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CITIZEN BEAUVIALA
WANDERING AND FILMING THE STREETS

CITIZEN BEAUVIALA
FLÂNER, FILMAR AS RUAS

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CITIZEN BEAUVIALA WANDERING AND FILMING THE STREETS

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ABSTRACT

Jean-Pierre Beauviala solved the technical problem of synchronizing image and sound in simple filming situations when, as a young electronics researcher, he planned to film daily life simultaneously in various craftspeople's workshops in Grenoble's historic city centre. He wanted to portray his acoustic and visual perceptions of the individual worlds of craftspeople at work, walking down the street from one workshop to another, and from one shop window to another. This suggested the possibility of a sort of filmed ethnography of the passer-by, of the flâneur. To do this, he invented a control circuit in the mid-1960s that let him synchronise a camera and a tape recorder, and which was portable enough that he could film as he walked. The film was never completed, but the different spaces he intended to film in the old neighbourhoods of Grenoble did eventually become connected to one another in 1971 with the establishment of Aaton, a camera manufacturing company whose models contributed to the evolution of cinematographic forms and techniques.

KEYWORDS: Jean-Pierre Beauviala, Aaton, Grenoble, filming the streets

RESUMO

Jean-Pierre Beauviala resolveu a questão técnica do sincronismo entre imagem e som nas situações de filmagem leve quando o projeto desse jovem pesquisador em eletrônica era filmar a vida cotidiana que se desenrolava simultaneamente em vários ateliers de artesãos no centro histórico de Grenoble. A ideia era poder captar a percepção sonora e visual que se tinha ao caminhar por uma rua, passando de um ateliê a outro, de uma vitrine a outra, mostrando os universos singulares do trabalho dos artesãos. Seria a possibilidade de realizar uma espécie de etnografia filmada do passante, do *flâneur*. Para isso, ele inventou, em meados dos anos 1960, um circuito de controle que permitia sincronizar uma câmera e um gravador, tudo devendo ser suficientemente portátil para filmar enquanto se caminha. O filme nunca foi realizado. No entanto, os diferentes espaços que ele queria filmar, situados nos bairros antigos de Grenoble, acabaram sendo interligados a partir de 1971, quando a empresa Aaton foi criada para desenvolver uma fábrica de câmeras que levaram à evolução, ao mesmo tempo, das formas e técnicas cinematográficas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Jean-Pierre Beauviala, Aaton, Grenoble, filmando as ruas

1. INTRODUCTION

Jean-Pierre Beauviala (1937-2019) solved the technical problem of synchronizing image and sound in simple filming situations when, as a young electronics researcher, he planned to film daily life simultaneously in various craftspeople's workshops in Grenoble's historic city centre. He wanted to portray his acoustic and visual perceptions of the individual worlds of craftspeople at work, walking down the street from one workshop to another, and from one shop window to another. This suggested the possibility of a sort of filmed ethnography of the passer-by, of the flâneur. The film was never completed, but the different spaces he intended to film in the old neighbourhoods of Grenoble did eventually become connected to one another in 1971 with the establishment of Aaton, a camera manufacturing company whose models contributed to the evolution of cinematographic

forms and techniques. The link between technical and formal innovation thus lies at the origin of this factory, which is a very organic, poetic space.

In Grenoble, Beauviala's search for a cinema to be experienced on an everyday basis and developed in the heart of lived spaces was poeticized in his ideas of urbanity and architecture. As the company began to mass-produce cameras, it needed to expand its premises, thus annexing the former craftspeople's workshops around Rue de La Paix. This part of town was Beauviala's own stomping ground, which he photographed to illustrate the first Aatonian manifesto promoting tools to improve cinema's mobility and to invent a locally grounded cinema, while at the same time creating movement between these spaces, preserving views and light.

