

Jen Debauche is a filmmaker who has spent the past ten years experimenting with film processing techniques in various labs such as LABO Bxl, l'Abominable (Paris) and MTK (Grenoble). Her practice is inherently collaborative, intimately based on sharing experiences and exchanging know-how on cinematic language and media. The author's research project focuses on madness. Working together with a film school, she proposes several systems for functioning so that students and professors can establish a common exploration of which forms are best suited to expressing this particular human experience. There is a practical and theoretical aspect to this approach, which aims to break down barriers and fight prejudices regarding mental illness by experimenting with materials and sounds. Throughout her preliminary research, the author tried to determine some of the formal concerns that correspond to the potential parallels between madness and cinema. She then presented the project to the film school INSAS, which helped her to build a team of motivated, volunteer students, former students, and film professors. Other encounters also took place with experts in psychiatry, photography, experimental filmmaking, sound design, writers and philosophers in order to nourish the thought process. One-on-one time with students allowed each person to get to the heart of their process and find the right workflow. The core group of collaborators was made up of seven people: Amélia Nanni, Mathilde Bernet, Nicolas Graux, Pauline Pilla, Lou Vercelletto, Elsa Rossler and Jen Debauche. In addition to these meetings, workshops held at LABO Bxl helped initiate participants to analog film processing techniques. Each participant could work autonomously with a set amount of donated film stock. Editing and post-production, as well as the film screenings, took place at the school at the end of the school year.

The following interview was conducted in writing during January 2018.

(A/R) What led you to develop this research proposal?

(J.D.) Last summer, a friend came to stay with me who had just been forcibly interned at the hospital in Sleidinge. The diagnosis hit

like a ton of bricks: schizophrenia—episodic mania. A series of major life-questions rapidly ensued. First about how madness is experienced in and of itself: what boundary had my friend now crossed? From which point onward is her singular experience considered as too singular, abnormal? How is it possible to forcibly intern someone, against his or her will? What causes this slip? How does the experience of madness in one person affect their social circle, their family and friends? Then another series of questions looked at how madness is represented in art and more specifically in film. Where does madness come from, and what does it produce in terms of how we see the other, through the lens of a camera and on screen? Are we really able to confront it? How do we feel? What do the artworks that evoke madness trigger in us? How do psychic and psychiatric delirium stream out to invent new forms of cinema, theater and visual art? Can these new forms change how we see madness and even change madness itself?

All of these questions brought on a desire for images and sounds. For the sound, I wanted to record my friend's story, her account of her stay in the psychiatric hospital; and then for the images, I wanted to work more abstractly, to let my imagination run wild by letting myself be guided by technique.

(A/R) For the questions regarding how madness is represented in film, what body of work did you use for your analysis? Did you look at fiction films, documentary, or both? Were there any specific temporal boundaries?

(J.D.) In order to examine madness through the history of film, my idea was to start with analyzing only silent films and documentaries. Hundreds of incredible movies and tons of writing have been dedicated to madness in fiction. To mention just a few: *Psycho* or *Spellbound* (Alfred Hitchcock), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick), *Shock Corridor* (Samuel Fuller), *Possession* (Andrzej Żuławski), *A Woman Under the Influence* (John Cassavetes)... Aside from this last example and the incredible performance by Gena Rowlands, I noticed that many fiction films rather easily criminalize madness or caricature it using clichés of true dementia, and I didn't want to fall for that trick.

So as a general leitmotif in watching and

analyzing film, I chose experimental and silent films so I could see what they offer in terms of image, effects and language, and documentary films for what they can teach us about the history of madness and the development of treatment methods. One focus was on films that proposed a strong cinematographic approach. I'm thinking of the movie *Le Moindre geste* by Fernand Deligny, for example¹.

(A/R) Fernand Deligny's film oscillates between documentary and fiction; it's special because it features children with mental illness. Is this the kind of close experience that you seek to produce with your filmmaking?

(J.D.) In terms of meditating on language, image and freedom, I'm still trying, maybe unconsciously, to reproduce what is revealed in the true nature of Deligny's project: to live and think what it is to be human as closely as possible, all why undoing the dominant psychiatric and normalizing thought-process about what "human beings" should be. Deligny attempted to set up living spaces in the Cévennes so that autistic, so-called "mute" children could have a daily life there free from pressure or "training", where they could live fully in the gestures they were accustomed to. Deligny always wondered what humans are supposed to be born with and what they learn, and what it means for a human being to be autistic. *Le Moindre geste* tells the story of a two runaway teens in the Cévennes who have escaped from an asylum. The creative, inventive and spontaneous potential of the dramaturgy turns the movie into a kind of poetic Western, all while remaining extremely realistic. You could say that the course (the "wander lines") that these two runaways follow is that of their psyche, and that the way in which they "wander" "represents" their mental state. I'm not sure whether those who made the film (collective) were entirely aware of this aspect.

