

ATHÉNAÏSE
PRESENTS

L'HOMME -VERTIGE

 74^e Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Forum

TALES OF A CITY

A FILM BY
MALAURY ELOI PAISLEY

IMAGE **MALAURY ELOI PAISLEY - VICTOR ZÉBO** EDITING **MARIE BOTTOIS** SOUND **ADAM WOLNY**
THIERRY DELOR - LUDOVIC SADJAN COLOR GRADING **ANTOINE DUBOS** PRODUCED BY **SOPHIE SALBOT - ATHÉNAÏSE**
COPRODUCED BY **LYON CAPITAL TV** WITH THE SUPPORT OF **CNC - RÉGION GUADELOUPE - SACEM - PÉRIPHÉRIE**





BIOGRAPHY

Malaury Eloi Paisley

Filmmaker and visual artist. Malaury Eloi Paisley works from her native island Guadeloupe, a French territory in the Caribbean. She studied art history and museums studies in Paris and Montreal before doing Ateliers Varan workshops in Guadeloupe in 2016. There she made her first short film, *Chanzy Blues*. She also attended an international workshop at EICTV (Escuela Internacional de Cine y de Television) in Cuba, in the aesthetics of documentary film with filmmaker Marcos Pimentel.

It was a decisive period, consolidating her commitment to documentary filmmaking and photography as powerful means of exploring the human experience and socio-political context in Guadeloupe.

She then embarked on a long-term project exploring the city of Pointe-à-Pitre, with *L'Homme-Vertige : Tales of a city*, between 2017 and 2023.

A wide-angle photograph of a man sitting on the stone steps of a grand, yellow-walled building with classical architectural features like columns and statues. The man is shirtless and wearing dark pants, looking towards the camera. The building has multiple stories with balconies and a large set of stone steps leading up to a double door. A sign on the left side of the building reads 'MINISTÈRE DE LA JUSTICE' and 'Annexe du Tribunal de Grande Instance'. The foreground is a cobblestone plaza.

Watch excerpt 

SYNOPSIS

Vertigo is anxiety, a state of confusion, a temporary madness. These are the men who go around in circles, trapped in Pointe-à-Pitre, a labyrinth. They cross it by returning to the same places, like an endless pilgrimage. For a long time, Eddy walked it day and night.

I tell Pointe-à-Pitre, the metamorphoses of this city, which was the city of the workers, of the revolts crushed in blood. Now, it is nothing more than a ghost town.

And yet, isn't there still something that resists the frenetic pace of change, something that lingers in the memories of fallen independence activists like Ti Chal, in the silence of Kanpèch, who was a worker at the Darse and who today returns there to offer his services as a fish scaler.

Seers anchored in a wavering city, bearers of a memory buried in the folds of their silences or the meanders of their inner voices, the characters I film are suspended on the edge of the city's abyss, on the edge of the world's chaos. They become my anchors, I join them, I listen to them, I follow their footsteps and immerse myself in their gaze. Their vertigo is ours.

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN

NADIA YALA KISUKIDI AND MALAURY ELOI PAISLEY

I'd like to ask you is why the title, *L'Homme-Vertige*?

When I started writing, the title came to me almost naturally. In this film I explore the notion of drifting in the context of Guadeloupe, a French overseas department. I'm very influenced by Haitian poetry, particularly Spiralism initiated by the poets Frankétienne and René Philoctète. And I think Frankétienne uses that term a lot, "Vertige" (vertigo), when talking about the chaos of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. And there's something that takes me directly back to our own context. I have the impression that there's a relationship between all these colonial towns: Port-au-Prince, Cayenne, Fort-de-France, Pointe-à-Pitre... We find the same people, the same forms of wandering.

"*L'Homme-Vertige*" is a poem. It should be read as a single word. I didn't like the term "drifters", which has a slightly negative connotation, it's like a judgement. I was looking for a term that would embody this complexity. Vertigo is a state of anguish, at the border of madness. These are the men and women witnessing the chaos of the world, the anguish of an entire society standing on the brink of the abyss, but holding on in spite of everything, unable to be brought down. For me, this film is also an assessment of the state of beings and bodies before the collapse.

