

FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

Mon Feb 17 | 8:30 |

Jack H. Skirball Series

\$10.00 [members \$8.00]

Jean Painlevé: The Vampire, the Seahorse and the Octopus in Love

Twenty-five years after the death of nature film maverick Jean Painlevé, REDCAT is giving a rare presentation—in glorious 35mm—of his most daring and exquisite achievements, including several of the legendary underwater films. Spanning decades, this program features *The Seahorse* (1934, 14 min.), *The Vampire* (1939, 9 min.), *Shrimp Stories* (1964, 10 min.) and *The Love Life of the Octopus* (1965, 14 min.), among other titles. Painlevé (1902–1989) possessed an inquisitive eye, unerring in its recognition of nature's subtle poetry. In more than 200 documentary shorts, he delivered serious scientific investigation as well as breathtaking beauty and dream-like drama, linking research, art, even anti-fascist politics. In the process, Painlevé scandalized the hidebound scientific community but also won over surrealists and avant-gardists—friends and collaborators such as Artaud, Eisenstein, Vigo, Buñuel, Calder, Rouch and Godard.

In person: Marie Jager, Archives Jean Painlevé

"Painlevé had a taste for beauty, researched it, and re-staged it in front of the camera. Throughout 60 years and 200 films, he unceasingly explored and transcribed forms, colors, rhythms, configurations, as well as conflicts – an undiscovered universe all the more fascinating because we know it is the one we live in."

– *Cahiers du cinéma*

"You have chosen the best job. It will never get out of fashion."

– Jacques Prévert to Jean Painlevé

"In Painlevé's hands [anthropomorphism] is a tool that subverts the narcissistic self-portrait we so readily impose on our animal friends. Often as not, like a mirror, his films hold up to us seemingly familiar grotesqueries such as the vampire bat's peaked snout, ceaselessly quivering in the throes of a lascivious frenzy, as if to say, 'Identify with

that!... [In Painlevé's films] we glimpse a world in which movement is the universal alphabet... It is no coincidence that Painlevé typically ended his films with a witty flourish in which the live organisms we have just been watching rearrange themselves into the shape of static letters spelling 'Fin.' When movement ceases, in other words, the show is over." – Ralph Rugoff, "Fluid Mechanics."

Program

The Seahorse (L'Hippocampe)

(1934, 35mm, b & w, sound, 15 min.)

Music: Darius Milhaud.

Narrator: Ben Danou.

Cameraman: André Raymond.

On the locomotion and grace of the sea horse, "the only vertical fish". Presentation of its dazzling mode of reproduction, for it is the male who gives birth, after the female has laid her eggs into his pouch. The film documents the development of the embryos and birth of a myriad of mini-seahorses that look like ghosts.

Blue Beard (Barbe bleue)

1938, 35mm, Gasparcolor, sound, 13 min.

Produced by Jean Painlevé.

Directed and clay-animation by René Bertrand and his family.

Music: opera buffa by Maurice Jaubert.

Lyrics: Jean-Vincent Bréchnignac.

A film in clay-mation, based on Perrault's disturbing tale. The technical achievement of the Gasparcolor lightens and colors the darkness of this story. This animated *opera buffa* composed by Maurice Jaubert is at last available in a both visually and acoustically restored version.

The Vampire (Le Vampire)

1939-45, 35mm, b & w, sound, 9 min.

Music: "Black and Tan Fantasy" and Echoes of the Jungle" by Duke Ellington.

Cameraman: André Raymond.

Presentation of particular specie of the chiroptera from South America: the vampire. Its prey hunting and attack strategy are documented. The film also evokes Murnau's mythical *Nosferatu* and the dark years of WWII.

Sea Urchins (Oursins)

1954, 35mm, color, sound, 11 min.

Music: organized noise in homage to Edgar Varèse and "The Real Mambo".

Cameraman: Claude Beausoleil.

Shrimp Stories (Histoires de crevettes)

1964, 35mm, color, sound, 13 min.