In my filmmaking practice, what is important for me is to *decolonize the imaginary*. I'm incapable of representing madness and this issue of representation doesn't really interest me, at least not directly. I dive completely into the subject and I film people and things that come to mind over and over again. Then I go for it. I film things first and foremost because I want to film them: a face, a landscape... To make a movie

is always to meet somebody, and this implies precise and fluid gestures between the person being filmed and the cinematic construct. These gestures—which are always in a kind of tension—are what, in my opinion, make up the fabric of the film. So I prefer to operate intuitively, letting myself be guided by my artistic obsessions, by meeting with others, and by techniques—which are inherent to my creative process—rather than looking to *represent*.

(A/R) Can madness influence how things are made, by becoming a kind of *method* that enables certain *forms* and a specific *aesthetic*, in your opinion?

(J.D.) I wouldn't say *method*, but a *topic* that I want to work with. As a filmmaker, it seems important that I address the subjects and places that are asking to be questioned politically, that need a relationship to the world, a position. From a methodological standpoint, I established certain specifications from the outset in order to guide the research. Several propositions, such as using a Bolex camera, which would involve working separately on sound, enabled me to weave together different layers of time. Another suggestion was to introduce the process of making the film into the film itself, to show its diegesis. This extra information made visible the possible parallel between the question of mental normality and the norms of cinema. Plus, revealing certain extra-diegetic elements was a way to reflect on the medium of film itself, the nuances and formulas that require political and philosophical reflection on the experience of madness. This approach made it possible to reveal the connections that establish themselves on the one hand between digital media and analog film (and its chemical processes), and on the other hand, classic psychiatry (and its chemical processes) and *alternative* psychiatry.

(A/R) The current running through these fields or categories, it seems, would be the question of our *view* and our *judgment*, since the experience of madness is not something that we can share *a priori*, it remains exceptionally solitary. So we can only understand and analyze it from an outside point of view, which obviously sets certain limits in terms of ethics, epistemology, etc.

(J.D.) There are always ethical problems when we film somebody and even more so when that person is suffering. How do we avoid distance, condescension, judgment? That's one of the project's concerns. Can we even breach madness? Who are we when faced by it? My proposition involves sharing visual and audio sensations (shock between image and sound, between shot A and shot B, C, Z...) in order to open up the fields, the points of encounter, etc.

I think that fortunately, or unfortunately, madness is something we can share and that isn't solitary. People who are close to the insane are drawn into their delirium, even if they all live it differently. The suffering is solitary but the delirium is collective, it is even political.

(A/R) Looking at the initial presentation of the project, how would you define or discuss the concerns of your research now that you have started, from a plastic or formal as well as a conceptual and/or theoretical standpoint?

(J.D.) The experience gained from this research led me to realize that the interview with my friend unleashed a desire to collect more accounts with the group, following the rhythm of our encounters (for example, during the residency at KAOS). The dynamics of the research and the group enabled me to go beyond the strictly documentary framework. They also allowed me to enter a first phase of experimentation on both content and form. I didn't really stray from most of the initial, intuitive lines, especially since the parallels between the history of madness and cinema only seemed to be confirmed.

(A/R) If hardly any of those lines were isolated, that also means that no single one of them was retained, or deepened?

(J.D.) Yes and no. We followed many of them and abandoned a few. For example, in the lab, two methods were rejected: the use of homemade emulsions, and fabricating our own lens using a remote-controlled needle. These experimentations were too long and fastidious, they could have made up a research project of their own. On the other hand, we decided to stick with using *caffenol* [coffee-based developer that can be used as a solution to process film stock], and cross-link and crystallization film processing. From a theoretical point of view, we distanced ourselves from the idea of just looking at prison-like asylums in order to spend the little time that we had on developing a project that would draw from the creative potential of madness.

(A/R) Considering that last idea, one might expect that certain potentials stand out from or take up more space than others as the research process goes on. However, I get the impression that the funnel widened rather than narrowed. Is this the case?

(J.D.) Yes, you could say that we're digging into a vast subject matter, from a theoretical standpoint, the funnel is widening but the image of a funnel as the shape of a research path comes across as rather utilitarian to me. In a society where efficiency reigns, I think it's crucial to open up the field of possibilities and to work in a network.

(A/R) What was the initial context for the research? Can you evaluate a difference between how you talk about it today and how you were talking about it one year ago? If not, what came out of this work, in your opinion?