I'm touched by your mention of Haitian poetry. When I was watching the film, the words of the writer René Depestre resonated. There's this concept of zombification that runs through his writings, the question of zombies that we also find in Fanon and others. And even if it's not immediately the way you look at the characters, there's still the idea that the risk of becoming a zombie is possible, of having a de-substantiated body whose soul has been eaten, eaten away either by hunger, hope or drugs.... Would you say that this "pre-collapse" that you're talking about is what precedes becoming a zombie?

Yes, I think there's a link... Pointe-à-Pitre is often referred to as a "ghost-city" and I also use the term "non-city". It's not a city as we imagine it. There's not much to do, the buildings are in a state of complete disrepair. Once the commercial activity stops, there are these bodies wandering around, like ghosts. The nights are very dark and there are not many street lights. Sometimes you're walking along and you come across a body walking. A look into the void, into the silence. Wandering is not just about people living on the streets. You can be in that state of wanderer and have a job, be completely integrated into life. It means getting caught up in a spiral, doing the same things over and over again. Going round in circles.



Wandering is also like a refuge, a way of resisting. It's being in between life and death. Not victimisation. It may even be the only way to stay on our feet in the current climate of political and economic oppression. That's it, because in any case, life isn't possible because there are so many things standing in our way. It's a system that pushes us outside ourselves. And in that sense, it 'zombifies' us, yes.

I was recently asked: "What kind of work do these people do? " Not everyone works in Guadeloupe. That's part of the reality of this island. Unemployment rates are staggering, especially among young people. What does that mean "to work"? Is it work that gives meaning to one's life? This brings me back to the expression "earning a living", which I've always found absurd. For example, for Kanpèch, one of the characters in the film, wandering is a way of being in the world. He was a walker. If he felt like going to work at the fish market, he'd go, otherwise he would sit on a bench and think. Sometimes I would join him in his meditation.

The film appears as a drift through the barrenderalict neighbourhoods of Pointe-à-Pitre. Why choose the mode of wandering and drifting to film such a space?

Initially I wanted to use tracking shots, so that there would be a kind of fluid movement between the static world of the characters and the city that moves around them. In the end, it was too complicated technically and also because the roads are in such poor condition. The city is evolving very rapidly, with different layers and disparities in terms of architecture. You can learn a lot from the buildings, both about the history of the town and about how people live here. I also wanted to create a kind of archive. Fires, as seen in the film, demolitions and new constructions constantly reshape the landscape.

Everything deteriorates very quickly, houses and buildings collapse, and you have to keep a record. And then there was the idea of the metamorphosis of places over time. Some days the emptiness is very heavy, the silences oppressive, it's a slow city, where the nights are almost deserted.

I was struck in your film by the relationship to ruin, which is not miserabilistic because it is always contrasted. But there is still a whiff of defeat that seems to me to be present throughout the film, even if this defeat is overcome. The contrast comes from the ruins or buildings that are being destroyed, while just next door people continue to live. There are also monuments to the history of Guadeloupe's struggles. There's La Mulâtresse Solitude, Delgrès, and others. It's very unusual to see them appear in the film. It's a history of monumentalised struggles opposed to a present made from destruction and ruins.

At first, I wondered how to talk about slavery without talking about slavery, that is to say without naming it directly. This story lives in us and permeates everything. The statues are symbolic, acting as signs. The sequence of statues comes just after a conversation between Ti Chal and his friend: "The Guadeloupean negro has no memory". The first statue represents the sacrifice of Delgrès and his men for freedom. It is a floating body that thinks, with its head separated from its body. I was wondering what had happened to this desire for freedom, if it had been abandoned.

I wanted to say something about forgetting what came before. It's all there, but you can't see much of it any more, so I wanted to update their presence. There are also snippets of archive footage of the fires linked to the 2021 riots. We always feel like we're on the verge of an explosion, waiting to be on the brink of something.

The tension is palpable, it's in the air. And we say to ourselves: "Well, soon it's going to blow", just like that, like some kind of forecast. In the end, everything breaks down, they block everything, the whole island, France sends in its tanks, law enforcement, more policemen etc. The last time, in 2021, it was difficult. Men were arrested and then transferred to prisons in France. They have still been there for almost two years, without any relevant charges or trial. It's always like that, it's a cycle. There were political prisoners in 1967, 1987, 2009.

