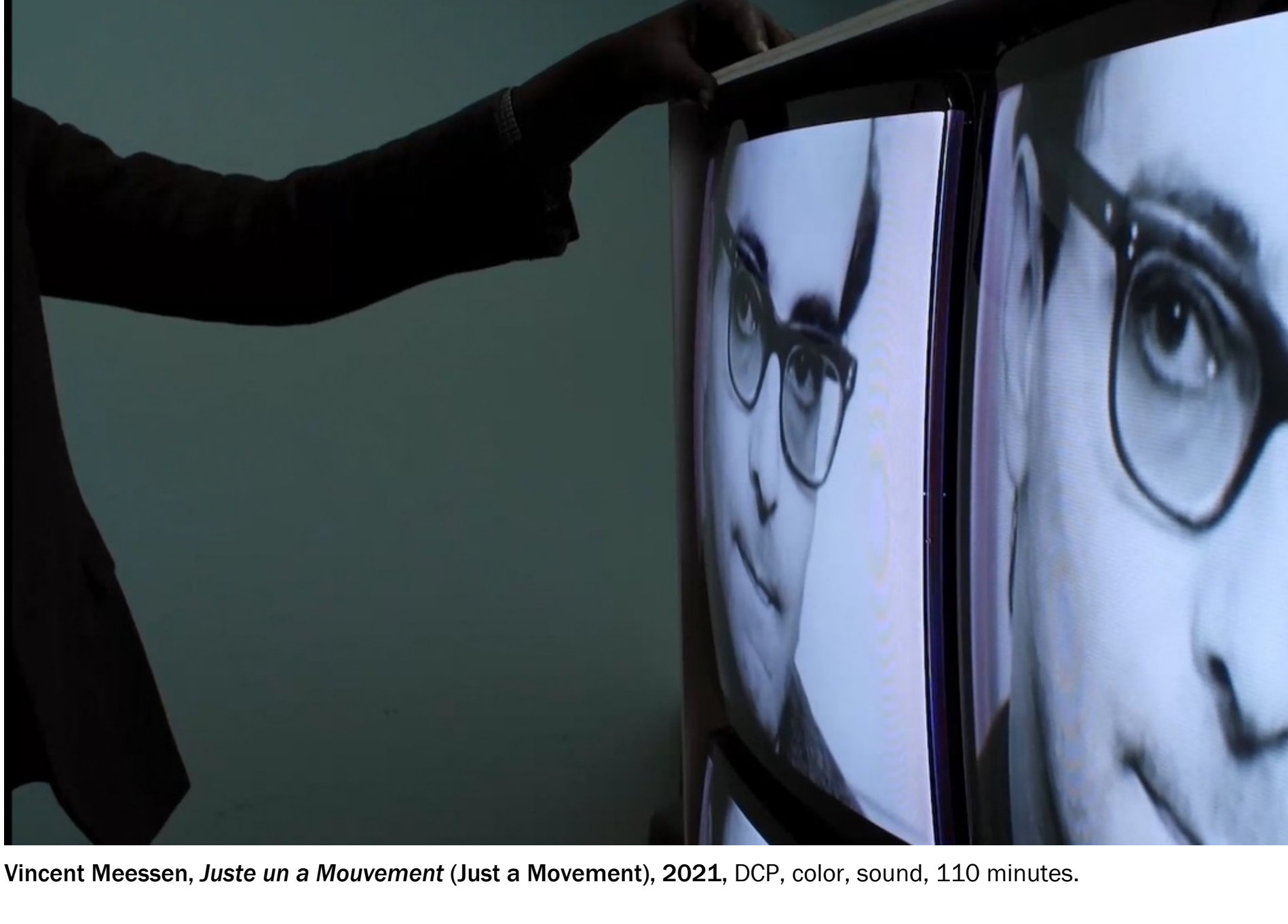


FILM

SOCIAL STUDIES

September 24, 2021 • Tony Pipolo on “Currents” at the 59th New York Film Festival



Vincent Meessen, *Juste un a Mouvement (Just a Movement)*, 2021, DCP, color, sound, 11.0 minutes.

WITH FIFTEEN FEATURES and eight programs of shorts, the second edition of the New York Film Festival’s “Currents” sidebar almost qualifies as a festival in itself. Again international in scope, this year’s selections reflect the ongoing impact of social media, not only in terms of how it has altered the speed and perspective by which global events are registered, but in how it suggests a possible new direction for cinema; this seems to be the point of Tiffany Sia’s *Do Not Circulate*. In reworking cellphone images of the violent police response to protests in Hong Kong in 2019, Sia’s work seeks to retain the immediacy of the events.

Found footage, long a staple of film history, shows up in other movies this year. For example, in *Just a Movement*, Vincent Meessen’s chronicle of the influence and fate of Marxist activist Omar Diop, the director interviews some of Diop’s former friends and colleagues in Senegal but also includes scenes from Godard’s *La Chinoise* in which Diop appears. Legendary Armenian filmmaker Artavazd Pelechian’s *La Nature*, composed entirely of found footage, begins harmlessly enough with majestic images of mountains and clouds accompanied by the Kyrie of Beethoven’s *Missa solemnis*. But the film soon becomes a relentless onslaught of volcanic eruptions, landslides, melting glaciers, and tsunamis—images no less terrifying than when they were initially captured.



