

***Fantastic Planet* (original title *La Planète Sauvage*) (René Laloux
Czechoslovakia/France 1973) DVD: Eureka Masters of Cinema series,
UK/Ireland**

Draft of a review published in *Science Fiction Film and Television* 1(1) 2008

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Presenting in photographic form the unphotographable has always been one of the primary challenges for – and pleasures of – sf and fantasy cinema. The macrocosms of space, the microcosms of the interior of bodies, speculative futures and mythical pasts, monstrous and alien bodies, fantastic technologies and spectacular metamorphoses have been cobbled together from paint and models, puppets and camera tricks and stitched into the flow of the real-time pro-camera event. From Méliès onward, such cinema has always been formally and technically hybrid.

La Planète Sauvage (for English-speaking audiences disappointingly translated as *Fantastic* – rather than *Savage - Planet*) was written and directed by René Laloux, designed by Roland Topor, animated at Prague's Jiri Trnka studios and released in 1973. As an animated feature film, *Fantastic Planet* has a technical and aesthetic homogeneity impossible in spectacular live-action sf: its population of monstrous plants, animals and minerals (and hybrids thereof) are as economical to produce through Topor's drawings as any other familiar or outlandish entity or phenomenon. Indeed the alien and the monstrous occupy not spectacular sequences pacing and punctuating the narrative, but rather incidental and background details. A monster straight out of Hieronymous Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights cheerfully massacres smaller flying froglike creatures. Silk-producing spherical animals weave clothing around human bodies. Things that appear to be architectural plants behave like predatory animals. An intestinal landscape loops and writhes menacingly as rain falls.



Few of the entities in this savage, vivified environment are named or explained, and they only intermittently affect the human and humanoid characters. Spectacular monstrosity more than compensates for narrative redundancy, however. Animation clings to the primal cinematic and precinematic invocation of the kinetic and the metamorphic image, and breathes life into the inanimate.

Adapted from the French sf writer Stefan Wuls's book *Oms en série* (1957), this savage planet is divided into two humanoid species, the giant ruling Draags and relatively tiny Oms (humans – '*hommes*'). The Draags are differently humanoid, with webbed ears and blank round eyes that glow when they are engaged in one of their numerous technologically-enhanced contemplative practices. As with any sf movie from another decade it is fun to play at decoding the allegory, though the Draags, with their culture dedicated to knowledge and meditation, cannot be easily mapped onto any particular peril, whether red or technological. The Draags are certainly cruel to the Oms, but these spiritual and civilised oppressors regard Oms as animals not people. In the opening sequence the protagonist Terr, as a baby, is carried by his mother, running from a huge blue hand that casually, repeatedly, and fatally flicks her to the ground. The hand is then revealed to belong to one of a group of Draag children, toying with the Om as if she were a beetle. For the Draags the Oms occupy a similar position to rodents in contemporary Western homes: one or two may be treasured as pets; wild or multitudinous they are vermin. The scenes towards the end of the film which depict the eradication of the wild Oms are disturbing, reminiscent again of Bosch but with futuristic technologies of extermination. On the other hand, the Oms are initially depicted as savage in the more familiar sense: as warring tribes with cruel games and rituals. As he flees his captivity as pet to a Draag child, Terr takes with him a piece of Draag information technology, a kind of didactic tiara. With it the Oms, like Trotsky's red Indians with rifles, fight back against the exterminators with their own technology and

knowledge, though ultimately, on this planet at least, it effects reconciliation, a synthesis and harmony between the species.



The savage planet is not hyperrealist in the sense of most animated features (at least since 1937 and Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*) in that it is less reverent of the moving photographic image. As with other adult animated features of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the conventions and aesthetics of live-action cinema and its cameras are downplayed and the style of the designer and illustrator predominates (other examples include Robert Crumb's *Fritz the Cat* (Bakshi US 1972) and George Dunning's *Yellow Submarine* (UK/US 1968)). Topor's hatched shading demonstrate animation's roots in the graphic arts of the comic strip, whilst his teetering figures move to the aesthetic – and economic logic - of 'limited' animation. Torsos and limbs are kinetic cutouts whilst Om faces are reminiscent of early Renaissance painting: Massacio vitalised by Oliver Postgate. The beleaguered and fugitive Oms are often forced to run for their lives – but rarely in any direction but left or right, parallel to the picture plane, as fixed in their two dimensions as is Scooby Doo.

