

Kung Fu and Butt Politics: Jubilatory Mashups in the 1970s

By Pierre Haski¹

Think that the *mashup*² (the détournement of videos) is the most modern thing on the Web? In the 1970s, well before Mozinor,³ experiencing technical difficulties that the *Final Cut Pro*⁴ generation would know nothing about, some people made mashups in the spirit and full of the usual references of the times.

These films have mostly disappeared from our screens, both the big and the little ones, but there's a chance to discover them thanks to a "carte blanche" arrangement between the Cinémathèque française and René Viénet, one of the pioneers of this unique jubilatory genre.⁵

The titles of these films of détourned images and meanings are, in themselves, a program: *La dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?*⁶ (1973); *Les Filles de Ka-ma-ré*, aka *Une petite culotte pour l'été* (1974); *Chinois, encore un effort pour devenir révolutionnaires!* (1976). There's also a fourth film, *Mao par lui-même*, released upon the death of the Great Helmsman in 1976.

René Viénet, whom I'm met in Taiwan more than a decade ago, has an imposing stature and the face of an old Chinese sage, due to living in Asia. Before that, between 1963 and 1971, he was a member of the Situationist International (the SI), an organization devoted to cultural subversion, as anti-establishment as it was anti-Leftist. Guy Debord, the leader of the SI, had conceptualized cinematic détournement, as one could see last year at the exhibition that the Bibliothèque nationale de France devoted to his life and works.

¹ "Kung-fu et cul politique : dans les années 70, mashups jubilatoires," published in the 20 Match 2015 issue of Rue89/L'Obs:

<http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/rue89-culture/2015/03/20/kung-fu-cul-politique-les-mashups-video-jubilatoires-annees-70-258268>. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 22 April 2015. All footnotes by the translator.

² English in original.

³ Cf. <http://www.dailymotion.com/mozinor>.

⁴ English in original.

⁵ <http://www.cinematheque.fr/fr/dans-salles/rendez-vous-reguliers/fiche-cycle/carte-blanche-rene-vienet,626.html>.

⁶ Translated and subtitled by Keith Sanborn, et al, as *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (1989).

René Viénet made his first film after his break with the SI,⁷ after having discovered, in Taiwan, Chinese cinema, of which he bought many films for a fistful of dollars [*une poignée de dollars*], thus beginning an important collection.

“I was overcome with an immoderate love for Chinese cinema and, as soon as I saw it, I thought about détourning it,” he recounts.

In *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* René Viénet détourned a kung-fu film by subtitling it and then getting the team at Café de la gare (Miou-Miou and Patrick Dewaere) to dub in the words, which had, strictly speaking, nothing at all to do with the film but everything to do with the political battles of the times. (Note that the extracts on YouTube are bad quality and that a better version will be presented at the screening at the Cinémathèque.)

It wasn't an easy film to make. Viénet learned to subtitle in a tiny studio in the 17th arrondissement, using a hand-made system that allowed him to match the subtitles with the movements of the actors' lips. The film was shown in the Latin Quarter in Paris⁸ and was very successful, which allowed Viénet to buy a Japanese film, a kind of soft-porn film, he explained.

“I was in love with the [main] actress, and I bought [copies of] all of her films. I made a second détournement to it by adding in hardcore porno scenes filmed in Paris with several friends! It made an enormous impact in the Latin Quarter, in the context of the puritanical repression unleashed by Michel Poniatowski, the Minister of the Interior,⁹ who'd closed a nightclub by saying, ‘There will be no artistic shelter for pornography.’ My slogan for the release of the film was, ‘At last, butt politics without artistic shelter.’”

Les Filles de Ka-ma-ré tells the story of “a settling of accounts between clitoral Bakuninists and vaginal Marxists.” Once again, the quality of the copy on YouTube is poor, and the film will be best seen at the Cinémathèque screening.

