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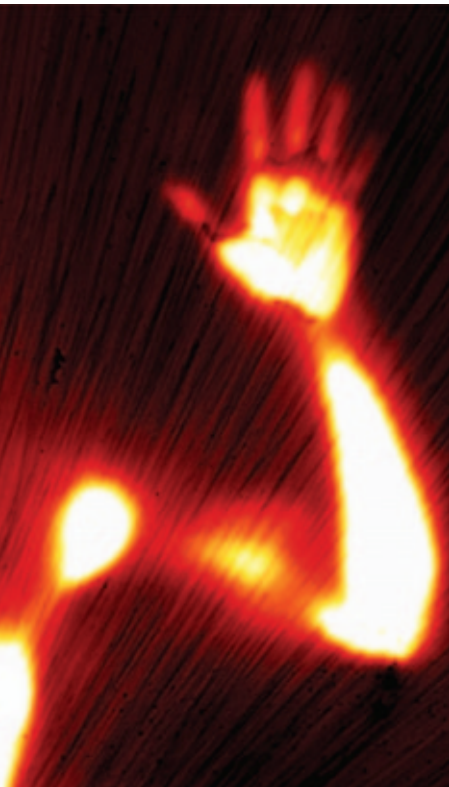
ORA

A FILM BY
PHILIPPE BAYLAUCQ

CHOREOGRAPHY PRODUCER
JOSÉ NAVAS RENÉ CHÉNIER

A NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA PRODUCTION





The Film

A cell divides itself. From this first mass of light six luminous bodies soon emerge. They evolve in a world they are discovering—explorers lit by their internal light, leaving behind traces of the fire that animates them.

ORA is a stunning meeting of the artistic worlds of choreographer José Navas and filmmaker Philippe Baylaucq. It is the first film to use 3D thermal imaging, producing visuals unlike anything ever seen: the luminous variations of body heat seen on skin, bodies emitting a multitude of colours, a space filled with movement that transforms itself.

ORA is dance transformed by cinema—a completely unique film experience. Director Philippe Baylaucq brings us a spectacular cinematic adventure, in the great tradition of innovative films produced by the National Film Board of Canada.



A Word from the Director

ORA is a dance allegory inspired by Darwin's theory of evolution and the myths of Narcissus and Prometheus.

At first, I was interested in exploring the role that colour could play in the perception of the human body and of movement. So I needed some dancers and a space to carry out my research.

I was granted a two-year film residency at the National Film Board of Canada, and that allowed me to develop these ideas by plunging into the fascinating world of stereoscopy. I set myself the challenge of showing a world that had never been seen before, and doing it in 3D. That's when I came up with the idea of using infrared cameras. I figured that the heat of the human body shown in 3D would look very intriguing.

I worked with dancer and choreographer José Navas, and together we developed a filmic and choreographic language to tell a story without any words. Our goal was to marry the possibilities of dance with a new technique of storytelling in film, through the use of high-end infrared thermal imaging cameras.

From the beginning, the exploration of space made possible by stereoscopy was complemented by sound and music. The soundtrack was developed to take full advantage of the possibilities of 7.1 surround sound. We needed the sound to heighten the perception of depth in the images, and to underline the dimensions of the space in which the dancers moved.

We made sure throughout the project to never lose sight of the humanity of our subjects. They ran the risk of being eclipsed by the technological capabilities of the unique, high-tech equipment we were using. Even though we were travelling through new visual, audio and musical territory, we kept returning to the basics: showing the human body in motion, remaining organic, being true to dance, surprising and moving the audience.

Philippe Baylaucq



A First for Thermography

ORA was filmed without lighting—no natural or artificial light. In order to see the internal heat of the human body transformed into light, we used extremely sensitive infrared thermal imaging technology. The use of these cameras is strictly controlled, and is limited to military, medical and scientific applications. This is the first time they've been used to shoot a complete film. The cameras were placed side-by-side and synchronized, like human eyes, which, of course, enable us to see in three dimensions. As a result, the cameras allow us to perceive the surprising reality of the thermal world in stereoscopy.

Through the considerable efforts of a team of computer graphics specialists, we were then able to transform this visual thermal material into an innovative film experience.



