, as we roam the streets, following Lina through her peregrinations. But the idea of "commerce" comes to the forefront with the bills that change hands when her father is paid for his services by the owner of a pair of shoes he has restored; when her mother asks for money to pay a witch doctor she is convinced will cure her; when Lina observes the *dhall puri* vendor's successful business; or when we follow her schoolboy admirer, Sanjay, as he purchases the earrings for her from the shopkeeper in the thriving market, claiming they are "for his mother"; and in her somewhat philosophical exchanges, in front of the cathedral, with Ram, the ice-lolly seller, that are punctuated by clients who patronize him, but also Lina's charity to the old woman on the street. As observed above, we learn she greets the old lady with a coin Ram provides her on a daily basis. In the novella, Lina is not

implicated in the commerce of the city in quite this way, and stands out, rather, as being quite ethereal.

For these reasons, as viewers we resist the presentation of Lina as utterly free from all links from the idea of "commerce" and worldliness. Lina consistently scorns the "successful" of Port-Louis: for example, a man who has a brand new car but who is tearful since his wife has left him; all those people rushing around without a purpose in life except getting rich and being successful. While the disarming nature of Lina that the novella gives us in poetic language is recreated, the film adds a touch of irony to the fantasy with the stark juxtaposition, or rather the strong intermingling, of this fantasy with the multi-media reality that cinema allows. By the end of the film, we might wonder if the fantasy aspect of Lina—or Lina as created in the narrative of the cathedral and by the French photographer—might not indeed stem from nostalgic yearning by the embodied city (and the collectivity that peoples it) for a space and time of a differently written history. Such a space is suggested as being confined to the steps of the cathedral where Lina daydreams and dances: a space that escapes the very definition of the city as a centre of commerce, trade, exchange, power, and plenitude but also decrepitude, poverty, and illicitness, something of which we see less in this portrayal. We do see peeling walls, plastic bags and trash moved around by the wind, and other signs of decrepitude, poverty, and neglect, but these are understated. Although links are suggested, *La Cathédrale* thus avoids the more common association, when the city is central in a film, of cinema and crime.⁷

Similarly, point of view is highly complex in this film. When Lina leaves her house, the camera often follows her wandering from behind, or sometimes she moves toward the camera placed off at a slight angle. She is always framed, indeed surrounded, by signs of the city, drains, walls, graffiti, traffic, beggars, shops. . . In one sequence, early in the film, we follow Lina through the city until, seamlessly, we are seeing it through the eyes of the French photographer. His voice takes over the narrative, which we learn is part of his journal, with the camera focusing on his handwriting whose content is heard as his voice-over. We see the photographer sitting on a bench with a luscious banyan tree behind him. The banyan is of course highly symbolic in Hindu culture, evoking mythical spirits but also infinity and enlighten-

ment. Vishnu (the preserver in Hindu mythology) is often encountered at the foot of a banyan tree. Although the Frenchman is fascinated by Lina and captivated by her spirit, the film gently makes of him, as an ex-colonial, a slightly clumsy presence in Mauritius, predictably seeking refuge in a five-star hotel setting. Still, he seems genuinely interested in getting past such a limiting position by capturing, and being captured by, the expanse of the city and its people. While the narrative voice of the cathedral opens and closes the film, it is significant that no voice-over is ever used for Lina's thoughts. In this way, although the spectator senses the struggle for narrative (or for Lina) between the cathedral persona, who wants to keep her innocence, and the photographer, who is fascinated by her free spirit, what dominates the entire film is the elusiveness of Lina's own thought process. Seen otherwise, Lina's thoughts as she relays them to Ram or Sanjay seem thin, almost frivolous. Despite many specific deviations, the film remains very close to the spirit of the novella in its effort to provide a nuanced entry into the narrative written by a very young author. Given that Ananda Devi herself wrote the screenplay, it is possible to recognize, despite the different medium and the entire remaking by a new artist, the hand of that "original" author as one has come to know her own very adventurous narrative wanderings since *Solstices*. Retrospection gives us the luxury to state that this story anticipates her most recent *Eve de ses décombres*, which revisits adolescence in Port-Louis with a very pointed pen. As we have noted earlier, this novel is currently being filmed by the couple.