Jean-Gabriel Périot, *Returning to Reims*, 2021, mixed media, color and black-and-white, 83 minutes.

Jean-Gabriel Périot’s masterful *Returning to Reims* is one of the most remarkable films to employ found footage that I have ever seen. The film is based on philosopher and historian Didier Eribon’s memoir of growing up in a working-class family, told against the social and political history of France over the last seventy-five years. The text, narrated flawlessly by Adele Haenel, is accompanied by dozens of excerpts from an astonishing range of documentary and narrative films from the archives of French cinema. Though Eribon’s life is traced from the 1950s onward, the excerpts range from silent and early sound cinema (Dimitri Kirsanoff, Jean Vigo, Germaine Dulac, Jean Renoir), to the Nouvelle Vague (Godard, Jean Rouch, Chris Marker), and to recent televised news reports. In so doing, Périot expands his source material, placing and editing familiar movie images so seamlessly that they become integral to the story being told. They not only help bring the past back to life but conjure Eribon’s—and no doubt Périot’s—personal and social history with extraordinary depth and poignancy.

Family portraiture of a different kind comprises another of this year’s strongest offerings: Wang Qiong’s *All About My Sisters*, a searing documentary about the one-child policy China enforced from 1980 to 2015 and its murderous effects on the filmmaker’s family. Given Wang’s blunt, unsparing approach, it is amazing that her parents and sisters agreed to participate in her project. No one comes off in a flattering light. One uncle recalls that to avoid violating the nation’s policy, he left a female newborn in the woods to die. The film begins and ends with Wang’s interview with her younger sister, Jin, who survived her parents’ attempt to abort her, only to be given away to a foster family. Jin’s bitter resentment toward her biological parents is transparent, most disturbingly conveyed by her verbal abuse and harsh treatment of her young son. We last see her, having abandoned this child, moving to a big city, allegedly to find work, with her second husband, a man with a gambling addiction whom she prefers to her siblings and parents.



Denis Côte, *Hygiène sociale (Social Hygiene)*, 2021, DCP, color, sound, 75 minutes.

Claire Simon’s compelling *I Want to Talk About Duras* dramatizes the relationship between one of the *nouveau roman*’s most beloved figures and Yann Andréa, a homosexual idolizer who became her lover when she was seventy and he thirty-two. Based on interviews with Yann, conducted in 1982 by journalist Michèle Manceaux, the film has the conviction of a good documentary but plays as a series of riveting psychoanalytic encounters (Duras herself is seen only fleetingly, in archival footage). But both Swann Arlaud as Yann and Emmanuelle Devos as Michèle bring the text to life with sobriety and finesse—a reserve also true of director Simon, whose *mise-en-scène*, camerawork, and editing are exemplary in their directness. This style provides a neutral frame for the painful, often sensational nature of Yann’s account of a bond that consumed every aspect of his being, leading to sexual confusion and attempts at suicide.

If Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet had ever made a comedy, it might look something like Denis Côte’s charming *Social Hygiene*. In Straubs/Huillet–like fashion, the film’s characters, in long shot and long takes, stand against serene backdrops of mountains, fields, and sky, reciting their dialogue with minimum inflection. We listen as a young man named Antonin is interrogated by his sister, his wife, and assorted lovers about his life as a pickpocket and general inability to make important decisions. Cote seems bent on paring away many conventions typical of narrative film, but the pithy effect he achieves here demonstrates that sometimes less can indeed be more.



Eléonore Yaméogo, An van. Dienderen, Rosine Mbakam, *Prism*, 2021, DCP, color, sound, 78 minutes.

Eléonore Yaméogo’s, An van. Dienderen’s, and Rosine Mbakam’s *Prism*, an atypical exploration of ingrained racism, presents us with a protagonist—or perhaps we should say antagonist—unlike all others. In one of the film’s key moments, an actress confronts this unseen figure and sums up the main argument of the film: that from its invention, the movie camera was calibrated for white skin. What do you think, she asks of her would-be interlocutor, “Are you guilty or innocent?” The reverse shot reveals that she addresses the camera itself, which, of course, remains mute.

For sheer aesthetic impact, it would be hard to beat Kyoshi Sugita’s *Haruhara-san’s Recorder* and Daichi Saito’s shorter work, *earthearthearth*. While the former is ostensibly a narrative about a young woman who lives alone and works in a local café, neither story nor character is of more than peripheral concern. Yet virtually every interior shot is framed and lit as carefully as a Vermeer painting, as if to mirror the composure and serenity of the person within. She remains little more than a benign presence, but the sense of place Sugita creates is anything but evanescent.

Daichi Saito continues to be obsessed with the filmic image itself and the myriad possibilities to which it can be subjected. Like Peleshyan, his ostensible subject is nature, but in *earthearthearth* it is transformed, often beyond recognition, by the eye of the filmmaker. A series of unidentified landscapes intermittently unfolds, intercut with black leader and morphing into undulating fields of shifting colors and textures as an improvised soundtrack by Jason Sharp accents every gesture of estrangement. It is as if we are watching a movie shot by some primeval witness to the beginning of the world.

— Tony Pipolo

The New York Film Festival’s Currents sidebar runs from September 24 to October 10.

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FILM September 18, 2020
Current Affairs
Tony Pipolo

FILM September 16, 2021
Grand Illusion
Nicolas Rapold

PRINT SEPTEMBER 2021
ALCHEMICAL ROMANCE
Ara Osterweil

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