

# Life in Film: Babette Mangolte

In an ongoing series, *frieze* asks artists and filmmakers to list the movies that have influenced their practice.



Born and raised in France, Babette Mangolte was one of the first women accepted in the cinematography programme at L'Ecole Nationale de la Photographie et de la Cinematographie, founded by Louis Lumière. After filming her first feature as Director of Photography in 1970, Mangolte moved to New York, where she worked as a cinematographer for Chantal Akerman and Yvonne Rainer, among others. Deeply involved in New York's downtown art scene, she documented, in still and moving images, performances by artists and dancers such as Trisha Brown, Philip Glass and Marina Abramović. Over the past three decades, she has directed several non-narrative experimental films, as well as a documentary about the making of Robert Bresson's 1959 film *Pickpocket* entitled *Les Modèles de Pickpocket* (2003). Her films have been screened at film festivals worldwide, and several retrospectives have been dedicated to her work. Most recently, her film *Seven*

*Easy Pieces* by Marina Abramović (2007) was screened at the London film festival, and her film installation *Presence* (2008) was included in the 5th Berlin Biennial. Her newest installation will be shown at Broadway 1602 in New York in October.

Two films literally changed my life. The first one made me decide to become a cinematographer and the desire to see the second one made me travel to New York, which became my home and where I later made my films.

Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), which I saw at the French *cinematheque* in 1961, had a profound influence on me. Was it the image of the eye reflected in the camera's lens or the heroic posture of the cameraman climbing a chimney that made me want to study cinema? Seeing the film several times between 1961 and 1964 led me to apply to film school, giving up on the

Dziga Vertov  
*Man with a Movie Camera*

1929  
This film made me decide to become a cinematographer [...] Utopia and *joie de vivre* were at its core, and I was unafraid.

predictability of an academic life in mathematics for a life of uncertainty and adventure. In the 1960s, women and film cameras just didn't mix and I was warned against pursuing my dream. But Utopia and *joie de vivre* were at the core of *Man with a Movie Camera* and I was unafraid.

The film trained my eye to see. It demonstrated that how you see and what you see are constructs that can be played with. There is no film reality that is not faked; but what you can fake has to be true. The idea of *kino-pravda* (film truth) was what struck me: that the film camera gives you access to the real, and films can reflect cultures, help you transcend borders, and comprehend what is far from you geographically as well as temporally.

I was lucky to live near the *cinematheque* on Rue d'Ulm in Paris and every day all through the 1960s,

**Michael Snow**  
*Wavelength*

1967  
The film is as fast paced as *Man with a Movie Camera*, full of jump cuts between night and day, opposition between action and stillness, while the unrelenting slow zoom enforces a sense of continuum.



I could see a mix of silent and sound films from the 1920s to the 1950s from all over the world: from the Weimar era, the Soviet classics, the French avant-garde and Hollywood, even while the French New Wave was at its peak. In many ways, I was more impressed by the films of F.W. Murnau, Vertov, Jean Epstein and others from the 1920s than by those of Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut. Jean Rouch was the key contemporary figure for me, especially because of his writings on *cinéma vérité* and his films, which showed how problematic and subjective the film camera can be. Objectivity, if desirable, has to be built. It is not a given. Food for thought for a potential camerawoman.

After finishing film school, I realized how difficult it would be to find a place in the French film world, which excluded women in key functions like cinematography (where most film budgets in the 1960s were spent). I knew about the existence of alternative film practices in other countries, particularly in New York, but those films were all invisible in Paris.

**Jia Zhangke**  
*Still Life*

2006  
Zhangke defines new territories in relation to the dislocation of space in the new Chinese economy.



I heard contradictory and baffling comments about a film with a zoom that made me curious. Some people thought it was the worst film ever made; others, the greatest. Forty-five minutes in an empty room. Nothing happened and the camera didn't move; just a zoom, I was told. The film was Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and I had to see it for myself. New York was where I could do so. I bought my first aeroplane ticket and off I went.

Seeing *Wavelength* in November 1970 suddenly made me see all other films differently. First, the camera position was not actually fixed; in fact, the camera moves invisibly in the space. If the zoom movement appears relentless, it is because the film is made of multiple changes produced by the use of colored gel filters, changes of film stocks, and abrupt shifts between negative and positive images. The film is as fast paced as *Man with a Movie Camera*, full of jump cuts between night and day, opposition between action and stillness, while the unrelenting slow zoom enforces a sense of continuum. At the end is a still image – degree zero of filmmaking – that satisfies the spectator's need for narrative enclosure. Only then do we see that the photo on the wall in the room is a still frame of a wave. So the pun behind the title *Wavelength* is both visual and aural, as the stunning soundtrack is a continuous sound wave mixed with quotidian city sounds intruding in this Canal Street loft.

Vertov's cameraman exploring a day in the life of a city and Snow's collapsing slices of time of night and day in a long tracking shot changed the parameters of what could be done with the film camera. I felt empowered. I realized that you could make film about

concepts like time and the experience of time. I had landed. I started my first film two years after seeing *Wavelength*.

As a film buff I like many films, not just the two that changed my life. I like Jean Renoir and Kenji Mizoguchi's long takes. I like the work of John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Luchino Visconti and every film by Robert Bresson. Seeing *Pickpocket* (1959) in France in the mid 1960s was also a defining moment. Bresson gave me the sense of my own drifting ways when I was a student. Indeed, films can reveal the interiority of one's life as well as its external conditions. In the 1990s I was impressed by Abbas Kiarostami, Hsiao-Hsien Hou and Kar Wai Wong, and more recently, by films from China, principally Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (2000), *The World* (2004) and *Still Life* (2006), which I saw twice in Paris on a big screen. I am a great admirer of this young filmmaker, who says that he is inspired by Yasujiro Ozu and Bresson. For me he is defining new territories in relation to the dislocation of space in the new Chinese economy.

Looking at films is my life, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the films I have seen in the past influence what I do as a filmmaker. Influences are hard to locate, and for me performance and the dancer's body are more important to my own practice than the films I see. I am stimulated by what my senses make out of the world around me and above all I am sensitive to light and colour. So the sun glowing in the middle of a JMW Turner oil painting or what I see from my windows are as important to my work as the films I see.

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