Quite naturally, the film captures the different languages of Mauritius. Most of the conversations take place in Mauritian Creole (or Morisien to use the nationalist term), the classroom setting uses English, while the French photographer speaks to the different characters (an employee at his posh hotel and Lina) in French. His voice-over narrative, that we understand to be his written journal, is also in French while the cathedral's voice is entirely in English. We do hear some snippets of Bhojpuri and Sanskrit in the old woman's lines and recital. One almost feels the thick description of ethnographic difference when we place this within the picturesque streets, market, scenic harbor, colorful clothing, beautifully chosen Creole music, and images of food, fruits, and wares. One can discern Anenden's experience and knowledge of his country, and particularly its capital, not simply from

the inside and the outside as a diasporic Mauritian but also as the maker of a documentary on the tourism industry of Mauritius.⁸

Why Documentary?

While Trinh T. Minh-ha's clearly stated discussion on documentary (as finally being impossible in its idealized closeness to "Truth") provides an early theoretical framing particularly for a host of films from the end of the last century onward that were made in former colonial contexts, the surge of documentary filmmakers who continue to make a mark on African cinema is remarkable. One of the "reasons" for this is surely the independence that documentary provides to filmmakers without a huge budget but who have a story to tell. The documentary can bypass the need for actors, studio settings, and lighting while putting to use less expensive and sometimes even handheld cameras, on-site settings, and real people within them filling in instead. Notable filmmakers who have used the documentary genre to tell African stories in a variety of innovative ways, and not only for these reasons, are Euzhan Palcy, Jean-Marie Teno, Safi Faye or Salem Mekuria. It goes without saying that these conditions call up a different set of variables that filmmakers choosing and/or somehow resorting to this type of filming encounter.

Here, effective usage of both long takes associated with documentary or *cinéma-vérité* and dramatic cuts associated with action or drama respectively give the impression of belief in the truth as equivalent to reality, and, at other times, quickens the pace of the film unexpectedly. One finds in *La Cathédrale* very few true shot-reverse-shots, with most conversations foregrounding the two-shot, thus capturing both actors in the exchange. While the shot is sometimes reversed in conversation, its timing most often does not correspond to the change in speaker. Such is the case of the few close-ups of Lina's face when the photographer is speaking to her. Conversations are rather explorations of space and light, sound and physical presence.

One of the rare shot-reverse-shot instances occurs between Lina and the statue of Mary, with the camera alternating in absolute silence between Lina's awed expression and Mary's calm gaze straight ahead of her. Lina's outburst against her own mother (when she accuses her of having never cared for her, for having transformed Lina's childhood into care-giving, and indirectly for being a self-centered hypochondri-



ac) occurs in the darkened room from which her mother rarely emerges. Lina at first seems to go along with the mother, as usual, when she is told to close the window she has just opened. She does as instructed, returning the room to the shadows when she decides to unleash her anger, citing cleaning and cooking and washing clothes for a woman who has no discernable illness other than spending her father's hard-earned money. This relationship plays out in the darkness of the dank room whose doorknob, when Lina approaches it at the beginning of this scene, becomes the focus of the visual as the opening toward an ominous presence in Lina's path.

It is the only door or window in the film that is captured with the focus being on the opening/closing device rather than its shape and movement. The sound of the creaking window opening onto the outdoors, when we first encountered Lina opening the window to the morning and the city, is cruelly transformed into the ominous creaking of the door leading to the dark space of the mother. The latter will subsequently pay a visit to a woman who lets on to the spectator that she is a charlatan by cursing the mother once she has left the scene. Tempted to cast her daughter as the cause of her illness for having placed a spell on her, the mother, however, decides not to use the powder this witch doctor has given her to place under Lina's bed. The film thus does not pursue a simplistic opposition between the Church and (fake) witchcraft. Instead, this moment of decision by the mother is used along with others to develop the family dynamics by exploring space through the placement of the actors within the shadows and light of the apartment and through the motion of characters and the camera itself via various thresholds. Lina's images within the frames



Fig. 3. *Left to right*, Sanjay/Lina conversation two-shot, Photographer/Lina conversation two-shot, Ram/Lina conversation two-shot

of the different doors and windows suggest in perhaps quite an obvious manner her position on the brink of adulthood and the precariousness of her future as well as the tautness of the household communication itself. However, the clever framing of Lina in these liminal spaces (the window frame, and very often at, passing through, or visible beyond the doorways of the small home) surreptitiously does more: it moves her effortlessly from the doorways and window frames of her home to the doorway of the church. When Lina enters the church it also occurs with a "magic" touch. A superb long shot allowing a view of the three doors of the cathedral frames Lina at the middle one. Lina is dwarfed by the huge structure rising up behind her.