The third détourned film, *Chinois, encore un effort pour être révolutionnaires*, is more ambitious: two years in the making, real producers (Hélène Vager, Charles-Henri Favrod, Edwin Aline and the INA¹⁰) and professional editors (Noune Serra and Monique Clementi). One of the voices in the film merits identification: that of Jacques Pimpaneau, a sinologist and the author of many books who was also Viénet's Chinese professor and who introduced him to Pierre Ryckmans, alias Simon Leys, the recently deceased scourge of Western Maoists.¹¹ Viénet would publish Leys' famous book, *Les Habits neufs du président*

⁷ He resigned in February 1971.

⁸ On 8 March 1973. Cf. <http://www.notbored.org/BreakBricks.pdf>.

⁹ 1974-1977, under the administration of Giscard d'Estaing.

¹⁰ The National Audiovisual Institute.

¹¹ Cf. Pierre Haski, <http://www.notbored.org/haski.pdf>.

Mao [in 1971].

“At the time,” Viénet says, “we didn’t have Final Cut Pro. We worked with 16 mm or 35 mm reels, a splicer and acetone. It required 15 bracketed trays to elevate the ends of pieces of film that were four or five meters long, plus other trays for the magnetic reel that we needed to synchronize everything . . . It was a lot of work.

“Today, special effects can be created in five minutes by any high-school student with a Mac that’s running Adobe software. At the time, to make Marx and Engels cry at the sight of a newspaper article that united them with Mao, it took Francis Deron¹² and a technician three days of hard work. But today, we could make *Chinois encore un effort* for much less money.”

At the time, Viénet recounts, the problem was that “this avant-garde and violent film wasn’t very successful.” It was difficult to topple Mao’s statue in France.¹³ But seen today, in a post-Maoist and image-saturated world, this film is, in terms of its form, startlingly modern.

For the Cinémathèque screening, Viénet has added to his own films a few by Hu Jie, an underground Chinese documentary maker whose film *Ne pleurez pas sur mon cadavre* has been hosted in its entirety by this website for the last month.¹⁴ Hu Jie, whose films can’t be seen in China, works on historical events that have been hidden or censored, in particular those connected to the Cultural Revolution. It is a precious look at whole areas that Chinese power would like to see disappear from memory.

The last “Chinese” segment of the programming, a bit of nose-thumbing by Viénet, is Jean Yanne’s film, *Les Chinois à Paris*, a formidable morsel of ferocious humor from the 1970s that is even more ferocious for the French and their unlimited capacities for collaboration and denunciation than for the Chinese, who are the unwilling pretext for this social parody.

Viénet says that he found a copy of it among the sellers of pirated DVDs in Shanghai, on sale for 1 euro, and that it enjoyed posthumous success in China, while it is unavailable in France.

The “carte blanche” screening that begins on Friday includes a documentary that has nothing to do with China: *Ne laissons pas les morts enterrer les morts*, which is a film from 1974 by David Bergman, Haïm Gouri and Jacques Ehrlich,

¹² Later a correspondent for *Le Monde*. Cf. his article “The Cemeteries of Maoism” (2008): <http://www.notbored.org/cemeteries.html>.

¹³ Cf. Viénet’s “Ghosts of the Maoists” (2008): <http://www.notbored.org/ghosts.html>.

¹⁴ Cf. <http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2014/12/21/a-voir-rue89-documentaire-inedit-revolution-culturelle-256606>.

produced by Miriam Novitch and concerned with the Nazi death camp at Sobibor. It is based upon images taken by the Nazis themselves.

In this eclecticism, we find a perfect portrait of René Viénet, who is a man with many lives (in prior ones, he sold nuclear power to Taiwan,¹⁵ produced wine, advocated the candidacy of Olympe de Gouges for inclusion in the Panthéon¹⁶ and harshly criticized other Sinologists¹⁷).

He will “pay” for this carte blanche, which is co-hosted with Nicole Brenez, by being present at every screening for a discussion with the audience. Thus, not to be missed by those interested in a rare, original and joyous cinema.



¹⁵ For a denunciation of this by an ex-situationist, cf. Raoul Vaneigem, *Caricatures and Self-Portraits of the Situationist International*:

<http://www.notbored.org/caricatures.pdf>.

¹⁶ In 2013. Cf. <http://www.notbored.org/marie-olymp.html>.

¹⁷ Cf. <http://www.notbored.org/vienet-radiofrance.html> from 2004.