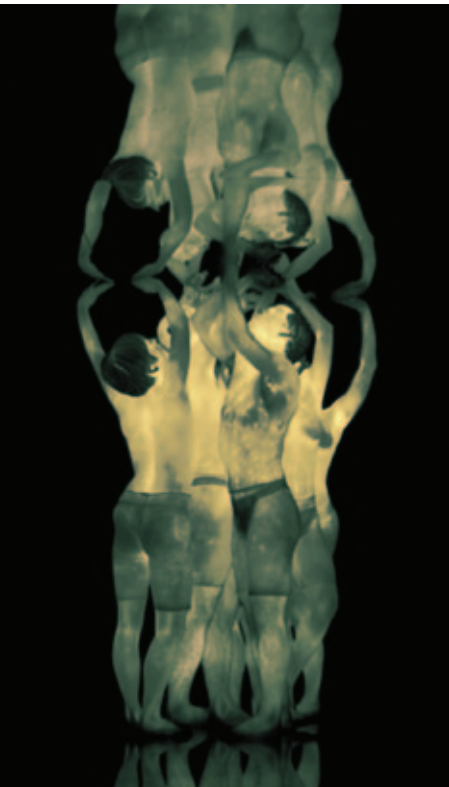
Photo: © Mariène Gélinau Payette

Philippe Baylaucq

Philippe Baylaucq was born in Kingston, Ontario, in 1958, studied in London, and first came to prominence during the 1980s for his work in videography and in cinema. His films are characterized by frequent experimentation with form, an affinity for technological innovation and an interest in various artistic disciplines. These include architecture (*Barcelone*, 1985; *Phyllis Lambert, une biographie*, 1994), painting (*Mystère B.*, 1997; *Les couleurs du sang*, 2000) and dance (*Les choses dernières*, 1994; *Lodola*, 1996; *ORA*, 2011). His films have won numerous awards at Montreal's International Festival of Films on Art, as well as at many international film festivals.

The multi-talented Baylaucq has also directed a children's musical tale starring puppets (*Hugo et le dragon*, 2001), a science film (*La dynamique du cerveau*, 2008) and *A Dream for Kabul* (2008)—a moving documentary about a man who travels to Kabul to assist ordinary people, after losing his own son in the attacks of September 11, 2001. Baylaucq was also the director in charge of *Happiness Bound* (2007), an homage to Quebec poetry.

Baylaucq's dedication to film has earned him the prix Lumières, in recognition of his work advancing the interests of film directors. He chaired the Association des réalisateurs et réalisatrices du Québec, the province's directors' organization, from 1996 to 2000, and has also chaired the Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal since 2005.



Interview with the Director

The title of your new film, *ORA*, seems a bit cryptic. Why did you choose it?

I was looking for a multilingual title. **ORA** means “early morning” in Armenian, and “now” in Italian. **ORA** also alludes to its English- and- French-language homonym, “aura.” I also like how the word looks: you’ve got the O, which is a circle; the R, which includes a square; and the triangle in the A.

Tell me about the origins of the project. How did it start?

Primarily, I wanted to make a film about the relationship between colour, the human body and movement. That’s where the idea of using choreography comes from. Then I wanted to work with stereoscopy, but trying to do it in a way that hadn’t been done before. I wanted to enter uncharted territory. Stereoscopy is based on the use of two cameras placed side-by-side, so they simulate human vision. So I went looking for a type of camera that hadn’t been used in this way before. That led me to infrared thermal imaging cameras, which are usually employed for military purposes and surveillance, as well as in medicine and engineering.

How hard are these cameras to come by?

It’s pretty easy to purchase an infrared camera. The difficulty lies in finding one that will shoot in HD. They tend to be owned by the US military, and their use is strictly regulated. So one of the first challenges in making the film was to get our hands on two of these cameras. One of the conditions of using the cameras was that we had to film in the United States—because we couldn’t get permission to transport them across the border. Also, we were only allowed to use the cameras in the presence of Arn Adams, the engineer who designed them. Fortunately, he is a very creative man who was excited by our project. He enthusiastically offered his support—even helping us with the shoot during his vacation.

How did you deal with colour in the film?

Thermal imaging cameras film in black and white, with each shade of grey equivalent to a very specific colour. Just to give you an idea of how sensitive these cameras are, they can detect 10,000 temperature variations. We could have used a computer to assign a specific colour to each of the grey tones—but in the end we decided not to use that approach. Instead, we chose to control a more limited range of colours in the film.

But the fact that you’re shooting with these cameras leads to unexpected results. For example, women’s and men’s bodies don’t retain heat in the same way. When women are cold, blood rushes more quickly to their stomach—a function of child-bearing—and that causes their hands and feet to get cold faster. In the film you



see that the women's hands and feet are darker. (In thermophotography, warmer areas are whiter, whereas anything cold tends towards black.) Similarly, a certain texture appears on the skin of the dancers when they start to get cool, because the blood is concentrated in particular areas, which can vary from one individual to the next, depending on their vascular system. You could say that each of the dancers has their own thermal personality, which is unique to them.