Surprisingly, she has never entered the church before. As she stands there, with her back to the church looking outward to the city, at the appointed hour to meet the photographer, the door appears to open on its own, startling the girl and seeming to beckon her in. It is in this sequence that the spectator is "interpellated" in a way that suggests his/her position is aligned with a greater collectivity. From that constructed perspective, the suggestion seems to be that the postcolonial context the film has been capturing might somehow have been different through the agency of such a collective or that it still could be. Lina pauses to look up at the statue of Mary on the inner wall of the cathedral as she makes her way towards the altar, following which a series of shot-reverse-shots between Lina and the statue create what might indeed be the most dynamic camera movement between two "characters" in the film. Then the camera continues to follow Lina who walks down the length of the central aisle. It is of course an exciting visual moment of the magnificent space of the cathedral within which she is

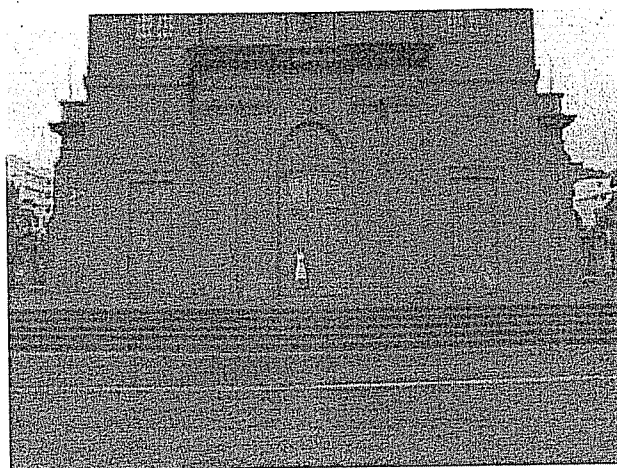


Fig. 4. Lina at church door

protected. There is something predictable, bordering on melodrama, in the overt substitution of her hapless mother by a long and dramatic pause of the camera in a point-of-view shot as Lina looks up at the serene and pure Mary. However, the drama of this scene, indeed the climactic moment of the film itself, occurs when Lina turns around to reveal she is moved to tears and then walks away from the altar. The difference in the second shot is that the altar is now (miraculously) ablaze with flames from a hundred candles that have lit up. . . For her return from the altar, we have a still camera with Lina walking toward it and into focus in a medium shot while the blazing altar is also captured with depth of field. As Lina walks toward the camera, the altar begins to lose focus in the depth of the shot. Lina literally walks into the camera until the close up of her face is lost and her neck and chest occupy the entire frame; a slight change in the direction of her path then moves her swiftly out of the frame while we see the flames at the altar, still with the lost focus. While on the one hand this is very much in keeping with the theme of light that is associated with the inner beauty of Lina throughout the film, on the other, the empty pews beckon the spectator to people them, and to do so in the form of a collective. This collectivity is called upon to bear witness to Lina's journey and illuminate the light of possibility that can spring from a collective will to dream and to accept fantasy.