(J.D.) The initial context was a residency at INSAS. At the start of the project, it just took

one meeting with the school's director to open up the group to former students, which enriched the team (because the non-students were more available). Even if the group demanded a lot of organizational effort, well beyond what I expected, it was an extremely useful and indispensable part of my personal research. It allowed me to solidify certain ideas about how to write a feature-length film and to gain practical experience in using a networked workflow. Every time we shared the results of each person's individual process, everyone benefited, all while contributing as a group to advancing with the real content, the foundations. For me there is no real difference between how I discuss the project before and after, I can only say that this experience was useful and beneficial for everyone involved.

(A/R) Was the initial idea also to involve students (and former students) in the process of making your film?

(J.D.) No. It was only to have them participate in the research (in preparation for creating the film, strictly speaking). Between the writing and the lab work, my filmmaking work is very solitary. This call for projects and the possibility to set up workshops for encounters was an opportunity for me to share with people who are like or unlike me. Since it's mainly about the first phase of a research project, I found it essential to share and exchange as much as possible, to tackle the subject matter in groups, with the support of all those different viewpoints coming from a multiplicity of life experiences. I also wanted to bring up the responsibility of an artist and his/her relationship to the world with regard to dealing with such a question and finally, I wanted everyone to find the language that best corresponds to the expression of their sensitive thoughts and perceptions. It was a practical and theoretical proposal.

(A/R) It seems to me that you were interested in offering the students tools so they could film and record their own movie sequences.

(J.D.) In that regard, one could say the project was a success. The final presentation of our research at INSAS wasn't about producing a finished piece. It was in a way a kind of new working platform that brought a group dynamic and a kind of training session in film processing to a close. For me it was important to show the results, that is, the shared body of theoretical and audiovisual elements rather than the exclusive work of one or several "individual" pieces.

(A/R) It is not necessarily obvious to organize the individual and collective aspects of the research and how they relate. If each person is starting from personal experience, let's say, with madness, and is exploring his or her own line of research, how can the result be collective?

(J.D.) All throughout the research, people exchanged and shared their individual

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experiences and results from exploring in their own personal research. This gradually brewed into the sum of individual works and a collective endeavor, but *collective* does not mean the sum of individual experiences.

(A/R) Did you draw on any theoretical resources and if so, which ones? What do you think they contributed to your research?

(J.D.) In terms of theory, we looked at the history of Saint Alban psychiatric hospital, which allowed us to approach the topic of madness through the prism of institutional psychotherapy². We discovered one by one the different steps taken over time to humanize the treatment methods, and so we also felt our way little by little into the history of madness. We quickly felt the necessity draw on real life situations in order to really confront the topic: archives, interviews, personal accounts, meeting with institutions, but also the reality of a film shoot and all the difficulties and surprises that come with it. During one of our round table discussions at INSAS, we welcomed Barbara Dapoz, the night watchperson at a therapeutic community, and Joris de Bisschop, a monitor at the Border clinic. The practices of these two speakers and the discussions that followed were illuminated by their singular experiences. The round tables, supplemented by excerpts from documentary films, helped us to hear other voices and points of view on how an asylum functions.

The figure studies such as François Tosquelles, Lucien Bonnafé, Jean Oury accompanied our research and quite rapidly became a driving force for the whole group. In this regard, writings by Freud and Szondi about the crystal principle taught us that: "If we throw a crystal to the floor, it breaks; but not into haphazard pieces. It comes apart along its lines of cleavage into fragments whose boundaries, though they were invisible, were predetermined by the crystal's structure. Mental patients are split and broken structures of this same kind."³

With this theory as a starting point, we sought to shoot a scene using image-by-image shots and a chemical crystallization process. The relevance of the results we obtained during the final presentation at INSAS confirms that the plurality of viewpoints and each individual's background actively nourished the research. At the same time as they were creating their own personal objects that would continue beyond the scope of this project, each participant was also contributing a stone to the collective edifice.

(A/R) It might have been interesting to examine the relationship between Freud and Szondi's definition and Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image.

(J.D.) Yes, that's true. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I'm not writing a thesis on the subject. There are tons of things I didn't have time to look into, since the rhythm of the

research simply couldn't afford it. The theory of the crystal that I mention here is one of the theoretical starting points that were shared by the group.

(A/R) In addition to the chemical crystallization process affecting the film stock, which seems to be a good example of how to embody Freud's concept of psychic fragmentation—and the beauty and poetic aspect of the image created by this process notwithstanding—did this afford any other inroads into understanding madness?

