

Travel, passage, landscape and portrait are concepts that link and describe Robert Cahen's work. Like recurring elementary particles, keywords or tags, they can often be found in the very titles of his pieces, exhibitions and retrospective shows, albeit sometimes expressed in other terms.

On his travels, Cahen picks up and brings back (or sends back: his first frame has often been a television screen) postcards or vignettes with flashes of movement, impressions and logs of journeys, songs and fleeting perceptions: *Cartes postales vidéo*, *Chili-impressions*, *Hong Kong Song*, *Blind Song*, *Sept visions fugitives*.

The notion of passage also entails a crossing, the passing of time (and time as a raw material), all the things thrown up by intervals of time as they are glimpsed, sensed, half-heard and intertwined in suspended, floating time: *L'entr'aperçu*, *Juste le temps*, *Traverses*, *La Traversée du rail*, *L'Entre*, *Entrevoir*.

The landscape is a constant motif or background, overlaid with others, especially travel, as expressed in the *Paysages/Passage(s)* duality in several of his titles or epigraphs. Moreover, the landscape also implies a generic description of not only a physical, natural or urban geography but also a human one as well.

Finally, the idea of portrait is often implicit in works with titles containing proper names—from *Karine* to the pieces that refer to Françoise, the elder sister he bid farewell to as she slipped away, or to composer and conductor Pierre Boulez—as well as in the idea of *anonyme singulier*, to use an expression coined by Michel Chion: any inhabitant of the world, any encounter with otherness.

Cahen trained as a musician and composer. After learning to play the piano and other keyboard instruments, he was drawn towards *musique concrète* on the courses offered by the GRM (Groupe de Recherches Musicales), led by Pierre Schaeffer under the auspices of the Conservatoire national supérieur de musique in Paris.

Cahen's early films and videos are the work of a musician, albeit one with a flair for visual music. At the Service de la Recherche at the ORTF (French broadcasting corporation), set up around the GRM, he came into contact with other groups and departments who were working with images and experimenting with different techniques—an experience that helped the young Cahen move from one place to another, eager to explore neighbouring compartments. In doing so, he discovered that he could apply everything he had learnt about *musique concrète* to film simply by swapping musical instruments for other kinds of keyboards that let him record, edit, mix, manipulate, add effects and the like.

His interest in film was also nourished by a cinematic streak in his family—his father set up the first film club in the Alsace region—and really took off when he moved to Paris, city of light and cinema par excellence.

Throughout the 1970s, Cahen made a number of films in a wide range of different formats, based mainly on animating his own or other people's photographic images by using an animation stand and employing sleights of hand while editing. These originally static images became building blocks for structuring time, creating rhythms and sequences—a term with its own musical connotations—and achieving the idea of

“the restless photo” (*la photo qui bouge*), an idea he also approached from the other direction by slowing down—and even completely freezing—moving images: thus capturing the apparent, illusory movement that lies at the very heart of cinema. A clear example was when he filmed the arrival of a train with a high-speed camera to stretch out the time of the shot (giving us time to identify the train in question, whether by chance or design, as the Caen express!)

Cahen has also readily explored all manner of different electronic devices he has come across. The Truqueur Universel, by engineer François Coupigny, who also created a sound synthesis module that formed part of GRM’s repertoire of instruments, was used in the evocatively titled *L’invitation au voyage* (1973) to process, solarise and colourise a series of film images—reflections on water, train journeys, locations and glimpsed horizons—that recall the legacy of pure, integral, abstract (or at least abstracted *concrète*) filmmaking of the kind made in France by Dulac, Chomette and Mitry.

Later came the EMS Spectron, a video synthesiser created by Richard Monkhouse and used in several films from 1977 to 1982, including *Horizontales couleurs* (1979)—Cahen’s only foray into absolute abstraction—and *L’entr’aperçu* (1980). And the most characteristic effects of this device - of patterns or striations - have been emulated in a more recent work, too: *L’Entre* (2014), with explicit echoes of the previous title in this one.