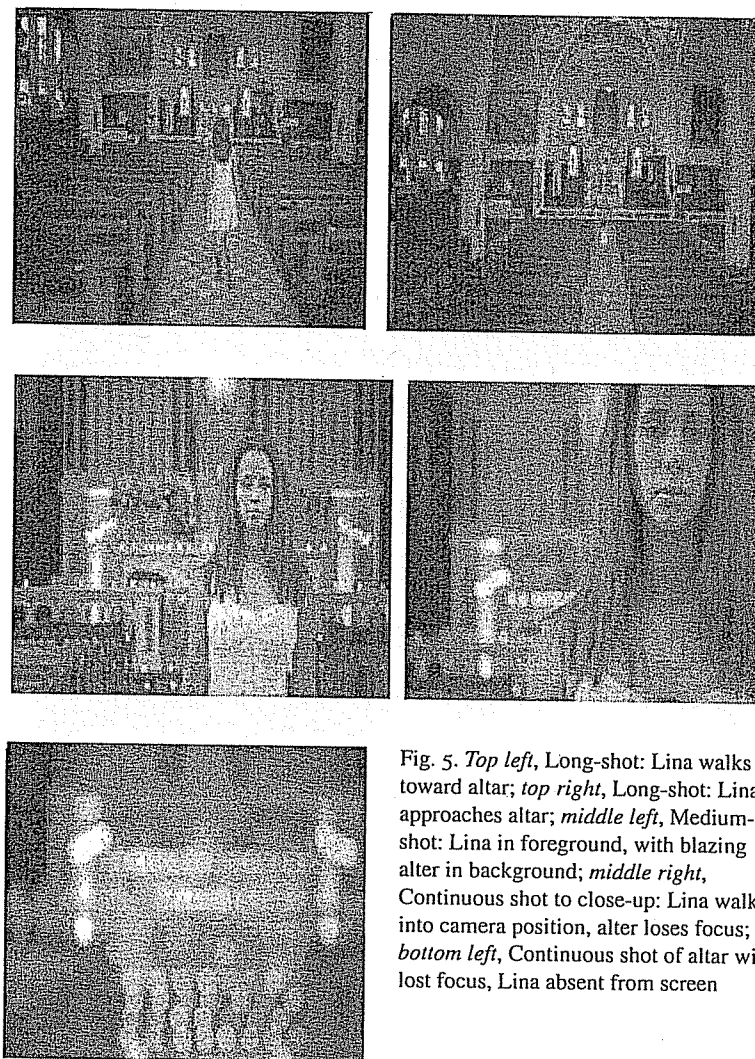


Fig. 5. *Top left*, Long-shot: Lina walks toward altar; *top right*, Long-shot: Lina approaches altar; *middle left*, Medium-shot: Lina in foreground, with blazing altar in background; *middle right*, Continuous shot to close-up: Lina walks into camera position, altar loses focus; *bottom left*, Continuous shot of altar with lost focus, Lina absent from screen

That is, Lina's earlier naive ideas about being independent because she does not enter the rat race of "success," which characterize middle-class Mauritius (or seen allegorically, the Mauritian nation in the race of the Third World to join the First), are given some credence not in their particularity but as a start for thinking "other" wise. Although at this point Lina predictably finds the strength to refuse the photographer's advances, she accepts the package of photographs that he has taken of her. Yet, this is literally juxtaposed with the stack of pencil sketches she has collected on her usual route and that were placed under little rocks along her path, as we understand, by her admirer, Sanjay, specifically for her to pick up. The pull between the outside and inside is given dramatic proportions in Lina's struggle, while her decision to remain "inside" takes on an ephemeral flavor with the cathedral's voice confirming that the time will come when she will have to give up the little girl. However, the simple choice as it was extended to the girl in this instance is also extended beyond the protagonist as suggested in the church scene. The consequences of her own power of choice, it turns out, have greater complexity than the character, Lina, is prepared to know at this time. The blazing alter is not seen by Lina and yet is dramatically visible to the spectator and the would-be audience that could occupy the empty pews. That knowledge is given instead to the spectator (and the omniscient cathedral) as a gift and a responsibility, while the collectivity suggested opens up well beyond the scope of the film.

If we were alerted by the opening panning shot of the city that the intent was not to deliver Port-Louis exactly as it was with documentary precision, the film prepares the realm of fantasy with enough irony to keep it interesting. We are drawn into the scene of Lina's dancing to the gentle singing of Ram as he taps on his tin box in full view of the young and hopeful school boy Sanjay, who draws Lina in numerous sketches and has just presented her with earrings. We are prepared to believe the French photographer has been as captivated by the moment as we. Perhaps, then, his invitation to dinner could equally be innocent/hopeful and arrogant/exploitative. Through the experience of *La Cathédrale*, postcolonial Mauritius "thinks" through spectatorship in another logic that Lina provides. If such logic seems hardly credible at the level of the somewhat naive protagonist within her tangible reality, as a dream it takes on new possibilities. The protagonist's

dream is reconstructed in spectators' thoughts against the only logic of "development" and becomes a project that binds together a collective, a new spectatorship, a postcolonial un-Hollywood one. One that, perhaps with Nigeria's booming video industry, Nollywood, we might have too hastily written off as dead! The idea of phantasm, then, is less about the different unreal elements depicted in the film than it is about the desire of the film itself, as a desiring machine, that expresses itself through the pedagogical moves it makes toward its would-be spectators.

