



Liberté : un statut éphémère (2020)

À travers un récit personnel de quête de libération aux États-Unis au début des années 70, *Liberté : un statut éphémère* se penche sur les désirs d'émancipation, d'émigration et d'éducation de l'après-68. Le film esquisse un portrait de la mère de la cinéaste aujourd'hui de retour en Ecosse, sous le prisme de ses mémoires impressionnistes.

Lien : <https://vimeo.com/402094173>

Mot de passe : LIBERTY FR

Teaser: <https://vimeo.com/426718822>

SPECIFICATIONS TECHNIQUES

Super 8 transfer à HD, couleur, son, 37'
parlait anglais (avec sous-titrage EN / FR / NL / FR & NL)
BE / UK / US

SCREENING FORMAT

DCP / ProRes / H.264, etc.

SON

Mix stéréo, mix cinéma

CAST & ÉQUIPE

Avec Irene Arthur

Caméra & montage Rebecca Jane Arthur

Son Rebecca Jane Arthur

Prise de son aux États-Unis Jordi De Beule

Sound design Achilles Van den Abeele

Mixage Sylvie Bouteiller

Étalonnage Lennert De Taeye

Supervision technique Lennert De Taeye

Produit par Elephy

Producteur Rebecca Jane Arthur

Coordination Post-production Sofia Lemos Marques

Coproduit par ARGOS and Beursschouwburg

Avec le soutien du Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds (VAF), Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie (VGC), Kunstendecreet, Wallonia-Brussels Federation, KASK School of Arts Gent, Sound Image Culture (SIC), WIELS Residency.

MUSIQUE

“SING A RAINBOW”

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“SKYLINE OF SKYE”

Words and Music by Halfin, Heneker, Irving and Ruvin

Published by Peter Maurice Music Co Ltd/EMI Music

25 ARTS SECONDE : PRESQUE BELGES

par Vincent Dieutre

... Là ça bouge*, l'exposition vibre !

Je me souviens qu'on avait commencé la visite par un long plan fixe d'arpenteur Straubien. Ici c'est l'autre bout du spectre expérimental, le cinéma vibratile, arracheur d'instant qui est convoqué !

... Du coup, de doux fantômes hantent l'exposition/programmation : Jonas Mékas, Maya Deren, et leur bande de filmeurs- filmeuses haletante. Le matériau pellicule reprend ses droits, donnant à voir concrètement la mort au travail, la lutte désespérée du cinéma contre l'oubli.

... Oui. Au début, on s'insurge, on se méfie du maniérisme super 8, puis on constate combien cette esthétique sert le propos de la cinéaste libre. C'est du passé qu'elle nous parle. Au début aussi, on se demande d'où sort cet Anglais étrange, haché et délicat, comme les images rayées. C'est de sa mère écossaise qu'elle nous parle, de sa tentative de s'inventer un destin ailleurs, en Amérique. Les doutes se dissipent et l'émotion gagne.

... Absolument. Plutôt que de rabattre le récit sur un présent numérique rassurant, c'est le film même qu'elle traite comme une archive, mêlant les cassettes audio qu'on s'envoyait autrefois, aux images super 8 des lieux tel qu'ils perdurent aujourd'hui.

... Du coup, de cette aventure américaine d'une jeune écossaise des années 60, nous pouvons saisir les déchirements, les enjeux politiques et les espoirs fous, sans jamais les plaquer sur l'expérience actuelle.

... Oui, étrangement, l'anachronisme des formes finit par inventer son historicité propre. Un peu comme chez Virginia Woolf. Un peu comme un album-souvenir qu'on feuillèterait dans le désordre. Qui parle ? La Mère, la Fille ? D'où nous fait-on signe ? D'Edimbourg, de San Francisco ? Toutes les figures imposées du documentaire familial sont comme neutralisées.

... Et au final, loin des règlements de comptes, de l'amertume, reste cet hymne à la fragilité, au trou de mémoire, à l'incertitude de soi. C'est cela sans doute que la mère transmet de plus beau à sa fille, l'armant pour l'aventure précaire et bouleversante du cinéma.