That must have led to some technical challenges.

Well, it was better to work in a relatively cool environment, rather than a warmer one, so that there was a significant difference between the temperature of the objects on the set and the human bodies. We didn't have complete control over the temperature though. There was no way we could keep it constant. As a result, we had a computer graphics specialist correct for the variations in ambient temperature.

What kind of lighting did you use?

Whenever you discuss a film project, lighting is one of the first subjects to come up. **ORA** was different though. It was filmed without any lighting: no sunlight, no ambient light and no artificial light. The only source of light in the film is the heat emanating from the dancers. We did use a tiny bit of supplementary lighting, but just enough to allow the dancers to see where they were going.

Tell us about your collaboration with José Navas.

This is the second time that I've worked with José Navas. Fifteen years ago, we made **Lodola** together, and it has always been a very memorable experience for me. José really understands what cinema and dance bring to each other. He is constantly looking for new ways to explore movement and to make dance accessible. He's an artist very skilled in thinking in terms of space—which makes him an ideal collaborator for a stereoscopic project, a project in which we are working with depth, with the Z axis.

What do you in terms of writing for a project like this?

The NFB was home to Norman McLaren, which means that there is a long history here of creating projects out of unique materials, experimentation and research. That's how José and I approached this project—doing tests with the thermal camera, workshoping with the dancers. Obviously, there is no traditional script involved. We proceeded through our findings and our discoveries. We did have a general structure that we refined over the course of our formal, technical and aesthetic research. That structure was mostly finalized by the time we began to film, but was still tweaked during the sound mix.



Photo: © Valerie Simmons

José Navas

Born in Venezuela in 1965, José Navas moved to Quebec in 1991 and became one of the dominant figures in the province's dance scene—recognized internationally for his work both as a dancer and as a choreographer. In 2000, the French magazine *L'Express* named him one of the 100 people shaking up Quebec society. His work is known for its sensuality, its intensity and its explorations of movement.

Navas has been a prolific solo performer (*Sterile Fields*, 1996; *Solo with Cello*, 2001; *Miniatures*, 2008; *Personæ*, 2011, etc.), but has also distinguished himself with a number of works for multiple dancers, including *One Night Only 3/3*, 1998; *Perfume de Gardenias*, 2000; *Adela, mi amor*, 2003; *Portable Dances*, 2005; *Anatomies*, 2006; *S*, 2008; *Diptych*, 2011.

Navas is very open to collaborations with other artistic disciplines, and has worked with a number of filmmakers, including Laura Taler (*The Village Trilogy*, *Perpetual Motion*), Philippe Baylaucq (*Lodela*, *ORA*) and Moze Mossanen (*The Golden City*).

Since 2010, he has been choreographer in residence at Ballet BC, in Vancouver.



Interview with the Choreographer

What elements make for a good dance film?

A good dance film gives us a sense of movement and a sense of space. That's very different from simply recording choreography. Dance is an experience, and a good dance film captures that experience and translates it into another medium.

What can cinema bring to dance?

The one vital element that cinema brings to dance is longevity. Dance is in the here-and-now. When the show ends, it's over. Cinema offers us the opportunity to preserve that experience.

Do you choreograph differently when you are working for a film project?

The main difference has to do with point of view. On stage, the point of view is from in front of the stage. The dancers are in front of the audience—as if in a box that's closed on three sides. In cinema, the point of view changes. It's universal. So you have to think of choreography in a multidirectional sense. That forces you to work in a circular manner, as Merce Cunningham taught us. The challenge is to maintain the same essence of movement from one diagonal to another—from one point of view to another. Of course, you're not seeing the same things as the camera moves, but you maintain the same idea. This approach can sometimes lead to wonderful accidents that add to our work—because when you work in the round there are things that appear that you would never have noticed if you were using a standard approach, with a single point of view.

Following the same train of thought, how does dancing for the camera affect the performers?

It's the same as for actors. When you're on stage, you have to project. In film, you have to be aware that the camera is sometimes close to you, and sometimes farther away. You must maintain the integrity of the movement when you dance, but without projecting. The relationship between the dancer and the camera is very intimate.



Was the choreography for *ORA* all created for the film, or did you use elements that you had already developed?