Using a variety of methodologies (recollections, archival research, "interactive" interviews, urban and sensitive mapping, narratives of ambiances, etc.), our inquiry updates and explores an era through rediscovered archives, rendering these documents public while also encouraging new creations. Our research searches for ways of rendering the political, technical, and poetic dimensions of this period sensorially present, and to tell the story of its ambiances, whose trail is always perceptual and, in part, still alive.

2. THE FLOW OF LIFE

In Issue No. 285 of *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, published in 1978, Jean-Pierre Beauviala recalled the film project that gave rise to his first technical innovations in the synchronisation of image and sound in the mid-1960s:

"After completing my studies, I worked at the university as a teaching assistant in electronics, and I needed to make a film: a research film about the pathways of a city, about its streets and squares, a film about the street as an essential place for appropriating space for one's own life. To make this movie, I needed a device that would allow the camera to move freely and at the same time to record several layers of sound. For example, for a guy walking down a given street, I wanted to record more than just the sounds of the street around him. What interested me and what I sought out in particular were the concomitant events that were taking place elsewhere on that street, to record sounds at the dairy (and with that, perhaps also another image), what was going on in an apartment up on the fourth floor, and in a workshop at the foot of the street. I wanted to record the synchronous sounds that accompanied, preceded, and watched over the guy walking".¹

Jean-Pierre Beauviala was interested in the "figure of the man walking" as a way to envision his filming, but the equipment for this film project didn't exist yet. The young electronics engineer devised a control circuit to synchronise the tape recorder to the camera. The manufacturer of the Éclair 16 camera, the Éclair company, based in Épinay-sur-Seine and Paris, hired Beauviala as a consultant-engineer within the SECLER R&D office to design a synchronous motor for the Éclair 16 and, more generally, to use electronics to improve filming conditions (Sorrel, 2017). With the pretext of the presence of a semi-conductor factory, Beauviala insisted on setting up the R&D office in Grenoble, in the building across the street from his own apartment. In wanting to live and work in the same neighbourhood, Beauviala imbued this vision of a *filmmaker in passing* with a political dimension: the person filming is more than just a flaneur; he/she is also looking at the city and its transformations, and more generally contemplating its desirable future. In 2014, he returned to this film project that he never completed and its manifesto aspects:

¹ Interview with Jean-Pierre Beauviala, *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 285, February 1978, p. 8.

“[...] I wanted to make a pamphlet against La Villeneuve. This was in 1967-1968. I wanted to fight against the very idea of the plan to build La Villeneuve. And to fight, given that I was an engineer and not an architect, an urban planner, or anything else, I relied on an extraordinary fellow named Camillo Sitte, who [...] wrote a book titled *The Art of Building Cities* [...] which explained that inhabitable cities create societies. And these aren't hygienist cities where everyone has sun and wind, but solitude as well. These are cities with streets, squares, where you can breathe [...], where there are human relationships. [...] The only way to do this was to make a pamphlet through a film to show an old city that worked well, and to show a modern city as it existed in the 1960s, which didn't work well, which even stimulated crime. At the time, I wanted to show that La Villeneuve [...] was indescribable. It was the worst place one could live in the whole world. [...] That's what led me to create the cinematic tools to be able to make this film”.²