(J.D.) I would say it illustrates the fissures caused by the experience of insanity, the appearance of "crystalline structures" in the psyche of mentally ill patients. For some members of the group, there was also a potential parallel with tetany, or spasms. On this topic, you could look at Elsa Rossler's research, who is someone we worked with in close collaboration, notably for a live performance on January 20, 2018, with other performances coming out of DIY laboratories.

(A/R) Knowing that in scientific research, the methodology is always carefully explained because the results are evaluated and critiqued solely in reference to it, could you talk about the methods you used, the reasons why you chose them, the importance of respecting them, and their use in how you evaluate your research?

(J.D.) The artist does not need to ape the scientist. I dare to say that the two are complementary and mutually support one another. I had a very concrete experience of a collective work process within a network and through work platforms: writing, shooting, group meetings, round tables with speakers from the psychiatric field, with filmmakers and technicians, sharing information using Dropbox (a body of texts, sounds and images...), public film screenings (film club), compiling a filmography, visiting libraries, museums and the Cinematek, discovering artistic residencies set up within a psychiatric institution (KAOS), etc. The platforms for working and exchanging were tools where all of the information about ongoing research came together, confronting and responding to one another, explaining and nourishing one another. They also served as a methodology for the research by allowing each person to develop their own point of view, to go deeper into their investigation and share their knowledge. Since the project was cinematographic in nature, each person was encouraged to follow his or her intuition and imagine a kind of *impossible ideal*. From there on, I had the feeling that it was important to respect the desires and particularities of each person so that I could establish a more emancipated gaze. It was no longer about summoning

the *experience* of the *expert*, since this transmission of knowledge is happening at every moment as we accumulate technical skill and autonomy in the work.

(A/R) At which point do you consider someone has become an expert in a domain? Could an assistant nurse with thirty years of experience be considered an expert, just like a psychiatrist or psychoanalyst?

(J.D.) It all depends on how you define the word "expert": through practice and personal experience and/or academic titles and media recognition, etc.? This question about expertise will be omnipresent throughout the process of creating my film, but I still do not have a definitive opinion on the matter.

(A/R) Was it because of your desire to conduct interdisciplinary research that you opted for speakers and participants coming from other fields than psychiatry, such as philosophers or other filmmakers? As a way to avoid an endemic approach to the subject?

(J.D.) Yes, we wanted to favor interdisciplinarity rather than a more "classical" approach that might be purely scientific, which was not our goal. We were much closer to the research-action that comes from meeting people personally. What's clear is that the topic of madness generates a wide variety of feelings and reactions... at least it leaves no one indifferent. Everybody has a personal story about madness (in the family or elsewhere) to share. In that regard, the enthusiasm that the proposal elicited was encouraging and beneficial to the research, individually and collectively. The entire group expressed a necessity to deal with the subject through the prism of personal experience (parallel to the theoretical resources), which was in complete harmony with my written statement and intentions at the start of the project, which described approaching madness as something that is above all a matter of an individual in relation to society.

(A/R) Based on this working platform, how did you proceed to organize the information coming from all sides? What principle did you use to interpret, make readable and render visible this mass of information?

(J.D.) I organized a *dropbox* for every platform. The members of the group contributed to it more or less actively. I needed a virtual place to gather, consult and share the information I'd collected throughout the process with each person. Unfortunately, we had too little time to look at each element together as a group, much less than I'd expected. And so the *dropbox* should be seen more as a tool that each person could use on their own, at home.

(A/R) Would you say your research has results or do you find this term inadequate? If there is a result, how is it different than an artwork or a finished piece?

(J.D.) Near the end of the process, we exhibited our first results at INSAS in the form of

a performance. It allowed us to take stock of the work we'd done throughout this collective research process, all while continuing to experiment with assembling the materials we produced. We speak of first results that reflect an entire progression rather than a finished and individual "piece".

This public performance enabled us to continue with, and finish off, the training in photochemical processing with a live projection of the 16 mm loops developed at LABO. The effect of these multiple projections of 16 mm loops, using several projectors and accompanied by asynchronous sound, was a way to explore forms of expanded cinema through the use of live performance. This pioneering experience helped us to set new goals for the research: the work will continue with several members of the group, depending on our resources and the circumstances as they come up.

(A/R) Did the performative dimension of the presentation have an impact on how you might envision a "final" piece? For example, in terms of editing or associating images?

(J.D.) Yes, for me it's important to test the projected images, the editing, step by step (this was the first step).

(A/R) Were the spatial and sound aspects of this presentation optimal, in your opinion?