When Philippe approached me about collaborating on the film, I was working on a piece called *Diptych*. I suggested he take a look at what I had, and see if any of the elements from that piece might work for the project he had in mind. After that first conversation, I started to imagine the choreography for *ORA*. At that early stage, I found it complicated to imagine the effects of stereoscopy and the infrared camera on the movement, so Philippe and I worked closely together to think very specifically about those elements of the film. I should point out that the choreography was really developed in partnership with Philippe. It started out with the choreography I had envisioned, but it evolved considerably over the course of the project. The final result is quite different from my original vision. So it really is a collaboration with the director. When you're working in film, it's very difficult to have fixed notions about your choreography, because things change all the time—and those changes affect the development of the movements. You have to constantly make adjustments.

Tell me about the technical aspects of your collaboration with Philippe Baylaucq.

There were a lot of conversations. Philippe was very interested in how to convey colour through movement. I found it very difficult to conceive of bringing those elements together, since my work tends to be very abstract. So we talked a lot about that, trying to approach colour without being too literal about it, and maintaining the abstract nature of my work. We also talked a lot about what we both learned from *Lodela*, which was the first film we collaborated on.

What do you think about *Lodela* when you look back on it now? What's stayed with you?

Lodela was a very interesting experience for me, both as a dancer and as a person. It was an experience that changed my choreographic work: it was the first time I had worked in film, and it altered my perception of movement in space. Philippe's and my collaboration lasted three years, which is a long time. You don't often have the opportunity to enter into a relationship with an artist from another discipline for such a sustained period of time. It's an important human experience.



Photo: © NFB

René Chénier

A true man of cinema, René Chénier has been the executive producer at the National Film Board's French Animation and Youth Studio since August 14, 2006. During this period, some thirty films have been produced at the studio. They include *Robes of War*, *The Necktie*, *The Trenches* and *Facing Champlain* (in 3D). The Studio has also co-produced such international works as *Rosa Rosa*, *Leon in Wintertime* and *The Lost Town of Switez*, which won a number of awards, including Best First Film at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival in June 2011.

René Chénier independently produced the acclaimed musical fable *Hugo and the Dragon*, directed by Philippe Baylaucq, which garnered several major awards. He has collaborated on a number of feature-length dramas and produced director Benoît Pilon's *The Necessities of Life*, a multiple award-winner and 2008 Oscar® semi-finalist in the Best Foreign Language Film category.

In 2010, he produced *Glimpses*, shown on an oversized screen at the Canada Pavilion during the Shanghai World Expo.

René Chénier has just finished producing *ORA*, a film about dance directed by Philippe Baylaucq with choreography by Jose Navas. Shot in 3-D using infrared cameras, the film marks a cinematic first!

ORA, an organic work in the pure Norman McLaren tradition, painting with light.

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Photo: © 1968 NFB

Dance and Film at the NFB

Film and dance are both movement-based art forms, so it makes sense that they would come together in projects focusing on the specifics of one or the other. Take the work of Canadian animation pioneer Norman McLaren for example, who made several films in collaboration with dancers. The best known is *Pas de deux* (1968), which pushed the limits of animation by bringing together dancers' movements that originally were separated in time. The result is an elegant and delicate film, but also a technical tour de force. *Ballet Adagio* (1972) is a more modest work, in which the director films a ballet in slow-motion, allowing viewers to watch the technique and the mechanics of movement. Finally, with *Narcissus* (1983), McLaren offers us an interpretation in dance of the myth of Narcissus.

Following in McLaren's wake, several other animation directors have collaborated with dancers. One of them is Pierre Hébert, whose film grew out of a multidisciplinary performance including dancer Louise Bédard, writer Sylvie Massicotte, musician Robert M. Lepage and the filmmaker himself.

Dance has also been the subject of a number of NFB documentaries, including *Margaret Mercier, ballerine* (George Kaczender, 1963); *First Stop, China* (John N. Smith, 1986), about an Asian tour of the Grands Ballets Canadiens; *Moment of Light* (Gordon Reeve, 1992), on the great Evelyn Hart; *The Making of a Dancer* (Douglas Jackson, 1993), on the meteoric rise of Stéphane Léonard; *Jean-Pierre Perreault: Giant Steps* (Paule Baillargeon, 2004), about choreographer Jean-Pierre Perreault; and the Oscar-winning *Flamenco at 5:15* (Cynthia Scott, 1983), which shows Canadian dancers being given flamenco lessons by two Spanish teachers.

Back in 1963, Roger Blais filmed the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in *Shadow on the Prairie (A Canadian Ballet)*, a work about the settling of the Canadian West. Philippe Baylaucq's work with José Navas, which began in 1996 with *Lodola* and continues in 2011 with *ORA*, is on a whole other level—closer in spirit to McLaren's *Pas de deux*. These works explore the possibilities of film to the fullest, transcending dance in the process.