

*My drawings inspire
yet cannot be defined.*

*They do not
determine anything,
like music they
transport us into the
ambiguous world of
the undetermined.*

-Odilon Redon

Between 1852 and 1865, Baudelaire published French translations of short stories by American macabre master Edgar Allan Poe, making him wildly popular in France. Poe, who Baudelaire described to his readers as a mystic or shaman, became a central figure for the French Symbolist artist Odilon Redon. The haunting, strange energy of Poe's work seeped into the charcoal drawings and lithographs Redon called his *noirs*.

Black, the most essential color, as Redon called it, is currently the subject of the exhibition *Noir: The Romance of Black in 19th-Century French Drawings and Prints*, which features Redon's *noirs*, and serves as the inspiration for tonight's program. Beginning around 1840, a wide array of new black drawing materials, such as man-made charcoal, black chalk, and conté crayon, had become widely commercially available. The exhibition chronicles a subsequent turn toward an exploration of darkness, both visually and conceptually.

It was the intrinsic qualities of charcoal that enable Redon's *noirs* to cross into an ambiguous space between reality and fantasy, a medium he called the *agent de l'esprit*.

Charcoal can create some of the richest and sharpest lines of pure black, only to have its edges brushed into a soft, translucent layer on the page, its velvety particles barely hovering on the surface, as if the image could blow away like a fleeting daydream.

For Redon, blackness, and specifically the interplay between black and white, held a surprising power to expand a “uniquely visual field,” in an effect that could perhaps today be described as *cinematic*. Moreover, what connects Redon to the sensation of the silver screen is his fixation with dreams. Redon’s countless depictions of apparitions, phantasms, and monsters are premonitions of the fantastical subjects that would become the preoccupation of cinema in the following century. Known to have regularly signed letters with *il rêvé* or “he dreams,” Redon’s work is hinged on the potential of these inner images to move beyond the confines of physical realities.

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It’s no surprise then, that when commissioned by the BBC in 1995 to produce a short “filmic flight of fancy” based on a work of art, the experimental

Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin gravitated to *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Toward Infinity*, a work found in Redon's 1882 portfolio, *À Edgar Poe*. In the image, a severed head on a platter, strapped to a gigantic upward-looking eyeball recalling a hot air balloon, is lifted away from a desolate landscape into a higher, unknown realm.

Redon never created simple, literal illustrations of Poe, but rather evokes Poe, spiritually and indirectly. Similarly, Maddin shapeshifts Redon, unleashing references to several of his works in a torrential flow of beguiling images, all translated into his signature frenetic and whimsical revival of silent-film era style.

As if to jump into the conversation between Redon and Poe, Maddin has a woman appear on screen named Berenice, referencing Poe's 1835 story of a man's demented fixation on his fiancé's intensely perfect, white teeth. In the tale, Berenice is mistakenly buried alive, only to be unearthed by her unhinged paramour, who pulls out each of her teeth in a murderous fugue state. Redon removes all humans from the story in his 1883 charcoal drawing *Vision: Les dents de Bérénice*, where a

bodiless, floating set of teeth hover in a dark library, radiating a blinding light, embodying the character's obsession itself. Maddin's Berenice rebukes her lover, and pulls out her teeth herself.

The film's protagonist, a white-bearded old man is blinded in a locomotive crash, and black overtakes and streams from his eyes as he becomes Redon's *Apparition* (ca. 1880-90), and as he feels around in his new darkness, Redon's eye-balloon floats away. His son transforms in to a plant-like chimera, before he unfortunately meets the fate of one of Redon's more frequent motifs: the head on a platter. The ominous face of the clock from Poe's *The Mask of The Red Death*, (and Redon's drawing of the same name), lurks in almost every shot.

The Redon-inspired images are embedded into a narrative tale taken from *La Roue*, a seven-hour epic masterpiece of the French silent-film era, revolutionary in its rapid edits, directed by cinematic innovator Abel Gance. Known to be a Poe acolyte himself, Gance's tale of a perverse love-triangle between a father, son, and adopted daughter ends in tragedy as they are hurled across the Alps in a steam-train, all of which Maddin

hyper-condenses into the five minutes of *Odilon Redon*.

In 1995, *La Roue* was thought to be lost to history, known only by description (a four-hour version was subsequently found). Maddin, never having seen it, recreated the legendary film based only on archival records. *Odilon Redon* is one of the earliest examples of what would become a career-long project for Maddin: to bring the early films of the silent era, lost to obscurity, existing only in text, memory, or rumor, back from the dead. In this sense, Maddin casts himself as the shaman, resurrecting the spirits of early film, a practice that would flow into his 2012 exhibition at the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris, where he employed a crew to recreate forgotten films in a production-as-performance-art piece called *Séances*.

Not unlike the vulnerable, ephemeral qualities of charcoal that spoke to Redon, film is an inherently fragile medium, highly flammable, and in a constant state of physical decay. It's this impermanence that drives Maddin's project. But his resurrections are not idealized, perfect visions

of what the film must have been, rather they are filmed in a deliberately murky, phantasmagoric way. Redon's dream-play is felt, but in Maddin's hands it is a fever-dream, mimicking how the sleeping mind incomprehensibly flashes between scenes, flitting between terrifying and glorious quasi-memories and randomly conjured phenomena.