* « Liberty: an ephemeral statute » de Rebecca Jane Arthur



REBECCA JANE ARTHUR (née en 1984 à Édimbourg) est une artiste visuelle dont la pratique est principalement liée à l'image en mouvement et à l'écriture. Ses travaux gravitent autour de portraits de personnes et de lieux, et son intérêt réside dans la manière dont les histoires personnelles illustrent des contextes socio-politiques et historiques. Elle a étudié les Beaux-Arts à Sint-Lukas Brussels et à l'Académie des Beaux-Arts de Vienne, puis elle a obtenu son MFA à la Royal Academy of Fine Arts (KASK) de Gand en 2017. Suite à l'invitation d'Ingrid Cogne, Rebecca Jane Arthur a travaillé comme chercheuse pour Six-Formats (financé par FWF-Peek), un projet de recherche axé sur les arts et accueilli par l'Académie des Beaux-Arts de Vienne, sous le format Screening en 2017-2018.

En 2019-2020, elle a été artiste en résidence au WIELS ainsi qu'au sein du programme SoundImageCulture (SIC). Elle a également fait partie de la résidence d'écriture Conversation #4 (une initiative du Centre Vidéo de Bruxelles (CVB) et du GSARA, en collaboration avec le Beursschouwburg), toutes ces résidences ont pris place à Bruxelles. En 2021, elle sera invitée à être artiste en résidence à la Cité internationale des arts de Paris.

Elle a exposé son travail à ARGOS Centre for Art and Media, Bruxelles ; au Beursschouwburg, Bruxelles ; au Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles, Paris ; à Convent, Gand ; à Courtisane Festival, Gand ; à Size Matters, Vienne ; au Tallinn Photomonth : Biennale d'art contemporain ; au 25FPS, Zagreb ; entre autres. Des textes sur son travail ont été publiés dans *Metropolis M* (BE), *Absys* (FR), et *KORTFILM.be*. Les textes d'Arthur sur le cinéma ont récemment été publiés par *Sabzian* (BE), World Organization of Video Culture Development (VCD) (CH), et *Film Place Collective* (UK).

Parallèlement à ses activités artistiques, Arthur travaille à Bruxelles chez Auguste Orts en tant que coordinateur du projet On & For Production and Distribution (2018-2021) financé par Creative Europe.



Elephy est une plateforme de production et de distribution pour le cinéma et les arts médiatiques, basée à Bruxelles. Elle soutient ses productions en leur fournissant un cadre professionnel géré par des artistes, garantissant ainsi une plus grande liberté artistique. La distribution des œuvres d'elephy va au-delà des festivals et des circuits de cinéma, elle inclut également les musées, les centres d'art, les contextes éducatifs et les nouveaux médias.

Elephy a été fondé par Rebecca Jane Arthur, Chloë Delanghe, Eva Giolo et Christina Stuhlberger en 2018.

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A LIFE IMAGINED

Rebecca Jane Arthur's *Liberty: An Ephemeral Statute*

"We arrived in New York at four o'clock in the morning. The view of Liberty lighting the world, the sight of the skyscrapers in the fog could not chase my sadness. I saw it all through tears which I tried in vain to stop. All around me I heard exclamations of enthusiasm in a language of which I understood not a word."¹

This account of an arrival in New York comes from the posthumously published memoirs of Alice Guy, who is widely regarded as the first female filmmaker. Her mention of the Statue of Liberty – which Paul Auster would describe almost a century later as "a welcoming mother, a symbol of hope to the outcasts and downtrodden of the world"² – is not surprising to the 21st century reader; her image is now synonymous with the history of migration to the New World. "Liberty" had actually not been conceived as a symbol of immigration but would quickly become so "as immigrant ships passed under the torch and the shining face"³ – its role permanently cemented by Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Colossus"⁴ ("Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!") and later reaffirmed by the movies.