In *Artmatic* (1980), Cahen explored an incipient version of a computing system developed by Jean-François Colonna at the École Polytechnique in Paris, in a trial that was a precursor of the digitalization of images referring to chronophotography as an anticipation by the filmmaker; and thus, yet another manifestation of the intersection between the fixed image and the cinematographic one

Around 1980, Cahen’s audiovisual work began to become more narrative in shape, full of gliding, dreamlike images somewhere between wakefulness and sleep. This is prefigured in *Arrêt sur marche* (1979), a short film in 35mm which constitutes an entire islet in the ensemble of his work, and in the enchantment of *L’entr’aperçu*, based on visual and audio motifs that regress and intermingle.

Furthermore, although Cahen originally created the sound for his audiovisual work himself, sometimes in partnership with likeminded colleagues, from the early 1980s onwards he delegated the job of composing or sound design to others: Michel Chion and, more recently, Francisco Ruiz de Infante, as well as occasional contributions from other electroacoustic composers.

The peak of this crossover—this passage between music and image, photo (or film frame) and electronic imagery, the specific and the abstract—came with *Juste le temps* (1983), which brought together many of the tropes, motifs and procedures he had introduced, tested and perfected during his formative years. It includes a train journey and the dualities of inside/outside, visible/glimpsed. The images are slowed down—producing modulated time, stretched and contracted at will—and processed by different means: striking colours, landscapes swept over first by the speed of the motion and then by an oscillographic readout of the electronic raster of the images (following a similar principle to the Rutt/Etra video synthesiser used by Nam June Paik, Vasulka and Gary Hill, among others). And there is a sigh of fiction and narrative quality which was already latent after the first *invitation au voyage* of ten years earlier.

Jean-Paul Fargier has taken this work by Cahen as one of the paradigms of the passage *de la trame au drame* in the video from the 'eighties: from the electronic weft of the images (comprised of continuously-flowing dots, lines, fields and squares) to the narrative and dramaturgical weft of an emerging video-fiction which, like science fiction, would have characteristics of its own a. Sandra Lischi, the greatest specialist in Cahen's work, added the notion of suspense as a consequence of the meeting of two characters on a train (the umpteenth variation of *boy meets girl*) where actually nothing really happens, except for the passage of time. Because as the creator himself said, rather than a fiction, this is a "fiction embryo".

His subsequent career has taken him through a wide range of different terrains. He worked closely with the Ina (Institut national de l'audiovisuel), the successor to the Service de la Recherche at the ORTF, and was much in demand at other centres, museums and television channels. Many of the resulting works could be said to be fruit of a carefully struck balance between his own ideas and commissions from others. And thanks to his keen desire to work with other artists and share and forge creative ties with creators working in all kinds of other disciplines, he sought out or found partnerships with choreographers (Hideyuki Yano, Susan Buirge, Bernardo Montet); explored the work of composers, musicians and environments such as Pierre Boulez, IRCAM and GRM; and made documentary projects on museums, collections, exhibitions and artists, together with others on a range of subjects encompassing theatre, architecture and film – always with a unique, innovative and bold seal (for example, by not even showing that which would be most evident in relation to the subject being dealt with).

In addition, travel has become a theme, subject matter and practically its own genre for Cahen. In the same way that we talk of travel literature, we should also think of travel as an audiovisual genre above and beyond the commonplaces of documentary travelogues. At first he travelled light, but his later trips took on an almost transcendental quality, so to speak. The very experience of moving, of going from one place to another and then returning to the starting point is an example of *voyager/retrouver*, according to one of the dualities Cahen likes to use. In fact, this is what he has always done (including the techniques and effects he uses): setting off in search of nothing in particular, and leaving himself open to being surprised by whatever he might find.

These lightweight pieces include *Cartes postales vidéo* (1984-1986), a joint project with Stéphane Huter and Alain Longuet that comprised a series of 30-second capsules designed to fill continuity gaps in television programming with archetypal images and iconic souvenirs of a wide range of places, cities, monuments, landscapes and picturesque details. For a moment, these captured images buzz with movement and burst with sound. He took the tourist trail in *Montenvers et Mer de Glace* (1987, again together with Huter) on a track railway, with visual and aural echoes of the intrigues of Hitchcock/Herrmann and the comic timing of Tati and Chaplin.

