

In Search of the Timeless Moment

Review by Michael Orlando Yaccarino

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Outre Tombe (Haunted Earth)

A film by Alexandre H. Mathis



When the early 20th-century English composer Gustav Holst created the seven-movement orchestral suite known as *The Planets*, his musical objective was in expressing the astrological and not the astronomical—that is, the emotional dimensions and not the scientific aspects corresponding to the celestial bodies represented in the work. So when the continuous opening shot of the film *Outre Tombe* showing the passage of clouds through which a glowing moon finally emerges, the viewer is firmly placed in a realm of dream, shadow and revelation. *Outre Tombe* is produced and directed by award-winning French novelist, photographer and independent *cinéaste* Alexandre H. Mathis. It is an experimental epic

The axis upon which *Outre Tombe* turns is Pamela Stanford. Active throughout the 1970s, the French actress is perhaps best known for her irrepressible and daring work with renegade film maker Jess Franco, most

notably *Lorna...l'exorciste* (1974) and *Blue Rita* (1977). Following an absence of more than thirty years, Stanford became muse to Mathis with whom she first collaborated briefly in the mid-1970s. Since 2015, this artistic union has resulted in a variety of experimental film projects.

In a 2017 interview¹ with Mike Haberfelner, Stanford explains how her character in *Outre Tombe* is that of the returning spirit of Catherine Lapeyre, a woman unjustly accused and executed for witchcraft in 17th-century France. So while the literal translation of the film's title is *Beyond the Grave*, its given English-language name of *Haunted Earth* offers another perspective on the same theme of liminal existence between worlds. Stanford has retained both her elegant beauty, ethereality and intelligence. So the viewer is enticingly lured along by the materialization of this interdimensional tourist. In addition to Stanford, there are brief appearances by Michael Girod as a member of the Knights Templar with whom Lapeyre shares a love unbounded by time.

Shown in profile or full-on, Stanford's face is often presented locked in an immobile expression of perplexed shock when confronting such vistas. For they feature now-ruined ancient structures known only by their viewer in their newness or man-made machinery devised centuries after her last appearance on the face of the earth. Conversely, the phantasm seems most at peace when observing natural landscapes unspoiled by modern industry or interacting with such roadside animal life as cats, dogs, horse and sheep. Although to be sure, the apparition is depicted as having little difficulty in managing tree-lined country roads in a two-door hatchback.

The unusual running time of *Outre Tombe* must be addressed.² Given its obsessive focus upon single female character, the film experience which leaps most immediately to mind is that of *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. The action of that three-and-a-half hour 1975 arthouse classic by Belgian director Chantal Akerman's exclusively concerns its increasingly fragmented central subject as portrayed by Delphine Seyrig. *Outre Tombe* neatly doubles that running time for an approximately seven-hour length. For those viewers willing to invest the time, a compelling journey will unfold.

Filmed in Aquitaine, Gironde and Bordeaux, the film is a visual *chant d'amour* to southwest France. Throughout its entirety, there is a continual return to several key locations—a railroad crossing, an aqueduct, the open pits of a mining quarry, as well as a variety of certain disused buildings and domiciles. Such revisits suggest how these sites might be locations haunted by the wraith whom occasionally refers to “haunted houses”. It seems no accident how many of these locales are those associated with transition or traveling as is the central figure between planes of existence.

Mathis employs a continual incongruence between image and sound. Identical locations are juxtaposed between their contemporary, abandoned state with sepia-toned images of the same in their vibrant heyday as shown in old postcards. Similarly, sound is played with to intriguing results. Empty stretches of highway or nature scenes are combined with the sounds of rushing vehicles. Multiple voices of children off-camera render a deserted town square that much more vacant. In several instances, the same scene is repeated with and without sound of any kind. Such purposeful manipulation frees the work's central character and environs—and perhaps most importantly, the viewer—from the strictures of time. In these ways, we undergo the same shadow-life of the protagonist.

Shot largely handheld with a variety of digital cameras, the director is impressively skilled at composing exquisite images in the moment. The work is co-edited by Mathis and Alain Deruelle, the latter of whom directed Stanford in the French cult horror film *Terreur Cannibale* (1981). The most notable cutting method utilized in the first third of the film consists of crosscutting between a selection of varied locations populated solely by Stanford. And within these, the same shot of a particular location is shown repeatedly at different moments in time throughout the day and night—or viewed through different lenses or via in-camera effects resulting in the juxtaposition of the same image lit by natural sunlight or presented in an eerie sapphire or violet-crimson glow. As the limbo-like experience of the visitant deepens, the editing style shifts to an appropriately impressionistic approach achieved most stunningly through a series of increasingly layered exposures combining multiple images already seen in the work with those shown for the very first time.

During the last half-hour of *Outre Tombe*, there is a seemingly incongruous imposition of narrative detail that disturbs the poetic dream-state of all that flowed prior. Perhaps this is the director's intention—to return us to solid ground. Regardless, the abundant treasures and pleasures of this demanding and ultimately rewarding work are its simplest. One standout among many—the stunning Stanford drawn to and then basking in a rectangle of golden sunlight upon a courtyard stone wall. It becomes a timeless moment burnished in the viewer's heart and soul. Then, now and always.

Notes

Outre Tombe (Haunted Earth) is available in a limited-edition, region-free DVD box set by Phoenix Underground Distribution. It includes an informative and finely illustrated 52-page booklet. Supplementary materials include a making-of featurette and six film-portraits of Pamela Stanford by Mathis, as well as the short *Petit déjeuner avec Abricot* by the director. Visit the director's site for more information and ordering details: <http://https-alexandre-mathis.over-blog.com/>

Michael Orlando Yaccarino writes on genre films and their creators, unconventional historical figures and the occult. His critical writings and interviews have championed world fringe cinema for more than twenty five years. Among other works, he is co-author of the biography *Infinite Variety: The Life and Legend of the Marchesa Casati* and his articles include "Marquis Value: From Sade to Screen" and "Bloody Banquet" on films by Jess Franco. Visit marchesacasati.com to learn more.

1 "An Interview with Pamela Stanford, Star of *Outre Tombe*" by Make Haberfelner for *(re)Search My Trash* (June 2017). Available at searchmytrash.com.

2 A compressed 17-minute, alternate version of the film exists as prepared by French author/film maker Gérard Courant.



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