The story of migration to the Americas is not only a recurrent cinematographic motif (from Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* to Sergio Leone's *Once*

Upon a Time in America) it is also *the* story of the movies, as Alice Guy's voyage across the Atlantic exemplifies. Essentially having run Gaumont's film production in Paris from 1896 till 1907 (where she directed hundreds of films, including *La fée aux choux*, *Madame a des envies* and *La vie du Christ*), Guy would go on to set up her own studio (Solax) in New Jersey and have a second career as an American filmmaker. In the 1910s and 1920s, the powerful American motion picture industry would be built by Jewish immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe such as William Fox, Carl Laemmle, Louis B. Mayer, Adolph Zukor – names that still resonate in the film industry today.

Rebecca Jane Arthur's *Liberty: An Ephemeral Statute* begins at sea. We soon glimpse Liberty, the Manhattan skyline presumed rather than seen through the mist and clouds. Blue sky and blue sea meet, the ghostlike city functioning as the horizon line that delineates one blue from the other. *Liberty* is the retelling of a personal story of migration, that of Irene Dunn, who, like Alice Guy, is also a pioneer of sorts. She left behind the certainties (and constraints) of a life that had been written out for her in Scotland to embrace the possibilities of an imagined one in America.

We do not know whether Irene travelled to America by sea, but it is by sea that the arrival has traditionally been represented in the cinema. The images of the Staten Island Ferry bring to mind Gregory Markopoulos's *Twice a Man*, and Arthur's film abounds with avant-garde film references and associations rather than those of Hollywood filmmaking. Before we see any image we hear Irene's voice, warning the filmmaker of the impossibility of remembering – and of forgetting – of the instability of memory: "what I'm saying is I won't be able to recall." She goes on to describe memory as a succession of "snapshots" (which she compares to images or

¹ *The Memoirs of Alice Guy Blaché* - translated by Roberta and Simone Blaché, edited by Anthony Slide, published 1986 by the Scarecrow Press. ² Paul Auster in *Collected Prose: Autobiographical Writings, True Stories, Critical Essays, Prefaces, and Collaborations with Artists* (2003). ³ John T. Cunningham in *Ellis Island: Immigration's Shining Center* (2003). ⁴ Written in 1883 to raise money for the construction of a pedestal for the Statue, Lazarus's poem was cast in 1903 into a bronze plaque and mounted inside the pedestal's lower level.

short videos on Instagram) – fragmented moments frozen in time. The problem is in bringing them together into a cohesive narrative, which is what Arthur attempts to do using “fragments” from Irene’s personal archive as triggers: letters, phone diaries, photographs, her US residence permit, other keepsakes. The images that we see, shot by Arthur on Super-8 as she traces Irene’s steps from Scotland to New York to San Francisco are contemporary (*Midsommar* posters would date them to the summer of 2019) but their graininess, their out-of-timeness, their obsolete material quality allows them to function as “memories.” Having chosen a format associated with amateur travelogues and home movies, Arthur allows her images to appear as Irene’s impressions as they might have been caught on camera to share with those back home. The images emphasize the contrast between the bright effervescence of the New York streets and the quietness of life “back home” in Scotland: the dullness of colours, the lack of people, Irene always filmed alone.

“Irene’s America Tape 1972” – as it’s referred to in the final credits – punctuates the film’s soundtrack. “Hello Irene, We’re going to do a wee tape for you” says a distinctive Scottish voice. But the sounds on the tape only travel in one direction,

from Dunfermline to the New World, and we only get to hear of her life through the echoes in their words (“we are glad to hear you are getting on so well”). There are many references to skiing, which seem to belong in the realm of the movies rather than to the more unglamorous life of a young secretary. Is any of it true? As she tells us later, “it had no resemblance to what my life was like.” Just as they “imagine” a movie-like life for her in America, her own idea of a land of plenty had been informed by the mid-century movies that she saw on television, particularly romantic comedies starring Doris Day or Elvis Presley. The shock that she experienced when she arrived in America was the harsh confrontation of fantasy with reality. America was no Purilia after all⁵.