This desire to film arose from a reaction against plans by the City of Grenoble to build a second city centre. Built in the 1970s by the Urban Planning and Architecture Agency (AUA), La Villeneuve de Grenoble created a radical rupture with the urban forms that had governed cities until then. Progressivism, humanism, and utopianism played a decisive role in the design of this district, which was subjected to a general geometric rule of hexagonal forms with a few external islands tied to the main body by covered walkways. The project criticised the traditional street, which it associated with conditions of poverty, noise, a lack of light, and the invasive presence of the automobile. In addition to the disturbances of the street, La Villeneuve's spatial model provided an answer to the issue of urban sprawl by proposing a way of creating a dense habitat in an environment abounding in greenery. Like all experiments, La Villeneuve did not keep all its promises (*Caravansérail*, 2020). Beauviala was convinced that “the flow of life”, as the theorist of cities and cinema Siegfried Kracauer called it (1960), was embodied in the street and everything it offered in terms of potential perceptions, encounters, interactions, and a sense of otherness. Hence, a street full of ground-floor workshops could play its very own dramatic role in staging an everyday reality, and which a camera should be able to capture. This period was concomitant with the last years of the Situationist movement that, since the late 1950s, had been developing a view of urban ambiance inspired by Henri Lefebvre's philosophy of moments. In their formulation of a dual critique of the daily life and urban planning of the 1960s, the Situationists adopted the notion of ambiance to destabilise the notion of the everyday through interventions in the urban environment, whether through experiments, diversions, or psycho-geographical studies (*Situationist International*, 1997). For the Situationists, the idea of ambiances allowed them to intervene in the city's emotional reality, at the confluence of the material, social, and artistic world (Thibaud, forthcoming). It is also worth noting that this approach to an urban everyday through walking and ambiances was addressed in Grenoble during these same years by scholars such as Pierre Sansot in *Poetics of the City* (1971) and later by Jean-François Augoyard, whose doctoral dissertation became the book *Step by Step: An Essay on Pathways in the Urban Environment* (1979), and who showed that, to the contrary, La Villeneuve gave rise to a rhetoric of habitat through meaningful pathways: “La Villeneuve was a kind of open city, a place where you could reinvent your life” (*Caravansérail*, 2023).

² <https://www.ambiances.net/evenement/le-quotidien-filme-archives-filmiques-et-espaces-publics/>



Figure 1. Jean-Pierre Beauviala with Raymond Depardon in front of an Aaton window display on rue de la Paix Grenoble, 27 March 2006, photo by Valentina Miraglia

3. MOVING FROM ONE AMBIANCE TO ANOTHER³

His reaction to the La Villeneuve Project expresses, first of all, a certain conservatism that describes more precisely that his vision of innovating and designing technical objects that would change the way films were made was conditioned by his views of urban planning and architecture. When Beauviala joined SECLER in the late 1960s, television and direct cinema, such as the French New Wave, turned the forms and techniques of light filmmaking on their head in an effort to be more in step with society. In his notes for an article on a light camera in his personal archive, he wrote “Lightening the camera means putting the body back on the road”. Beauviala conceived the ergonomics of cameras as being based on the body and imagination of the flaneur, thereby distancing himself from the figure of the hunter (of images) that was still the prevailing model for the design of the Éclair 16. As the slogan announcing the sale of the new Aaton 7 camera in 1974 suggests, Beauviala referred to uses that came from direct cinema and anthropological film: “Adventurer filmmakers, snoopers, and experts all complain that cameras are not suited to filming out in the field”.⁴ The Aaton 7’s design had to differentiate itself from that of the Éclair 16, if only to register patents and create a buzz for the camera by making it more adaptable to real-life situations. By improving the viewfinder’s optical principles, Aaton managed to push the camera back onto the shoulder of the person filming and thus reveal their face, in search of a more equitable relationship between those in front of and the person behind the camera. The Aaton’s ergonomics were thus inspired by a change in perspective characterised by a documentary approach that sought to restore the role of the filmed subject. The Aaton’s ergonomic design was also similar to the one developed by Victor Papanek in his work *Design for Human Scale*, published in 1971.⁵ This socially committed designer criticised a design world that “produced mediocrity that bore no relation to humanity’s true needs”

³ In reference to Georges Perec’s famous phrase “Living is going from one space to another and trying as much as possible not to run into anything” (1974).

⁴ *For a cinema of the nearby* (1974), J.P. Beauviala – Aaton papers, archives of the Grenoble Cinémathèque.

⁵ Its translation into French came out in 1973. This work formed part of Jean-Pierre Beauviala’s personal library.

(1973). In producing film equipment, Beauviala was not responding directly to humanity's true needs, as Papanek had argued for. Aaton instead manufactured recording equipment that sought to produce meaning, and Beauviala proposed and designed tools to help humanity portray itself more fairly. Beauviala sought to do far more than just design and sell working equipment, even if Aaton had to adapt its production to the uses of the cinematographic and audio-visual industry. Papanek advocated for a design centred on humans rather than on technology, one that was participative, integrative, ethical, and, thus, often inventively cobbled together. Papanek was interested in [...] "the interface between design and people, meaning a true concern for the other" (preface to the second edition, 1977). In trying to adapt film to reality and not the other way around, Beauviala envisaged the design of the cameras based on the human body. This approach was a commitment as much as an aesthetic. In the 1970s, especially in French cinema, the direct recording of reality was envisioned as being totally unhindered; wherever the body went – through a doorway, into a car, etc. – there the camera was supposed to be able to follow so that the film didn't have to stop. Adapting to reality rather than reconstituting it, going from the inside to the outside, and vice versa, with no limits. Describing the world of the city, where the street was the site of perceptions and encounters, with multiples passages from one ambiance to another, required a camera that adapted to reality, and not the other way around.

The ergonomics of the first Aaton camera, the Aaton 7 presented at Photokina in 1974 (Nicolazic, Sorrel, 2022), represented for Beauviala a starting point for thinking politically about the means of cinema to develop a cinema of the nearby. Work on the optics pushed the viewfinder farther back for the sake of balancing the camera, which thereby sat like a cat on one's shoulder. The figure of the pet thus creates an alternative with which the camera operator could build relationships other than technical ones, namely to the camera, the places filmed, and the people encountered. The goal was to be able to move with the camera and to construct images in which one is able to "stroll" to "allow for a view that lets things happen".⁶ This meant welcoming reality instead of hunting it down, and allowing the complexity of the context to enter the field of view at the same time that the sound allowed people to hear a place. Beauviala advocated for a filmmaker able to shoot his or her own film "so that he/she could reconstitute space"⁷, and for filmmakers who explored the role of the human in society.

3. A CAMERA FACTORY IN THE CITY

When it came time to launch production of the cameras in the mid-1970s, Beauviala wanted to film the former workshops of the craftsmen on Rue de La Paix, which were connected to one another and which thus constituted the building blocks of an industrial site in the city centre. It is worth dwelling on the fact that the camera factory established itself in the city as a way to foster the thinking behind the design of the tools. They adapted the existing premises to preserve the aspect of craftsmanship, as well as the windows, which let people see the work being performed inside and allowed the light to enter into the work areas. The interior spaces were reconfigured to facilitate movement within and to create views:

⁶ J.P. Beauviala – Aaton papers, archives of the Grenoble Cinémathèque.

⁷ J.P. Beauviala – Aaton papers, archives of the Grenoble Cinémathèque.

“We split up the rooms for noise reasons, but we did so with glass. No one was removed from the movement of the city. Everyone had a view of the city. Only those people on the mezzanine had to lean out to see people in the street. And in the summer, when all the windows were opened, we were practically out in the street. Anyone could come into Aaton. People rang, entered, people came... So, there was space, light, the freedom to come and go, to go do one’s shopping. We really were in the city centre”.⁸

The design of the tools and the location of the workshops for their construction in the city centre express the desire for these tools to facilitate a “cinema of the nearby”:

“Since the Aaton camera was very quiet, with a low profile that lay behind the operator’s head, the operator could now participate actively as an individual and not just as someone carrying a magic box that stole people’s portraits; it could establish a relationship with actors who were no longer seen from afar. The cameramen who use this camera tell us that it has often deeply changed the way they work. This is why we describe the Aaton 7 as the camera of the nearby”.⁹

The expression “camera of the nearby” suggests more than just the idea of designing a light, mobile camera. It is also a technical object that encourages encounters and interactions. The camera was envisioned as a portable tool, one that promoted a cinema that invited people to use its tools to institute new practices and representations: a cinema experienced in the everyday and developed in the very heart of people’s lived space, using a concept that was poeticised and politicised by Beauviala’s reflections on urbanity and architecture.