Music: Pierre Conté.

Narrator: Le Brun.

Detailed presentation of the shellfish's entertaining routine: eating, cleaning, reproduction and moulting.

The Love Life of the Octopus (Les Amours de la pieuvre)

1965, 35mm, color, sound, 13 min.

Music: Pierre Henry.

Narrator: Clairval.

On how octopuses move, breathe, eat, copulate and look after their eggs. The spectator is also welcomed in their cozy natural habitat: the breach of a rock.

Acera or the Witches's Dance (Acéra ou Le Bal des sorcières)

1972, 35 mm, color, sound, 13 min.

Music: Pierre Jansen.

Bisexual molluscs swim and dance with the help of creases forming a cloak around their body. We are also invited to witness the egg laying and development of the larvae until they reach adulthood.

Jean Painlevé (1902-1989) Painlevé was born in Paris, the son of mathematician Paul Painlevé, who later served twice as France's premier. Before becoming a filmmaker, he studied medicine and zoology. At age 21 he became the youngest researcher ever to present a paper (on color staining of glandular cells in midge larvae) to the Académie des Sciences.

At the time, film was developing into a serious narrative art form. Mindful that film had originated as a medium for documenting science, Painlevé sought to merge the documentary and narrative powers of film and, accordingly, sought the company of filmmakers. Cameraman André Raymond, in a film that was never completed, taught Painlevé a time-lapse effect he would use in his first film, *The Stickleback's Egg*:

From Fertilization to Hatching. Painlevé presented the film to the Académie in 1928. The experience taught him that the mass acceptance of film made it to some a less desirable tool in science. One scientist, infuriated, stormed out declaring "cinema is not to be taken seriously!"

In the early 1930s, Painlevé made what was perhaps his most famous film, *The Seahorse*, for which he enclosed a camera in a specially designed watertight box for use in the Bay of Arcachon. Because the camera could only hold a few seconds of film, Painlevé was forced to return to the surface over and over to reload. Crude diving equipment limited his movement. His breathing apparatus was tethered by a 10-meter hose to a manually operated pump on a boat. Recalling the many challenges of early underwater cinematography, he wrote: "At one point I was no longer getting any air. I rose hurriedly to the surface to find the two seamen quarreling over the pace at which the wheel should be turned." The studio portion of the shoot also held frustrations: He and a collaborator spent three days and nights waiting outside large tanks for a male seahorse to give birth.

After hiding from Nazi collaborators during the war, Painlevé briefly served as director of the national cinema. Nine months later Charles de Gaulle replaced him with a bureaucrat. Painlevé went on to revive a group called the Institute for Scientific Cinema and helped create the International Association of Science Films, serving as its president. A running conflict in the group involved the definition of a science film. Painlevé ran into the same attitude he'd encountered years earlier in the Académie, that popular film was a form of prostitution and that popularization was, by definition, vulgarization.

In 1948 Painlevé became the first person in France to broadcast a live science program—teeming microbes in a drop of water. (A month later, repeating the shot for the BBC in London in another live broadcast, he became frustrated by technical difficulties and his lack of English, and his cry of "Merde!" was heard in 200,000 British homes.) His pioneering streak continued well into the 1970s, when he began experimenting with new techniques in video.

Painlevé portrayed sea horses, vampire bats, skeleton shrimps, and fanworms as endowed with human traits — the erotic, the comical, and the savage. He single-handedly established a unique kind of cinema, the "scientific-poetic cinema".

Marie Jager is an artist based in Paris where she runs a not-for-profit organization to promote research, publications and exhibitions around

the work of Jean Painlevé. She had a close personal relationship with Jean Painlevé who treated her as a granddaughter growing up in Paris. She recently co-curated 'Le Club des Sous l'Eau' at the Palais de Tokyo gathering contemporary artists and original members of Painlevé's 1934 diving club. She holds an MFA from the University of Southern California and has taught film and installation at the University of California Los Angeles and at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts Paris-Cergy.

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Curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud