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## A filmic exploration by means of botanical imagery

*Notes on Rose Lowder*

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*I'd never been on a farm and am not even sure which are begonias, dahlias, or petunias. Plants, like algebra, have a habit of looking alike and being different, or looking different and being alike; consequently mathematics and botany confuse me. – Elenore Smith Bowen*

When looking at what can be considered the canon of so-called experimental film one suddenly realises that there is a segment of this production devoted to botanical imagery. The presence of this imagery functions as the catalyst of a distinction between the filmmakers involved in this common exploration; even if one can trace links between this shared concern for the subject the approaches are extremely varied. As a starting point one could argue that the interest in botanical imagery among different artists might be due to a shared desire to deal with established pictorial genres, most notably still-lives and landscapes; but this too seems inaccurate.

If one looks at the work of Marie Menken (*Glimpse of the Garden*, 1957), Stan Brakhage (*Mothlight*, 1963; *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1981), or Kurt Kren (*3/60 Bäume im Herbst*, 1960; *37/78 Tree Again*, 1978) – to name just a few artists who deal with the subject at hand in those specific films – the difference among pictorial representations is startling. For instance, Menken constructs her *Glimpse of the Garden* on close-ups and dynamic hand-held camera movements. Brakhage deals with botanical elements in a manner directly based on the collage technique, gluing flowers and plants onto the clear film strip. Kren works rhythmically with short cuts and a fast in-camera editing style. The case considered in this article – the

film work of Rose Lowder – is particularly interesting because of the artist's commitment, made explicit through an entire series of films with botanical imagery. The aim of this article then is an inquiry into this subject with an attempt to point out the different uses and functions that plants and flowers embody in some of her major works.

## Cameraless film

Before examining the subject directly it is worth noting that Rose Lowder's cinematic experiments (starting around 1976) began even before she was able to shoot film with a camera. It can also be useful to recall here that before making 'experimental' films Lowder trained as a painter and sculptor in artist studios and art schools (in Lima at The Art Center, La Escuela de Bellas Artes, and in London at Regent Street Polytechnic, Chelsea School of Art). Her training in the visual arts was pursued in parallel with working as an editor in the film and television industry. This dual aspect of her biography proves to be crucial when dealing with her film work since it is possible to find both pictorial concerns and an in-depth knowledge of the filmic apparatus.

Her first works (which are grouped together in a sort of anthology and distributed under the literal title *Loops* – an evident reference to the film strip) seem to deal directly with film material. Furthermore, not only are they entirely abstract (or more accurately, not at all figurative) but they do not rely on any image obtained photographically. These loops are composed of transparent 16mm film leader in which Lowder made holes using a paper-punch in addition to using an ink marker to trace lines on it.

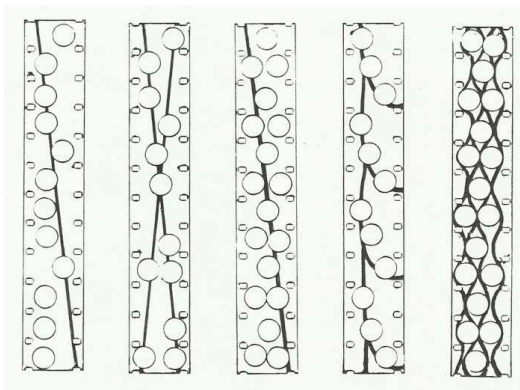


Fig. 1: *Studies for the Loops films* (from Lowder 1987, p. 283).

These first attempts to deal with film reveal at least two major things about Lowder's work. It is clear that the photographically-obtained image (and consequently questions of composition, light, etc.) is secondary in her production, being entirely absent in these works. Also, these experiments underline something that will become even more central in her subsequent work. The loops she created around the second half of the 1970s make visible the dual nature of film; that is to say they point out that what lies on the film strip does not correspond to what is shown on the screen by the means of projection.<sup>1</sup>

The first of these issues discussed above is also expressed by the filmmaker herself in a text published almost 20 years after these first experiments (on the occasion of a program on experimental film and colour curated by Philippe-Alain Michaud at the Louvre Auditorium). Tracing the history of cinema in concise yet accurate terms, Lowder explains the following:

[w]hile the cinematographic tradition has been built upon two types of movement – that of the camera and that of filmed reality – it is in the concern for the very mechanism of the filmic apparatus that makes manifest the inherent possibilities in the arrangement of individual frames and the movement of the film strip.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, as clearly stated by the filmmaker, it is not so much the camera nor the 'filmed reality' that opened up new possibilities for cinematographic movement but rather those possibilities were themselves already inscribed in the mechanics of the apparatus – in the film strip, the projector, the shutter, etc.<sup>3</sup> When Lowder began producing her own images – that is to say, when she bought her first 16mm camera in 1977 – those questions were not put aside but rather shifted slightly towards another direction with the introduction of some aspects of composition that interacted with the already well-defined formal concerns mentioned above.

Now that the crucial importance of the film apparatus has been established there is another important point to be made. The loops that Lowder worked on at the beginning of her career seem to embody an implicit critique and mark a theoretical difference with one of the major orientations in experimental film of the period. Although one can trace some similarities with the realm of so-called 'structural film' (due to the interest in the essential components of the film medium) there is at least one notable difference with this sphere of production.<sup>4</sup> To make a comparison it is possible to see that in one of the most precise formulations of the poetics

of structural film delivered by Peter Kubelka, which refers to ‘metrical film’ with respect to his own production, there is at least one element that clashes with Lowder’s first works. At the core of Kubelka’s formulation is one key assumption: that of the primary role of the frame in film composition. Kubelka argues that the single frame is the smallest unit of film structure, thus the essential articulation of cinema takes place ‘not between shots, but between frames’, in opposition to standard conceptions of narrative cinema.<sup>5</sup> Whereas for Lowder, as she clearly stated years later in an interview with Scott MacDonald, even Kubelka’s position seems to fall short of the truth:

[a]s these experiments demonstrate, pieces of different frames can make up what you’re seeing on the screen. In other words, you can construct an image on the screen with bits from different frames. You can change very slightly parts of frames or several frames – change the color, the thickness of the lines, whatever, and a completely different thing happens.<sup>6</sup>

The frame and its supposed central role is challenged from Lowder’s earliest work; it is as if the filmmaker wanted to decompose – down to its most minute parts – what is generally taken for granted as the smallest unit in film. However, this research did not stop when Lowder started shooting with her camera. On the contrary, it found a new configuration in the figurative style of her later films while keeping continuity with her early works and also ambiguously shifting back and forth between modes of abstraction.

### **First lesson in botany (towards abstraction)**

It is at this point that it becomes possible to detect the presence of botanical elements, most notably in Lowder’s work from 1979 entitled *Rue des Teinturiers*. In this film the camera is set up on the tiny balcony of the filmmaker’s apartment which, as the title indicates, is located on the Rue des Teinturiers in Avignon. Through the window one can see the street below but there are plants located on the balcony that interfere with the vision of the observer. Most notably, leaves of laurel always appear as a screen (in its etymological sense), blocking the view.

The method applied by Lowder is meant to complicate this relationship between figure and background. Over a period of several months the filmmaker recorded this space, alternately focusing on the plant and the

background. Since the focus changes in every single frame the distinction between figure and background tends to disappear, giving birth to a certain composite image of the two elements. Through this peculiar device the whole field of vision appears to widen and the process is even more astounding since it is carried out from an extremely narrow point of view. Furthermore, the whole scene is subject to infinite changes that perpetually overlap. Not only does the focus change, constantly mixing the laurel tree with the background scene, but the whole image is continually subjected to a metamorphosis due to the inevitable multitude of mutations in light, colours, and movement. Because some elements are beyond the control of the filmmaker (cars and people strolling down the street) the changes are often extremely unpredictable. In this dialectic between outer and inner space an entire theory of perception is challenged – namely the canonical distinction between figure and ground that can be traced back to Gestalt psychology.

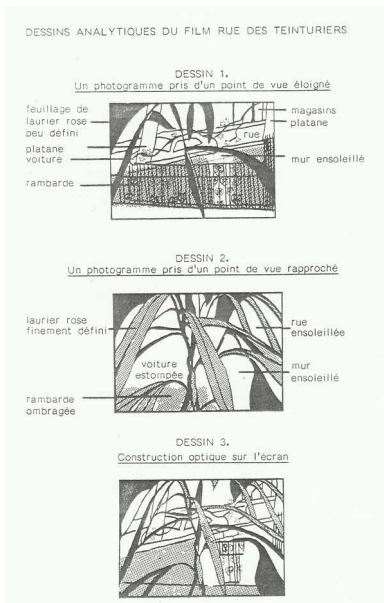


Fig. 2: Analytical drawings for *Rue des Teinturiers* (from Lowder 1987, p. 278).

As Lowder explains:

[i]t seemed to me that if you wanted to create, not reality – that's not interesting at all; you might just as well see reality – but if you want to make a work of film art that is as rich as what one is used to in reality, you have to

enrich the film image somehow. One way is to continually focus on slightly different focus points that allow you to see around the corners of things just a bit. In certain scenes in *Rue des Teinturiers*, you'll notice that at some points you can actually see through the flowering laurel tree trunk in the middle of the balcony. You are seeing behind it as well, because one of the focus points is the trunk itself, and still another is in front of the trunk. Because I use all these focus points over and over, you see multiple things in the same space, which in reality is physically impossible.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore film, through a simple shift of focus – although in the production process itself it was not that simple, since it had to be done for every frame – can offer a different path towards perception. The relationship between figure (the laurel tree) and the background (the street scene) creates a dynamic unity made possible by the image projected on the screen. As in the case in the *Loops* films what you see on the screen is in fact not what is printed on the film strip. Indeed the extremely rapid alternation of single frames produces a projected image that cannot be found in the regular succession of frames as observed on the 16mm strip.

What then is the role of the plant in this case? It is clear that the laurel tree was not chosen for its iconographic qualities, nor does it recall any pictorial genre; it functions instead in a twofold manner. At first it embodies the role of an obstacle to vision; the view from the balcony is closed by its presence. Yet as we have seen it is also through this presence that the dialectic between the domestic space and the outer landscape is articulated by the means of a technical device (the change of focus). The laurel tree stands as a threshold of perception, something that can be penetrated by the gaze of the spectator but also something on which the very same gaze can focus.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, due to the long period over which the film was shot, the living nature of the laurel plant is highlighted and acts as a prism for the reflection of the overall changes. The light that hits its leaves and the wind that shakes them alert the spectator to the singular condensation of time made possible by the frame-by-frame filming technique. So one could argue that in a way the cinematographic apparatus (the camera, the strip of film, and its continuous movement) does not clash with the natural element (nor the botanical one) but rather that it is an instrument for stressing its presence and opening a broader exchange between the daily rhythm of nature and the filmic, mechanical element.

Another film that Lowder made during the same year (1979) offers a similar example although not dealing at all with botanic imagery. The object in *Couleurs mécaniques* is at first difficult to recognise. The whole pattern

of the film, composed of colourful lights spinning in different directions, appears to be almost entirely abstract. Gradually one is able to understand where these lights come from: the element that produces this light show is a carousel, but the camera's point of view focusing only on narrow portions of it allows the viewer to catch a fugitive glimpse of the entire structure. What can we find here that is so close to the nature of *Rue des Teinturiers*? Something essential lies in the title – *Couleurs mécaniques*, 'Mechanical Colours' – which is in fact a direct reference to Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy's avant-garde classic *Ballet mécanique* (1924), though the fact that the title is plural shifts the meaning considerably. As the filmmaker herself points out the key difference between Léger and Murphy's film and *Couleurs mécaniques* is due to the fact that the avant-garde of the 1920s was fascinated by the machine itself. On the contrary Lowder in *Couleurs mécaniques* aims precisely to use the workings of the machine in an opposite way – she wants to use them in order 'to free the objects' colours for another visual purpose'.<sup>9</sup> In a similar manner to *Rue des Teinturiers* then, where the mechanical aspects of filmmaking are indeed linked to the botanic element displayed in the film, here the machine-originated colours are meant to lose their link to the technical apparatus and are freed from it, propelled towards abstraction.

It is not surprising that during this same period Lowder created an entirely abstract film. *Parcelle* (1979) stands apart in her production, since although it is true that the *Loops* films are abstract they can hardly be considered a finished work. On the contrary *Parcelle* is a fully-accomplished work of abstract film. The film introduces a geometric frame into a sequence of pure colour ones: a small coloured square positioned in the middle of the frame alternating with a circle of the same size. As Nicky Hamlyn points out the size of the object is crucial: '[i]t is just big enough for the viewer to distinguish between the circle and square, but not so big that the alternations between the circles or square are gross or dramatic, or threaten to overwhelm the background colour field.'<sup>10</sup> The whole rhythm of the film is based on the alternations between the colours of the background and those of the figures and their two shapes (circle and square).



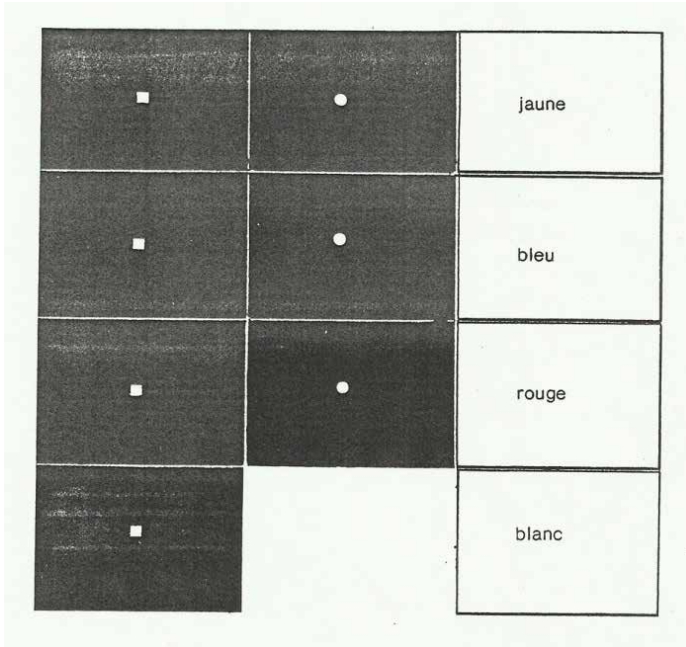


Fig. 3: *Elements for Parcelle* (from Lowder 1987, p. 301).

Hence we again encounter two major elements discussed earlier. One is a concern for challenging the laws of perception through the filmic apparatus. *Parcelle* functions in a manner similar to *Rue des Teinturiers*, where one can experience the simultaneous view of figure and ground (the laurel tree and the street scene). In the abstract film the border between figure and ground is constantly shifting thanks to an extended use of the ‘flicker’ effect.<sup>11</sup>

The second aspect coincides with an idea that can be traced back to Lowder’s first attempts at filmmaking: the strong belief that the frame is not the minimal unit of film. The frame itself can be split within its boundaries as the small circle and square rapidly alternating at its centre demonstrate. This idea which seems to remain crucial to the filmmaker’s work will be subjected to another original variation in a work that she made some years after *Parcelle*, in which we once again find the presence of a botanical element.

## From flowers to ornament

*Les Tournesols* (1982) not only stands out as a key work in Lowder’s filmography but also indicates a theoretical turning point in her career. The subject

of this three-minute film is a field of sunflowers framed to exclude the horizon.<sup>12</sup> The quasi-pictorial image is under tension as a result of the same device used in *Rue des Teinturiers* but with a remarkable shift that is coherent with the spatial and framing restrictions. The field is photographed with a large number of different focal points so that the uniform pattern is constantly moving. *Les Tournesols* proceeds through spatial and temporal condensation.<sup>13</sup> As MacDonald describes it: 'Lowder's single framing of the field seems to energise the field, condensing the subtle movements of the sunflowers that occurred during a period of hours into a comparatively brief cinematic moment.'<sup>14</sup>

It is also worth evoking the tactical shift operated by the filmmaker in the use of botanical imagery. Whereas in *Rue des Teinturiers* the laurel tree functioned mainly as a threshold to test a theory of perception (and to dialectically challenge the distinction between figure and ground) here the sunflower field is chosen because of its inherent capacity to introduce movement within the borders of the frame. By focusing alternately on different points within the shot the overall pattern becomes dynamic and in doing so produces a series of motifs that modulate the image. Thanks to the singular in-camera editing technique this movement is not abrupt but rather continuous. As Lowder states:

[y]ou're focusing on successively different flowers all over the field, and together they all look in focus. But when the images were shot, parts of every frame were out of focus.<sup>15</sup>

The peculiar pattern that comes out is therefore produced by the simultaneous presence of two components: the natural element (submitted as such to a whole series of chance events: breeze, light, etc.) and the rigorous formal structure in which it is contained.

With the *Bouquets 1-10* series (1994-1995), one of her most celebrated works, Lowder's method of composition becomes increasingly complex and articulated. The series consists of ten films shot in the south of France and as the title indicates the subject matter is mostly (but not exclusively) flowers. Each of the *Bouquets* is a one-minute long film strip – which is to say they are composed of 1,440 frames each. Each of the films are shot frame by frame but in non-chronological order and according to a careful plan, following something of a musical score. On this point Lowder notes:

the work is similar to that of a musician. I fix my sheets securely to the tripod, or put stones or my foot on them if nothing else will do, and then play

my instrument, the camera as best I can. The reality filmed shares, with the grid-like charts to be filled-in, the function of a score. The difficult execution interpreting within the given constraints demands the same concentration as the careful attention a musician gives to the beginnings and endings of first and last notes (frames) of a movement in a piece of music.<sup>16</sup>

The formal organisation thus moves towards a certain abstract quality (like a musical score) although the medium used for its expression is photographic reality. This conflict between the rigorous procedural structure and the uncontrolled reality which is recorded stands at the core of the *Bouquets* series and is the extreme conclusion of a process towards abstraction that began with *Les Tournesols*. Lowder uses the filmic apparatus to distil pure visual motifs out of the landscapes she carefully explores, freed from the mere photographic recording of reality. By means of the frame-by-frame filming technique the rapid alternation of one image with a different one creates a vibrant surface animated by an overlapping of abstract motifs. As Michaud recently pointed out, discussing Lowder's *Bouquets*:

[w]hen film is imagined as projection phenomenon, it is freed from its frame, spreads out in space and multiplies. At the same time, the projection of coloured surfaces takes on an ornamental density, negating the fictitious depth that opens up on the screen, and asserting its artificial aspect. The stylised figures now only have a compositional or formal value. The spatial treatment concludes in an interplay of coloured motifs and lines that connect, break up, overlap or counter each other. The illusionist realism of film that aspires to create stable representations of the transitory appearance of things is countered by the deliberate schematism of ornamental images that suggest a different way of occupying the surface. Ornamental order is not the order of the narrative, but of composition: rather than attempting to imitate the real, it seeks to transform it into a motif.<sup>17</sup>

In this way the flowers that make up *Bouquets* seem to enter into the realm of the ornamental. They are used to form a fleeting composition that appears in a flash and rapidly dissolves, as with fireworks (to appropriate the metaphor proposed by Michaud). Their formal qualities (colour and shape) are then exploited to produce this unstable pattern that can be shown on the screen by means of projection but that cannot be found on the film strip.

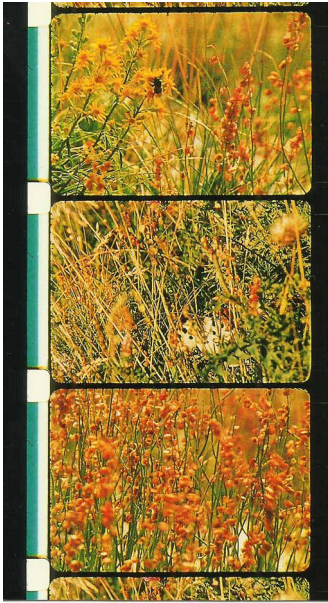


Fig. 4: *Bouquet 1. Mont Ventoux* (1995), 16mm  
©Light Cone.

Throughout her filmography Lowder has established different ways of dealing with botanical imagery, using it either as a theoretical tool for an inquiry into perception (as in the early part of her artistic production) or as a means of producing ornamental motifs. However, there is coherence in her gradual progression from one approach to another because in each case botanical imagery is framed in a rigorous manner. Ultimately the botanical elements displayed in her films do not appear as elements appropriated from reality but rather as a catalyst for the filmic apparatus itself. When looking at the fleeting motifs that recur in the *Bouquets* one can feel disoriented. The composition lasts for an extremely short length of time and the surface constantly changes, invaded by a new motif, while at the same time entangled with the surrounding elements.

In her anthropological novel *Return to Laughter* (1954) Elenore Smith Bowen described a sense of confusion precisely in regards to plants which, like algebra, 'have a habit of looking alike and being different, or looking different and being alike'.<sup>18</sup> One could ask what she would have thought of Lowder's films, where the almost mathematical composition constantly frames and organises the botanical element. I would argue that while perhaps coupled with the sense of confusion described in those lines she would also have experienced a deep aesthetic astonishment.

It is worth mentioning that the very same passage from Bowen's novel was quoted by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the first chapter of his *The Savage Mind*, titled 'The Science of the Concrete'. This chapter is devoted to the methods of acquiring knowledge which differ from scientific thought. When Lowder collects and gathers flowers and plants for her *Bouquets* she is not producing taxonomies or anything of the sort. Rather, by making her rigorous filmmaking practice collide with botanical imagery she is demonstrating the aesthetic achievements of *a science of the concrete*, a science whose axes are the profound knowledge of film and its mechanical apparatus, and the experienced gaze of the botanical connoisseur.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. On this topic, in an interview with William English, Lowder recalls attending a screening of Robert Breer's *Recreation* (1956) while she was living in London around 1964 (held at Better Books). In the filmmaker's words: 'I found that very interesting. To me it was quite evident, right from the beginning, that the individual frames or pictures were not at all equal. They seemed to have a different time according to what was in the picture.' English 1989, p. 106.
2. 'Alors que la tradition cinématographique s'était construite sur deux mouvements, celui de la caméra et celui de la réalité filmée, c'est l'intérêt pour les mécanismes même de l'appareil qui rendit manifestes des possibilités inhérentes aux agencements des images grâce au déplacement de la bande.' Lowder 1995, p. 147.
3. It is worth noting that Lowder has always combined theoretical writing together with her artistic practice. This is most evident in her Ph.D dissertation, under the direction of Jean Rouch. See Lowder 1987.
4. The reference is to the article by P. Adams Sitney (Sitney 1969).
5. Kubelka 1978, p. 141.
6. MacDonald 1998, p. 219.
7. MacDonald 1998, p. 231.
8. *Retour d'un repère* (1979) functions in a rather similar way. Later, in 1982, Lowder reworked this film following a different editing technique and extending its length to nearly an hour. For an in-depth discussion of *Retour d'un repère composé* see Cartwright & Gidal 1986-87.

9. MacDonald 1998, p. 226.
10. Hamlyn 2003, p. 63.
11. For a discussion of the 'flicker film' see Michaud 2006, pp. 121-134.
12. It is worth remembering that in the same year Lowder made another three-minute film with the same sunflower field entitled *Les Tournesols colorés*. The two films can be screened together side by side, creating a new dynamic between the two different images.
13. On the relationship between filmic material and temporality Peter Gidal writes: '[d]uration can be theorized in relation to discontinuity, the piece of filmstrip-time which is cut at begin and end by the splice.' Gidal 1989, p. 100.
14. MacDonald 2001, p. 84.
15. MacDonald 2005, p. 219.
16. Lowder 1997.
17. Michaud 2011, p. 40.
18. Quoted in Lévi-Strauss 1962, p. 6.

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