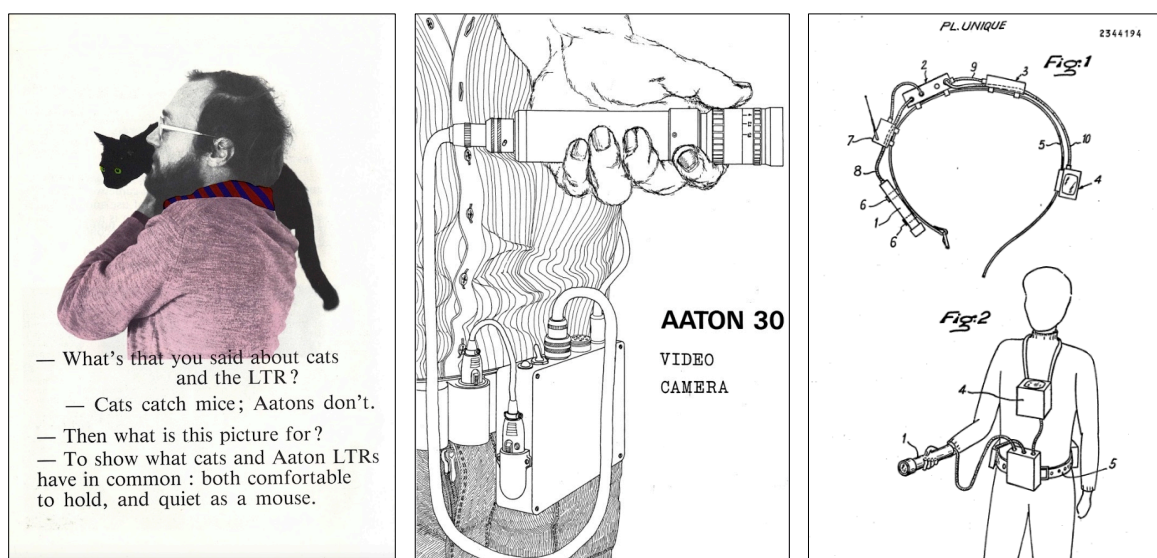


Figure 2: a camera as a cat on one’s shoulder. Advertising, camera 16mm Aaton 7 [1975], fonds Aaton, Cinémathèque Française
 Figures 3 & 4: camera called “la Paluche”, Brochure Aaton, [1976], fonds Aaton, Cinémathèque Française

The desire to manufacture cameras in the very heart of the city to enable a cinema of the nearby is evident in the test films that could be made simply by stepping outside the workshop and using the surrounding neighbourhoods as a subject. These test films, called “Grenoble walks”, more than evidently being technically and aesthetically interesting, today constitute a novel archive of the urbanity and ambiances of these neighbourhoods.

⁸ Interview with Jean-Pierre Beauviala on the operations of the Aaton company, conducted by Alexia de Mari, in the online magazine *Création collective au cinéma*, “The film team: innovations and inventions”, Issue No. 2, 2019.

⁹ Aaton document in the Archive of the Grenoble Cinematheque. At this time, Aaton was spelt as such in the document produced for the Grenoble short film and documentary festival in 1974.



Figure 5. Test films (source: Grenoble Cinematheque)

Furthermore, this “stepping out of the Aaton workshops” into the neighbourhood, as it was termed in 1978 by *Les Cahiers du cinéma* in reference to the Lumière Brothers’ first film, became a ritual for those who came from afar¹⁰ to Grenoble to visit Aaton and meet Beauviala. Countless directors and technicians have made what we have come to call “the visit to Grenoble” (Sorrel, Tixier, 2022). The traces of these visits, which we have been able to observe in various forms (i.e., photos, films, and interviews), show how a media and technical and artistic scene arose in Grenoble because of Aaton’s ability to exist at the margins of a film industry that was otherwise located mainly in the Paris region.