The many corners of the dwelling place through which *La Cathédrale* takes us purposefully lead to the coolness of the Port-Louis cathedral. Here, the phantasm of Lina creates and demands a collective view of the illumination of a postcolonial possibility whose contours are yet intangible, somewhat innocent, even at times laughable and immature. Yet Lina's rejection of the French photographer—precisely because it is set on the steps of the Catholic Church, which symbolically reminds us of the conversion of African slaves by the French—is also a rejection of the most obvious continuation of dependency. While the Port-Louis cathedral is a reconstruction that dates back to the 1930s, it marks the site of the first church built in the eighteenth century. But as we saw, those contours of freedom are not, paradoxically, beheld by Lina herself. She does not turn back: might the spell be broken and might the church go dark like her mother's room? Is she Orpheus or Cinderella risking, in her case, a return to the enslavement and indenture of her ancestors? In other words, might the light be precisely "magic," created by the spectator's engagement with this presentation of Mauritian reality through fiction? It would be too risky, it seems, for Lina to turn her head back to glimpse the altar, now ablaze. Instead, the spectator was already drawn in to the waiting pews in a classic cinematic moment of "identification," by means of a shot that allows for the wide perspective around Lina. In essence, the invitation to see the light still unseen by the protagonist is an invitation to construct through willful dreaming the future post-Independence (Independence dates back to 1968), which is already the past. While the same time period for some new postcolonial nations has been used to forge a purposeful striding into the First World, perhaps the suggestion is that Mauritius could still walk otherwise and aspire differently by diverging from the expected. If the idea is filled with innocence

or a naïveté that Lina incarnates, the spectator's situation, for having seen the transformed altar (that the character did not witness), almost demands an alternate dream from that spectator. "Maybe it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in fact that we shall not have the time to achieve it. For a house that was final, one that stood in symmetrical relation to the house we were born in, would lead to thoughts—serious, sad thoughts—and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality."⁹

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Notes

1. Not to be confused with the animation *Katedra* (2002) by Tomek Baginski.
2. Henri Lefebvre (77).
3. Personal communication with Anenden, August, 2010.
4. Gaston Bachelard (72).
5. Ananda Devi, "La Cathédrale" (28).
6. *Ibid.*, 38.
7. Mark Shiel (3).
8. Harikrisna Anenden, *Rêve et Réalité*, 1981.
9. Gaston Bachelard (61).

Filmography

Harikrisna Anenden, *Rêve et réalité*, 1981.
Harikrisna Anenden, *La Cathédrale*, 2006.

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Anny Dominique Curtius

Utopies du BUMIDOM

Construire l'avenir dans un "là-bas" postcontact

Une institutrice, un menuisier, une aide soignante, un chauffeur de taxi pour envoyer la voix, et quatre cent mille répondants pour jeter l'ancre de la mémoire dans la veillée du temps.

Alain Anselin, *L'émigration antillaise en France. La troisième île*

Antoine Léonard-Maestrati et Michel Reinette, respectivement réalisateur français et journaliste guadeloupéen, s'attèlent en 2007 à réaliser le documentaire *L'Avenir est ailleurs*¹ sur une question douloureuse, embarrassante, complexe et mal connue, celle de la migration d'Antillais, de Guyanais et de Réunionnais organisée par le Bureau pour le Développement des Migrations intéressant les Départements d'outre-mer. À partir de 1962, le BUMIDOM offre l'aller simple pour la France à des jeunes originaires d'outre-mer qui viennent travailler en France pour pallier le manque de main-d'œuvre non qualifiée aux lendemains de la guerre d'Algérie. À partir de témoignage des générations BUMIDOM et post-BUMIDOM, d'interviews de politiciens, d'écrivains, de fonctionnaires du BUMIDOM, de documents d'archives, le tout mêlé à une trame fictionnelle, Léonard-Maestrati et Reinette effectuent un retour sur mémoire et mettent en parallèle les discours et expériences des générations issues de ces diverses vagues de migrations. Ce documentaire s'inscrit dans le cadre d'une mise en image archéologique du souvenir effectuée depuis le milieu des années 1990 par des réalisateurs antillais. On peut citer à cet effet les films de Guy Deslauriers dont le scénario est écrit par Patrick Chamoiseau², le récent documentaire d'Euzhan Palcy³ sur l'action résistante oubliée des dissidents antillais durant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, ou encore plus récemment le documentaire de Camille Mauduech sur