“I’ve not much to tell you” keep telling her relatives, stressing the feeling that nothing much happens back home. There’s something both loving and almost suffocating about the tape, and its omnipresence, its refusal to let go (“you know I can’t keep away love”), its pull to the sounds and stories of back home (traditional songs like “Ye Banks and Braes” or the nursery rhyme “I can sing a rainbow”). The words from the “wee tape” are eventually submerged in the sounds of vibrant American city life.



⁵ In the novel *A Voyage to Purilia* by Elmer Rice (1930), two astronauts journey to a mysterious distant planet not unlike our own. In fact, it resembles 1920s America reconfigured by Hollywood, for although cinema is never mentioned, Purilia is *the* movies. For filmmaker Thom Andersen, who writes about it in his essay “The Time of the Toad”, Rice’s book represents a satire of an image of American society – affluent, post-industrial, and essentially classless – as repackaged by the cinema.

Even if Irene's American Dream had been partly triggered by representations of a "domestic utopia", her bold move took place in the early 1970s, in the context of the post-1968 women's liberation movements. After all, "Liberty" is female, a mighty woman with welcoming, "mild eyes."⁶ What transported Irene to America was not the vision of a super-equipped kitchen, but the refusal to accept that marriage is the only end to life, or rather the understanding that it can indeed be the end to a woman's life and aspirations. As the British feminist filmmaker Lis Rhodes wrote:

"[...] I do remember that the ending of *Jane Eyre* is most smooth and the form most complete and – of course – the ending is marriage. Whereas *Villette* doesn't really end at all and is really most incomplete and therefore most interesting – a woman busy working – earning her living – earning her living on her own is really not an ending. She is neither married nor dead – but really very cheerful and working. So it is interesting to reflect how often *Jane Eyre* has been made into a film. Cinematically the possibilities are there. It can be made to appear as a perfect paradigm of social control."⁷

Being in the United States – maybe not the land of the plenty, but still the land of opportunities – opened up the possibility for Irene to seek

a higher education. Upon her return to the UK, she would get a degree in literature. Arthur films Irene's bookshelves – overflowing with volumes by the likes of Charles Dickens, Colm Tóibín, Edna O'Brien, Alice Munro and Annie Proulx – as we hear Irene recount the pain inflicted on her by failing the "eleven-plus":⁸ "*You had nowhere to go*", she says, unless of course, you went abroad. In the 1970s "*girls were starting to realize that they could be independent*", that they didn't have to stay at home and be domesticated.

Blue sky and clouds: back to blue. The film begins at sea and ends in the sky – Irene having decided to remain in the UK at the last minute, when she was already in the airport about to return to the US. During the film's end credits – to the sound of "The Skyline of Skye" – we discover what we might have suspected all along, that Irene is Rebecca Jane Arthur's mother. The words "Starring Irene Arthur" appear; she is no longer "Irene Dunn." The film is not only a personal account of migration and freedom, but also a portrait of the filmmaker's mother, recalling a long tradition in Scottish artists' moving image initiated by Margaret Tait's *Portrait of Ga.* Like Luke Fowler's recent *Mum's Cards* – here the clue is in the title – *Liberty: An Ephemeral Statute* also deals with women's education and emancipation in 1970s Britain.

Having travelled further and further away – from New York to San Francisco to Hawaii – Irene eventually returns home to achieve her true ambition of an education. She needs not to run away anymore; the journey having provided an outsider perspective that allows her to see her own life and society with much more clarity. A statute is a written law, something that is seen as formal and permanent, the opposite of "ephemeral". The seeming contradiction of terms in the film's title appears therefore as a poetic evocation of the contradictions in Irene's life. After all, where lies true freedom?

María Palacios Cruz

⁶ "*Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand/Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command/The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.*" (Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus") ⁷ Lis Rhodes, "New Forms in Non-Narrative Film" (1985) in *Telling Invents Told* (2019). ⁸ The "eleven-plus" is an exam taken in the last year of primary school that determined which students would be admitted in "grammar schools" and other state secondary schools using academic selection – which represented at the time one of the few paths to a higher education for working class children.