Figure 6. The visit to Grenoble, path – collage of the emblematic sites, original format: 1.5m (Emmanuelle Pilon, 2022)

4. CONNECTING SPACES TO CREATE A VIEW

The Aaton workshops were not the only spaces occupied by Beauviala, as his research was also expressed through other site projects: the building of a house in Mens (a rural commune located one hour outside Grenoble), a veritable experimental architecture for his ideas, and the restructuring of a 450 m² attic apartment in the historic part of Grenoble. Created over time by buying garrets, attics, rooms, and hallways to connect these spaces to one another to transform the whole into a veritable passageway with atypical views that allowed for novel rooftop views of Grenoble.

To understand their underlying rationale, we visited all of these sites, created 3-D renderings (using point clouds), and talked to the architect, Jean Jo Verdet, who partnered with him on these projects, and the mason, François Della-Valle, who worked on almost all of them. Several principles are operative here that are not entirely dissimilar from the way in which the Aaton cameras were created.

Beauviala envisaged the design as a perpetual process in which the move to fabrication was not the last step. This view took the form of an ongoing discussion with his architect, as well as all the craftsmen, who exchanged ideas with one another using, instead of final execution drawings, explanatory sketches that they had made during their meetings, often at table or directly on site during the construction. And even when one part seemed completed, it could always be revisited. This instituted a design process that was open to

¹⁰ New York director and editor Jon Fauer gave a lengthy account of his visit in 2009: http://www.fdtimes.com/pdfs/articles/aaton-beauviala/FDT_Aaton_WebRpt_hi_072309.pdf

ideas that could be discussed and especially tested. The goal was not a formal or structural mastery of the whole, rather to test systems and leave some parts open to their potential extension. These are the same principles as the ones adopted by Brazilian architect and artist Sérgio Ferro, who came to Grenoble in the early 1970s. Ferro advocated for endless remodelling and collective experimentation with the craftsmen, even if this meant tearing something completely apart and starting over from scratch. Far from “the hypostasis of the project for normal architects”, Ferro asserted “the priority of the work in progress in a world dominated by productive capital” (2024).



Figure 7. Tests for depicting Rue de la Paix and the Aaton premises – 3-D point cloud
UPR MAP – created by Livio de Luca and Laurent Bergerot

Another principle that governed Beauviala’s architectural intentions was the desire to blend into the existing built space, to the point of not differing from it. The goal was to have people think that the architecture had always been there in terms of its forms, materials, and social patterns. His architect Jean-Jo Verdet told us this story: “Upon arriving in Roissard from Grenoble, and upon entering the old city, on the right are several groups of roofs all grouped together. When we saw them, he told me, “My house will be a hamlet in that spirit that you see there. I want to make a hamlet that has always been there”. The idea for the hamlet was as a working and living space where both the individual and the collective were possible. Here the public space was the square instead of the street, as for the workshops. Beauviala saw the first house (his own) as the beginning of a place that could evolve with the construction of other houses and ultimately form a hamlet. The very form of his house consists of volumes connected by at times improbable passageways. This contributed strongly to the sense of a hamlet as the result of an evolution over the years, and not an initial design.