Cahen's love for travel has also grown thanks to his involvement with various international events, festivals and crosscutting projects. Indeed, the increasing worldwide acclaim for his work led to his urban symphonies, in a *concrète* vein, to New York (*Le deuxième jour*, 1988, with music by Zorn) and *Hong Kong Song* (1989, in collaboration with Ermeline Le Mézo), his impressions of Chile and the mysterious Easter Island (1989 and 1990) and his magical evocation of the Luminara festivities in Pisa, when the Tuscan city is filled with the light and the smell of wax candles and oil lamps (*La notte delle bugie*, 1993).

Next, the idea of a transcendental journey could be extended to his travels to distant lands and cultures, extreme places and wild landscapes, and his encounters with otherness. It can be seen in his journeys to the Antarctic (*Voyage d'hiver*, 1993, with Angela Riesco; *Paysages d'hiver*, 2005) and the Arctic (*Le cercle*, 2005); his repeated trips to the Far East: China (*Sept visions fugitives*, 1995; *Canton la chinoise*, 2001, with Rob Rombout; *Red Memory*, 2010, with John Borst, among others), Vietnam (*Plus loin que la nuit*, 2005; *Blind Song*, 2008) and Japan (*Corps flottants*, 1997); and his travels to Yemen (*Sanaa, passages en noir*, 2007), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (*Dieu voit tout*, 2011) and Georgia (*Ceremonies*, 2015).

Cahen's audiovisual work has almost always been firmly rooted in the image. There is little room for words in his pieces, unless the subject or premise calls for them or he feels like breaking his usual moulds (*Corps flottants*, *Canton la chinoise*, *Dieu voit tout*).

He believes in the idea that images can speak for themselves through their own eloquence and ductility. In other words, strength on the one hand, stretching or slowing down on the other. Cahen's images are very beautiful but never sickly. His imagist journeys are not exotic reports designed merely to pass the time and see the world through the window of the screen. He aims to shine a light on this world shared by all those who live in it and pass through it, or, in his words, "to translate into images and meanings the deep, beautiful but terrible emotions that underpin existence".

Although his use of slowed-down images has become one of his hallmarks, he stresses that he uses this technique to make his images not more beautiful, but more visible, more present, by eschewing any trace of sentimentality. Another fundamental aspect is the interval—pause, time for rest and sedimentation—that passes once he has captured his images, on his way back from his trip or expedition, so that they can be prepared, organised and processed with the condiments of editing, effects (including subtraction) and sound (or silence).

In 1997 the exhibition *Robert Cahen s'installe* (Frac Alsace, Sélestat) gave his career a fresh twist. Its playful title alluded to both his return to the region where he grew up, after many years based in Paris, and the fact he was presenting a set of video installations that would forge a new path ahead. Although he had previously made occasional pieces in this vein, from the mid-1990s onwards this focus became increasingly central to his work.

Cahen's early installations were very much in the style of the time—lots of monitors, sculptural components, props—and often featured different ways of presenting and viewing some of his creations in single-channel format and for what we used to call the small screen.

Later, though, in the new millennium, the generic conception of installations and *projected media*, or whatever other name they might go by (the terms "screen art", "cinema of exhibition" and "loop" were all suddenly very much in vogue), have led to a global shift towards a more stripped-down look. In Cahen's work, this has translated into a succession of pieces that frequently take the form of a silent or sound projection in a continuous loop, sometimes on twin screens, framed (literally or conceptually), turned on their side (in terms of the image aspect ratio) and projected onto a specific material or screen-device, etc. The projection(s) and other

components, media and machinery are always carefully arranged in accordance with the space-box where they are being exhibited.

Which brings us back to the concepts set out at the start of the journey: travel, passage, landscape and portrait. Sometimes as clippings of crossings and choreographies found in populous China (*Vélochine*, 2007; *La Traversée du rail*, 2014) or as portraits at the crossroads between stillness and movement (*Françoise and Portraits*, 2013); other times as explorations of landscapes (*Entrevoir*, 2014; *Paysages de Chine*, 2009, a compilation of images looking back at his various trips to China) and the transcendentalism exuded by these video impressions, which in turn become, to use Brakhage's phrase, "metaphors on vision" and take on a metaphysical air in the vaporous images in *Traverses* (2002), in which a succession of people of different ages emerge out of a white fog and slowly walk forwards until they vanish back into it in an eternal passage of time.