The state of this city, its architecture, its abandonment and decay tell us something about successive policies.

And the ruins filmed at night too - this city is practically plunged into darkness after 7pm. I wanted to light up the city.

Towards the end of the film, we see a wasteland. This was the site of the Chanzy social housing estate that I filmed from 2016 until its demise. When they launched the demolition project with a view, they said, to launch a second urban renewal of the city, it took a long time, they slowly let the building deteriorate, stopped maintaining it, stopped collecting the rubbish, etc. It was an insidious way of getting people to leave on their own. It felt like a technique to stop people from going about their lives. The city was a rubbish dump. Everything was overgrown with vegetation and household waste. The rats would run past where the children were playing. Some families weren't even visited any more because they were ashamed and people were afraid to set foot there.



And when I finished my first film *Chanzy Blues* with Ateliers Varan in 2017, after a screening, there were people, Guadeloupeans, who said to me, referring to Priscilla who we also see in *L'Homme-Vertige*: "Ah, but this actress is incredible! Fortunately, it's not real life."

Chanzy was a big denial. A huge building that shaped the landscape right in the centre of Pointe-à-Pitre, the housing estate stretched across the whole of this wasteland, where 1500/2000 people lived and we forgot they existed. And I also saw those people in the city who are, as you say, plagued by illness or drugs. Eddie, who opens the film, was head nurse of a psychiatric unit in a hospital.

He was also a slammer and poet. So he was someone who, like others, had a very keen awareness of what was going on in society. And so I was wondering if there was a link between the idea of defeat, of failed struggles and their state... And what does the lack of a country change inside us? What is the link between this context of political and social inertia and this drifting of bodies.

I wrote down what is practically the first, very beautiful, sentence this character says in the film, because I thought it was beautiful: "There's the sun on one side and the moon on the other, it's a strange paradox. It makes me almost paranoid. For me, this sentence sums up the whole film.

You have to think of that decomposition in terms of a dream that seems to me to be constantly reactivated by the voices of the film. This ruin is never an end in itself: all the characters in the film have an extremely reflexive relationship to these ruins, to this decomposition. They know what state they're in and they're not satisfied with it. You film this man who is committed to Fidel's dream in Cuba and we see his health deteriorating, but he doesn't die.

Yes... I also wanted to film, to show what remains, what history has left on the bodies. This dream you're talking about destroyed Ti Chal, the old man who devoted his whole life to wrestling. He spent a period in alcoholism, and often talks about this disillusionment. It was too hard to live with the realisation that what they had fought for was never going to happen. He was very bitter about today's politicians. He said to me: "But they're traitors! "

How can one live here? There's this idea of being completely aware of what's going on and being a kind of spectator. And this rhythm, this movement, this contemplation of the city that we set up during filming and editing, at once shows this distance while immersing us in the intimacy of the characters. As if the camera were omniscient. There was this double posture--distance and intimacy--and I wondered how to make people see things as I saw them. Because I had this cartography in my head, I was constantly living with these people.

They were on my mind every day.

Where's Priscilla? What does Jean-Charles do? Where's Eric? What's Eddie doing? And I wanted it to feel like we were everywhere at once.

After a projection during the editing, a person who doesn't know much about Guadeloupe said: "It's as if they've tried to destroy any desire for independence." That made an impression on me. It was becoming real, it wasn't just in my head. When I was making the film, I kept asking myself: "But what's my subject? What am I trying to show?" I had no answer. Because it wasn't a linear story, I think it translates our thinking quite well, it's like Frankétienne's poetry, everything comes at once. I wanted to put the whole of Guadeloupe in one film!