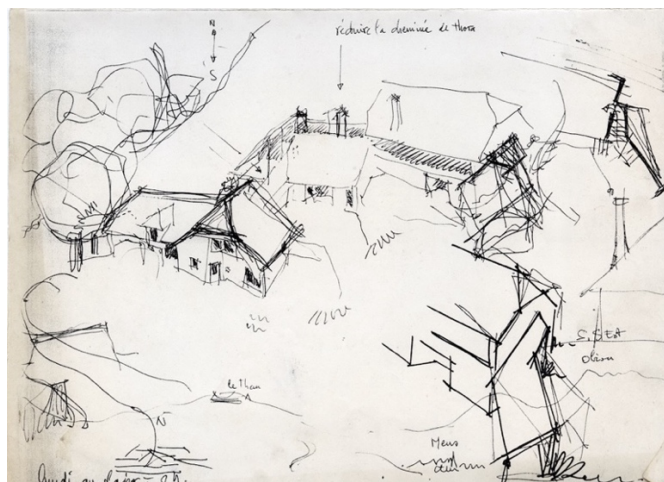


Figure 8. Sketch of the house in Mens showing the intricacy of the spaces for a house, which already set forth the idea of a hamlet
Undated document drawn at the ice cream shop at Place Notre-Dame by J.-P. Beauviala (archives of the Grenoble Cinematheque)

Creating pathways between the interior spaces and thus having differentiated ambiances and carefully designed views represented another important principle for Beauviala. The intention was an architecture without doors. Doors interrupt the fluidity of one's step, of sight, and of sound. The interior arrangements play with thresholds and passageways, thus developing an art of appearing and disappearing from one space to another. He created mezzanines, quarter floors, even 1/10 floors when passing from one space to another. These configurations of the spaces (it is not always easy to talk about them as rooms) allow one to see and access many other ones. The ambition was not a panopticon of domestic control, rather to have the living spaces be configured like workspaces to allow people to meet and to offer a diversity of spaces to rest and enjoy a view, an opening onto the world. Together with his architect, he even mulled over the idea of an interior street that would at once provide access and be an inhabited space. The explicit idea was to endow the interior spaces (both for living and working) with the qualities that an active, lively street offered in a city.

These principles were far from any sort of architectural rationality in pursuit of a predefined logic through theory or structures. Nor was there an attempt to create functionalities tied to standardised uses (which were rejected). To the contrary, they sought the possibility for each space to welcome people (and not functions) and to offer a sensory and social experience, following a logic of experimentation, collaboration, and invention that would form part of what was already there, in which innovation went hand in hand with a vernacular.

4. CITIZEN BEAUVIALA¹¹

Jean-Pierre Beauviala's idea of architecture did not seek to optimise materials or forms. He instead thought sensory effects (e.g. views, perspectives, and pathways) driven by an experience of the place (e.g. space, ambiance, and materials), which was designed to welcome the human body. Far from a standardised thinking, his design of the spaces was driven by a logic of experimentation and invention, in which each architectural space is the subject of an idea to be tested, in pursuit of an aesthetic that unfolds through a process of layering, of a sum of decisions made throughout the design and construction phases. Even after their completion, the spaces were transformed and modified, much in the same way that he felt a need for a continuous evolution of his devices, whose design would reveal their function. In this respect, the term "worksite" rather than "architecture" seems more appropriate to this approach, which is in principle endless. Beauviala's construction projects were permanent transformations involving extensions that sought new "passage" effects (from a house to a hamlet, from a workshop to a street of workshops, if not a neighbourhood of workshops, and so on), just as the design of the devices provided possibilities that left room for evolutions towards something that remained yet unknown. This was a gesture of imagining based on what already existed. We can see a desire to respect "the other" in what makes for a place, a form of know-how, and an architecture that appears to have always been there. The idea was to resume a part of its history by recovering the materials, ideas, and rationales of a particular site.

¹¹ *Citizen Beauviala* is a lovely expression that we owe to cinematographer and director Caroline Champetier. This expression was then used during a radio broadcast *Surprised by the night – Jean-Pierre Beauviala, a portrait in the form of a walk*, on the France Culture radio station on 3 October 2007.

This approach to architecture sheds light on how Jean-Pierre Beauviala envisaged the design of tools for cinema based on the human body and a design at a human scale, driven by the idea of connecting spaces through sight and hearing by steps that took people from one ambiance to another to perceive their various forms of socialisation. The fabrication of architectures for living and working was envisaged as a construction of spaces where, and from where, people could look, just as through a camera. To see and be seen through various effects of transparency and organisation of the spaces meant, in essence, making cameras and architectures for life to take shape within them.

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