In an informative booklet included with the DVD, Craig Keller notes that from the mid 1950s Laloux worked at La Borde Psychiatric Clinic in Cour-Cheverny – an institution at which Felix Guattari was a doctor. Like Guattari, Laloux's political concerns were driven by, as Keller puts it, a terror of quotidian fascism and it is perhaps this that motivates the savagery on the Fantastic Planet. The horrific extermination of the Oms is triggered not by a supremacist ideology but by the puncturing of a refined and technologised existence by the presence of a misunderstood and uncontrollable other. La Borde was a progressive institution that attempted to challenge the hierarchies of psychiatric institutions and medicine by abandoning the carceral model of the asylum for a 'borderless extension of the outside world' (Keller 9). Doors were not locked and patients were involved in creative activities and decision making. It does not seem too

tentative a leap to see in progressive psychiatry an analogous critique of the inadvertent establishment of terror at the everyday level for the mentally ill by a well-meaning yet hierarchical professional authority.

Laloux involved himself in the clinic's creative and communal activities, running workshops on painting and shadow puppetry. His first film was a 16mm documentation of patients's shadow theatre (*Tic-tac* 1957), edited by Laloux and the patients. This film was bought for television broadcast, and its success encouraged them to make the 35mm colour film *Les Dents du Singe* (France 1960). Guattari wrote the film, which is dragged, by the naïvely painted monkey of the title, from nonsense to a critique of professional authority – this time in the figure of a dentist (and it is interesting to note that Wul was also a dentist) – and back to nonsense again. Though *Les Dents du Singe* is not included on this DVD it is easy to track down online.

Keller's essay is titled 'The schizophrenic cinema of Rene Laloux', partly in reference to Guattari's collaborations with the philosopher Gilles Deleuze on books such as *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (1972). Significant among the unphotographable realities cut into live-action film by animation techniques are mental states: memories, dreams and hallucinations. In the technical and aesthetic homogeneity of mainstream animated features these realities often coexist seamlessly, or are at least blurred. For example, the diegetic reality of Dumbo's flight is barely less fantastical than his alcohol-induced vision of pink elephants on parade. The residual reassuring fiction that the (live-action) camera and apparatus - despite all the mediations of technique and ideology - captures something of reality is removed in animation. Thus, if animation in the digital era is, as Lev Manovich puts it, the 'return of the repressed', it has always been the mad aunt in live-action cinema's attic: its grasp of the accepted forms of representing reality has always been loose at best. Animation's madness is at times neurotic; for example another film on this disc, *Comment Wang-Fo Fut Sauve* (France 1987) – set in a fantastical ancient China and elegantly drawn by Philippe Caza – is diegetically and formally a parable on the seductive but threatening power of images. From Felix the Cat and Dadaist film, to Jan Svankmajer and Spongebob Squarepants, animation has also presented gleefully psychotic episodes. The short animated film *Les Escargots* (France 1965), included on this DVD and also powerfully drawn by Topor, is a delightful example of this latter tendency. Playing with generic expectations and the formal narrative arc of the feature-length film, the film flicks between comedy, nonsense, monster movie, surrealist whimsy and expressionist horror as a hapless farmer's attempts to grow virile lettuces by watering them with his tears somehow generates giant monstrous snails that set off to the city to assault its inhabitants.

Animation is transforming contemporary mainstream cinema technologically through CGI and formally, as Norman Klein observes, by the split-second timing,

corporeal malleability and sheer busy-ness of the screen image learnt from Looney Tunes. That which cannot be photographed is woven into live-action cinematography, whilst the latter is stretched, coloured, moulded and simulated to accommodate it. On the other hand animation is a cinematic form whose production remains accessible to all sorts of Oms (bedroom auteurs and children, dentists, psychiatrists and their patients). Films like *La Planète Sauvage* and the others on this DVD, as well as curious delights in their own right, offer ways of thinking about both cinema's future and its alternative histories.