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Like the films re-imagined by Maddin, *Le Révélateur* is an experimental film made in France that has largely fallen into obscurity. Although made in the 1960s, it roots itself in the traditions of the early silent-film era, devoid of all color and sound. Filmed in the days following the events of May 1968, when students and workers formed a revolt that threatened to destabilize the government, *Le Révélateur* was part of a series of films by a collective of artists called the Zanzibar Group, a little known and brief radical movement in the history of French cinematic and political art.

As Mao's *Little Red Book* became a visible symbol for the leftist revolutionaries of the time, the filmmakers chose Zanzibar as their spiritual home,

an imagined utopia at the crossroads between east and west, and a Maoist colony. Their members included filmmakers Philippe Garrel, Jackie Reynal, and Serge Bard, among others, along with conceptual artist and painter Olivier Mosset, who introduced them to Warhol and Dalí, and their patron, a 25-year old oil-heiress Sylvina Boissonnas, who granted them free creative reign.

Among the group Philippe Garrel was known as the “high-priest”, fueling their mythic or cult status. Just before making *Le Révélateur* he proclaimed, “I’ve had it with the cinema. It is prophecy that now interests me.” The film’s title hints at magic. *Le révélateur* translating to “the revealer” or someone who exposes a secret, a role bestowed to the child in the film. (Edgar Allan Poe’s famous story *The Tell-Tale Heart* was translated by Baudelaire as *Le Cœur révélateur*.)

Le révélateur has yet another meaning: developer. Garrel likened the dipping of film stock into the developer bath to a baptism, with its requisite ritual and reverence as chemicals conjured latent images. The film itself becomes the *agent de l’esprit*.

Along with his cinematographer Michel Fournier, Garrel chose a hyper-sensitive film stock which resulted in a film with an aesthetic of startling, deep black voids in high contrast to blinding whites in each frame. Relying mostly on candles and cheap flood lights, Fournier recalled that the film stock allowed him the greatest liberty to improvise and to invent, and as he said “to stimulate our imagination in order to capture the faintest glimmers or the strongest apparitions.” He added “If the photography of this little silent film borders on the amateurish, it is nonetheless one of the most beautiful in the history of cinema with its luminous and charming dreamlike manner.”

The black becomes a palpable force within *Le Révélateur*, channeling that intangible and strange energy that Redon absorbed from Poe. Like Maddin’s co-opted plot from *La Roue*, the loose narrative follows a family unit on the move, fleeing on foot across a vaguely war-torn land, running from an unseen, but keenly felt pursuant.

A collection of dark, unraveling moments, the scenes are enigmatic visual poems, at times incomprehensible, laden with oblique symbolism,

open for a variety of readings, with an undercurrent of subversion. As if they were animated versions of Redon's *noirs*, the film abstracts any literal translations. Filmed in Germany's Black Forest, the production was routinely stopped by police, but Garrel relished the atmosphere's danger. Redon's fantastical dreams and Maddin's phantasms are Garrel's desolate nightmare.

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The Zanzibar coterie was connected to the Warhol Factory scene, which Olivier Mosset had visited in 1967 with artist Jean Tinguely. Nico, the German model and singer of resident Factory band The Velvet Underground, would become Garrel's muse and partner for more than a decade. Garrel and Fournier were highly influenced by Warhol's films of long takes with zero cuts as seen in the screen tests, the self-described *Sleep* (1963), and the static, single shot eight-hour film *Empire* (1964). The rapid edits pioneered by Gance's *La Roue* were revitalized in the 1960s by the Nouvelle Vague filmmakers, becoming a hallmark of their dominant style. In direct opposition, the Zanzibar films take this Warholian formula to create an

almost disturbingly slow, powerfully taciturn experience that feels almost like the figures on screen are slowly radiating in shock after some unknown trauma.

By 1968, Warhol had brought his films into a new phase with the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, a legendary series of shows hell-bent on sensory overload that, in addition to mirror balls, strobes, and countless other stimuli, juxtaposed live music performances by The Velvet Underground with multiple projections of Warhol's films. To witness the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* was certainly to enter an ambiguous dream world, a strange happening bursting forth from a dark room.

It is equal parts the induced dream-state of the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, and the live accompaniment traditions of the silent-film era, that are invoked by tonight's live scores by harpist Mary Lattimore and multi-instrumentalist Jeff Zeigler. They are two musicians from today's equivalent of an artistic underground, operating within a scene in Philadelphia that has forged its own aesthetic. Together, they have composed an elaborate, picturesque soundscape, adding a

shimmering and thoughtful layer to these otherwise silent films.

This constellation of artworks, from Lattimore and Zeigler's musical compositions, Garrel and Maddin's films, to Redon's drawings and Poe's stories, are bound by a spiritual thoroughfare of the strange and marvelous brought on by their enigmatic indeterminacy – a sense that something terrifying, liberating, and enduring is lurking in the black.

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Written upon the occasion of Mary Lattimore & Jeff Zeigler's performance of original live scores to Philippe Garrel's *Le Révélateur*, and Guy Maddin's *Odilon Redon, or The Eye Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Toward Infinity*, on February 27, 2016.

