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Focus on May '68

Détruisez-vous (Serge Bard, 1968) and the Zanzibar films

Serge Bard's *Détruisez-Vous* (1968) was the first of what came to be known as the Zanzibar films, the output of a loose group of filmmakers, artists and models that formed around the wealthy French heiress Sylvina Boissonnas. Officially, thirteen Zanzibar films were completed, credited to eight directors, including Philippe Garrel, Eric Rohmer's editor Jackie Raynal, and the painter Daniel Pommereulle, though there are further titles associated with the group. Several of the thirteen works have since been lost or withdrawn from circulation.

Like the radical democratic organisations formed during May '68 (*démocratie directe*), the Zanzibar project was an inevitably short-lived utopian experiment. Boissonnas believed passionately in the creative potential of every individual, and operated a hands-off policy of funding virtually any project presented to her. Consequently the group produced largely unscripted work on 35mm, with a greater immediacy even than that of the *Nouvelle Vague* directors, whose projects had been financed according to conventions of script and producer, with the authorisation of the *Centre national de la cinématographie*.

Taken as a whole, the Zanzibar films attempted a renunciation of meaning imposed by previous generations, a return to zero. Whereas the *Nouvelle Vague* had celebrated the novelty of the new, the Zanzibar filmmakers emphasised their youth (Garrel had made his first film at fourteen). Almost all amateurs in their early twenties, they were attempting to create a cinema unfettered by film history. And by its nature, youth is ephemeral; the movement was not intended to last, nor was much thought given to the films' circulation or preservation. Rejecting narrative, the Zanzibar films aimed to return the viewer to him/herself – *Ici et Maintenant*, as Bard named his second film – rather than to offer escapism in identification with the characters on screen. They collectively represented a call to the present.

"With regard to the Zanzibar films as a whole, whose contents were not political, I think that it is important to state that it is thanks to the 'Spirit of May' that these films were able to come into existence. There was an idea of conquering freedom for many of us, of leaving behind what Guy Debord had memorably called the 'society of spectacle' and of participating in several areas at once, without however being a professional in any one. We were in synch with the youth movement in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as with the Chinese cultural revolution (or how it was perceived in the West). We also sought to put into practice a collective management, to reject a delegation of authority. We dared to think of making films without being professionals, by using reduced crews, often made up of friends as technicians." (Sylvina Boissonnas)

The group was given the name of Zanzibar in September '69, when Boissonnas created a production company in order to attempt to sell the films. The Maoist African island of Zanzibar represented an alternative to decaying Western civilisation in the wake of the failed May revolution. In 1969, Serge Bard led several members of the group on a filmmaking expedition across Africa, with the intention of reaching the island, but after months of mishap, mismanagement and nihilistic inertia, culminating in Bard's sudden conversion to Islam, the trip was abandoned. Only Philippe Garrel and Jackie Raynal continued to make films after the group's dissolution in 1970, whilst Boissonnas turned her considerable energy and funds to the cause of women's liberation.

- Matthew Lloyd