The character of Eric, the poetic spectre, brings these voices together. He's the narrator, but he's also my viewpoint. He's the link between all the characters, but at the same time he's on the outside, so you get the impression that he doesn't exist, that no one can see him. We wonder if it's even real. That was the most prepared part of the shoot. We wanted it to go through fairly symbolic places that say something about the city, about the struggle, like when it arrives at the hospital, for example, where the care workers are on strike. It was one of the miracles of the shoot. Just as we started filming, they played the national anthem for independence, written by Gérard Lockel, even though this musician was part of the film from the start. I used to listen to him over and over again as I drove around the city, and I would see images pass by like paintings. His singing was like an omniscient voice, throwing everything in your face, all at once. It's very strong. I said "It's crazy, he wrote that in the 60s and we're still in the same mess". I wanted to turn the musical revolution initiated by Gérard Lockel into a film.

How can we draw inspiration from him and tell the story today of what he wanted to say in the 60s? Because nothing has actually changed.

This question of independence is central. You used a very beautiful expression, the "lack of country" that unfolds in the film. When it comes to the issue of independence, there's always something about the lack of a country, which is expressed. A whole library of material kept popping up. It's essentially a Caribbean library, but not the only one. In fact, I say René Depestre, you mentioned Frankétienne, and there are other authors too, such as Édouard Glissant's *Le discours antillais*, which talks about West Indian reality in terms of depersonalisation, independence, unproductivity and so on, the gap between the real country that we don't inhabit and the dream country that is missing. I get the impression that there's all that going on in your film if we want to make a clearly political reading of it, if we want to politicise this wandering.

It's funny that you should say that we don't live on it, because I wrote precisely "the island inhabits us but we don't inhabit it" and also, "how can we belong to an island that doesn't belong to us?" We have this visceral link with the land, but at the same time, as I said earlier, we are spectators. Things are happening around us, the infrastructures are being demolished and rebuilt, but it's not all designed for us. There are places you pass by that have been renovated, where you feel like you're in the Paris urban area. That it's built in the image of something that isn't us, and it's the same for laws and decrees. So many things make no sense in terms of our realities. I really wanted us to feel that gap. I've been told I have a pessimistic outlook.



But in fact, there's no light, there's no way out. At least, that's how I feel. I feel we're falling apart. I don't see how the situation could be any worse than what we're experiencing now.

We're already at the end of something. And what comes next? I don't know, but I wanted to open the film with the flag of Guadeloupe and the independence movement.

As if to say that somewhere in the Caribbean, on this island, this French territory, there are men and women who dream of something, who live in this city that is drifting away. And they aspire to freedom.

I don't know how foreigners who don't know the history of the French West Indies will perceive the film. I don't know if they know that it's a question of thinking about a colonial situation. When Édouard Glissant talks about the French West Indies or the four old French colonies, Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guiana, he talks about the horrible without horror of successful colonisation. In other words, what does successful colonisation produce? It devitalizes, it produces this decomposition of bodies and souls that try to belong to this land that doesn't actually belong to them. It created just that. And there's another dimension to the film that really struck me, and that's its humanity. Not in a moral sense, but in an almost concrete, practical sense, in that people--I don't know how you did it--agreed to let themselves be filmed and to reveal something of that concrete humanity. How talk to a camera about your breakdown, your relationship with illness, drugs, broken dreams, a family you can't rebuild, and so on. But this exposure is never carried out by subjects who ask for help and assistance. Watching the film, I wondered how you met these people, how you discovered them. How did you manage to build up this network of voices and confidence?

With regard to what you say about the colonial situation, it was really very important for me. I was wondering how we were going to know we were in a colony. That's why we had to plant all these clues, statutes and references. I wanted us to make links with the state of the bodies. To really ask ourselves what makes people like that. What does it do? In fact, I wanted us to put words to it, to name the evil. Ti Chal is very clear when he speaks.

And how did I meet them? I don't think it starts with a film, but with meetings. After that, the film becomes an alibi. What do we have in common? In principle, there's no reason why I should be friends with Kanpèch or Eddie, although why not, I think it's our humanity that brings us together. And I have an intuition when I see certain people. Their presence is beginning to take hold of me. I'm in the city, I'm walking and I get attached to this man or this woman that I see every day, we see each other, we recognise each other. And eventually you get used to the other person's presence. Then one day we talk and at some point I say that I'm a director.

These people are seers. They are often labelled as victims. But they are very aware of what is happening to them. They are the ones who feel the full force of the situation and who are best placed to talk about it.