(J.D.) The logistical support of INSAS for the final presentation is certainly what made the presentation possible. Nothing is ever "optimal" and we always end up piecing things together bit by bit, but it was entirely satisfactory for what we were showing. Even if, generally speaking, this "living laboratory" could have lasted longer, which might have given it more exposure.

(A/R) How did this presentation influence your perception of the "results" of your research?

(J.D.) It allowed me to lay it all out and review everything.

(A/R) If they weren't a piece, then what is the status of these projections?

(J.D.) An extension, a presentation of research.

(A/R) What subjective evaluation would you make of this experience?

(J.D.) It was the first time that I was putting together a research group. Seen how the presentation of these first results turned out, these past few months of work revealed many key elements and a direction for writing a feature-length film. It was very useful and enriching to bring this group together, to nourish

it and be nourished by it. It was also the first time I was working long-term with certain people from LABO Bxl and helping them to become autonomous in certain practices. For me, the transmission seems quite successful. It is satisfying to realize that my collaborators want to continue to use what they developed and deepen their cinematographic language.

(A/R) What differentiates the experience of transmission in the context of this research from a more classical take on teaching? Is it a question of giving autonomy through processing techniques or the kind of dialogue that gets put into place?

(J.D.) Both, and also the fact of working as a network.

(A/R) How would you evaluate this experience from a societal point of view?

(J.D.) Did we manage to break down the barriers between institutions and patients? Between them and us? Were we able to turn art into a social force? It would be naïve to think that we would disrupt everything! But maybe we got closer to one barrier; maybe we took a first step.

(A/R) The fact that just about anybody can be touched by mental illness makes your project both accessible and hard to approach for someone who has never had this experience. How might you avoid this pitfall?

(J.D.) It's not about returning to a kind of relativity or to proclaim oneself an "expert", rather to investigate how the "insane" and "society" view one another, to question their relational progress in history, not by denying, but on the contrary, by acknowledging the broader support of the medical establishment (doctors, psychiatrists, nurses...). I very quickly sensed a need to orient the group toward real-life scenarios so we could confront things together: archives, interviews, personal accounts but also the reality of a film shoot, of lab work, and the rigor of this work and all the difficulties and surprises that come with it.

(A/R) What is the use of opening these moments of encounter throughout the research to a larger public?

(J.D.) The performance presented at INSAS was a major step in our work that we hope to enrich by presenting it to others in a very open format. This research in preparation for shooting a feature-length film is constantly

in motion.

Madness such as I have experienced it (via the forced internment of a friend) was a key moment in my existence. My relationship to this friend since then is as personal as it is creative. The fundamental question remains, how to respect the other within this artistic work? I continuously ask myself, what is the importance of sound, what it tells, in a more documentary vein, and what is the visual connection I want to establish?

Experimenting with film stock, through photochemical processing, are things I'd like to develop as I write this future film.

The collective nature of the research which is over, for now, has also left its mark on my need to share, to hear what others have to say, to respect people's limits (and my own) and to see beyond the framework, be it institutional or cinematographic. Ideally, I would continue these experiments and show them to a variety of audiences, just as I envision broadcasting the sound capsules (more documentary) amongst public institutions and organizations, or even on non-profit or community radios (and only with the consent of the concerned parties).

1. *Le Moindre geste* is a film directed by Fernand Deligny and co-directed by Josée Manenti and Jean-Pierre Daniel in 1971.
2. Institutional psychotherapy is a kind of psychotherapy in a psychiatric institution that emphasizes the group dynamic and the relationship between the nurses and the patients. The collective treatment of healers-interns and the humanization of how psychiatric establishments operate so that patients can receive better-quality treatment are characteristics of this therapeutic movement. The French psychiatric sector was founded by representatives of institutional psychotherapy in the 1970s, with the goal of breaking with the former asylum practices in favor of outpatient treatment within an established housing situation.
3. Sigmund Freud, "Nouvelle suite des leçons d'introduction à la psychanalyse" [1955], in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. XIX, Paris, PUF, 2004, p. 142.

CAPTIONS

- fig. 01 Interview opening page: Superposition of 16 mm film for *ATLAS* (slide), 2017. Photo: Mathilde Bernet.
- fig. 02 16 mm tests using caffanol, 2017. Photo: Jen Debauche.
- fig. 03 Zoom on crystallized film. Photo: Pauline Pilla.
- fig. 04 Double exposure on 16 mm film (slide), 2017. Photo: Jen Debauche.
- fig. 05 Dipotassium phosphate crystallization, 2017. Photo: Elsa Rossler et Jen Debauche.
- fig. 06 Live performance at INSAS, 2017. Photo: Mathilde Bernet.