Eric was working in a day centre for people with a stable mental illness. I was taking photos there and the first time I saw him I thought he was a mediator. Afterwards, the director of the centre said to me "I've been told that you took a photo of Eric, in fact he's been admitted to the centre..." I found this ambiguity magnificent, because at the same time he was cared for, but he was also taking care of others. We continued to see each other.

I took photos with him around the city. I'd bring him texts that I'd read at the beginning, like extracts from *Tragédie du roi Christophe*, things like that. And I'd say to him, we're going to do this route in the city, you're going to walk with these evocations. So we walked, we talked and we stopped off at places. And I sometimes did portraits of him in abandoned houses. Then I came across a notebook in which I'd written down the excerpt he says in *The Burnt House*.

A restored archive of a speech by Amílcar Cabral on fear... discovered in a documentary film by Filipa Cesar. All the people's fears accumulated over the centuries... Making this film is also about channelling my own fears. Afraid to go out, to face the world, to talk to people. I think I made this film trembling. I was afraid of everything, even when I went into the squats on my own, even though I wasn't really in any danger. Someone told me that the film was extremely violent and voyeuristic. To say this is almost to take away their ability to be lucid and aware of their situation. The people I filmed had complete power. Eddie, when I film him in the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre, he has power. I follow him everywhere. He takes me to dangerous places. He also protected me. I'm alone with a camera. I think I gave them the freedom to do what they wanted to do. They also suggested sequences, so it was fluid.

To the question: how did people let themselves be filmed and why? We develop this relationship of trust and at some point, the person wants to make the film as much as I do, without us explaining why. They understand how their story is political and how it tells something about the world. I'm going to use some very strong language here, but I really like to talk about relationships, bonds and love, because I don't film people just to make my film. I also film them because I enjoy spending time with them and that's that.

There's another line that really struck me and which refers to the bond of love that you speak of and that is at the heart of your gesture, a line from Joël Beuze, carried by the storyteller, who says that he is gathering up all the scattered sorrows. And I think it's a sentence that doesn't talk about suffering because it's about being attentive to what we don't see, to the pain of the defeated, that is to say the pain that we despise, that we don't look at and that requires a gesture, an effort, that of picking them up, in fact. And this effort is also a very profound, very singular gesture of attention. And for me, it's a bit like the conclusion of the film. I have the impression that the movement of your camera, which perhaps starts from a moment of wandering, which follows the city of Pointe-à-Pitre, consists precisely in picking up all the scattered trauma. It's something that gives the film a great deal of power and would testify precisely to this act of love that you're talking about, in a revolutionary sense.

I really think that, it's going to sound a bit pompous to say it like that but, we'll get through it with love, by making, re-making and maintaining bonds. Because I think that this decaying city is helping to break down the bonds between people. All the disorganisation of social structures that has been generated by successive urban renovations has really contributed to destroying people's way of life, their way of being in the world. When I was looking for a reason to make this film, when I was wondering what it was going to be about, I said to myself that we'd never seen ourselves represented like that. So maybe just bringing those faces and voices to the screen, and that poetry, is already.... that's all. It's like giving access to a part of the world you've never really seen. Joël Beuze writes "Earth, if you want me to be silent, if you want my tongue to perish. So why, why did you let so much fire smoulder in my chest? "That's the fire we're talking about. We live here but there's something burning inside us. And that's what I also wanted to show, that the light is always inside people and that's the only thing that keeps them going. In the end, when it all falls apart, all that's left is the bonds we share to one another.

Nadia Yala Kisukidi is a doctor of philosophy, writer and a lecturer at the University of Paris VIII.





Watch excerpt 

CAST

Eddie

Eric

Charles Eschylle called «Ti Chal»

Jean-Charles

Kanpèch

Priscilla

CREW

Produced by Sophie Salbot - ATHÉNAÏSE

Image Malaury Eloi Paisley - Victor Zébo

Editing Marie Bottois

Sound Ludovic Sadjan, Adam Wolny & Thierry Delor

Color grading Antoine Dubos

Coproduced by Lyon Capitale TV

Contact : Sophie Salbot / athenaises@orange.fr / +33 6 14 12 81 76

With the support of



Périphérie
CINÉMA DOCUMENTAIRE