

“France in Autumn: *Race d’Ep* and the End of the Seventies”

Greg Youmans

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With the exception of the 16mm *Race d’Ep* (1979), Lionel Soukaz shot all his films of the 1970s in Super 8. He can therefore be counted among the filmmakers of the *Ecole du corps* (“School of the Body”), a loose set of queer Parisian artists who made lushly erotic films in the “amateur” format during the mid- to late 1970s.¹ At the same time, Soukaz stands apart from the group (which included Téo Hernandez, Jacobois (Jacques Haubois), and Stéphane Martí, among others) because of the strong political charge of his films. *Boy Friend 2* (1976) and *Le Sexe des anges* (1977) are similar to the voiceover-drenched first two parts of *Race d’Ep*. In them, the image track serves as illustration and counterpoint to passages read aloud from the work of Tony Duvert, Guy Hocquenghem, and René Schérer. Other solo works, such as his first film, *Lolo Mégalo blessé en son honneur* (1973), made when he was nineteen years old, and the devastating *Ixe* (1980, 16mm), a *cri de coeur* against the government censorship of *Race d’Ep*, largely eschew voiceover. They achieve their political impact instead through a rhythmic montage of transgressive images, often paired with looped sounds, which together build to a fever pitch that seems designed to propel the spectator out of complacency.

In his survey of the first twenty years of gay and lesbian movement cinema, Richard Dyer ranks Soukaz with Rosa von Praunheim at the top of a very short list of gay activist filmmakers who pursued a “confrontational” approach instead of the “affirmational,” or positive-images, approach more widely favored and practiced by gay

cultural activists.² At the same time, Dyer distinguishes the French filmmaker's work from the West German's on the grounds that, in the former, pleasure always ultimately trumps argumentation. He notes that three image-banks are regularly conjured and celebrated in the films of the 1970s: drag, porn, and pederasty.

Each poses a threat to the social order: drag as a refusal of male privilege, porn making present the polymorphous perversity of desire, pederasty undermining the authority of the bourgeois family. What is distinctive, however, is not these arguments in themselves, which had their counterparts throughout the international gay movement, but the way they are fuelled not by political correctness but by pleasure itself. Other pro-drag, -porn, and -pederasty positions seem to imply that one should get into these things in order to smash male and familial power, but the French polemics starts from wanting them.³

Race d'Ep is no exception. It too mobilizes these three sites of bourgeois-convention-shattering *jouissance*, from the pederastic orchestrations of Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden (played by Schérer) of Part 1, to the gender transgressors posed and prodded by Magnus Hirschfeld and his colleagues in Part 2, to the pornotopic 1960s youth fantasia of Part 3. Soukaz made the film in collaboration with activist intellectual Guy Hocquenghem, who was a founding member of FHAR (*le Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire*; in some ways France's equivalent to the Gay Liberation Front) and a writer of both political essays and queer theory (this last *avant la lettre*). Soukaz did not meet Hocquenghem until 1977, though he had seen him speak at rallies before then and was already familiar with his writing. The two became lovers and would remain close friends and artistic collaborators until Hocquenghem's death from AIDS in 1988.

Race d'Ep suggests that the history of homosexuality is bound up with the history of photography. In this respect, the film adds an image track to Michel Foucault's discourse-based history of sexuality, which had just been published in 1976. Foucault famously argued that when the medical category of "homosexuality" was created in 1870, so too was a new species (or, perhaps, "race") of homosexuals.⁴ *Race d'Ep* layers the "Time of the Pose" onto Foucault's late-nineteenth-century origin story. But having followed the film's chronological journey from Gloeden's 1890s art photography through Weimar and the swinging sixties all the way to the filmmakers' present, I am uncertain as to whether the film means to make a historical argument *per se* or if its diverse content should be understood instead as snapshots assembled in a loose-leaf scrapbook. Soukaz suggested as much in a 1981 interview, when he stated, "*Race d'Ep* n'est pas l'Histoire, mais seulement quatre histoires."⁵

The film is an artifact of the conflicted, transitional moment that was the late 1970s. Schérer has written that Soukaz's films express both the exuberance of the *après-mai* generation (Hocquenghem's term for those who came of age after May 1968) and the "glaciation of sensibilities and human relationships" that was to follow, during what Félix Guattari referred to as *les années d'hiver* ("the years of winter").⁶ Perhaps then we are right to think of Soukaz's films, *Race d'Ep* included, as autumnal in both their historical conjuncture and their political concerns. In them, we can sense the waning of the halcyon, early-1970s days of gay liberation and the mounting chill as the commercialization and assimilation of gay life sets in (though something far more chilling was on the horizon). In his 1977 book *La Dérive homosexuelle* ("The Homosexual Drift"), Hocquenghem expressed profound concern over what was

becoming of the gay revolution in the face of a late-1970s “movement of closure which is founding new sexual bourgeoisies.”⁷

We feel the contradictions of the era most clearly in the fourth and final part of the film. Here Hocquenghem plays a gay man who, while hanging out in a bar with his friends, decides to cruise an attractive blond foreigner who has wandered in off the street to buy cigarettes. As we watch their encounter, we hear two competing, retrospective accounts of what transpired that night. The off-camera voice corresponding to the blond man is that of a straight-identified American businessman who somehow took a wrong turn and ended up spending the night talking and walking, but no more, with a French gay guy. By contrast, the off-camera voice corresponding to Hocquenghem’s character is that of a queen (“folle”) telling a tall tale of sexual conquest over the phone to a friend the next day. But only the American’s version of events seems to correspond to what we actually see happening on the screen.

According to the American’s account, he spent the night listening to the Frenchman hold forth on queer life and politics. However queeny his voiceover, the Frenchman seems to the American, as well as to us watching the film, to be calmer than the other bar denizens, and somehow both of the milieu and apart from it. The American says he is touched by the Frenchman’s expressed desire to resist assimilation and to maintain a connection and identification with more marginalized queer people. (The Frenchman seems to have the option of assimilating into mainstream society in a way that the other queens do not.) Being familiar with the more visible and commercialized gay culture of New York, the American finds the Frenchman’s adherence to the role of Genet-ian outsider quaint. The pathos of the scene is heightened by the fact that

Hocquenghem is clearly portraying an activist-intellectual much like himself, yet he is discoursing about homosexuality to a straight foreigner who, while mildly curious, on one level couldn't care less.

As we watch Hocquenghem's character struggle with his conflicted, self-designated role of *porte-parole* ("spokesperson") for the gay community, a structuring logic of the film falls into place. From Gloeden to Hirschfeld to Hocquenghem, the film traces a historical lineage of privileged, cis-gendered gay white men who play the role of patron-doctor-writer-activist on behalf of more marginalized queer subjects. In its historical and narrative arc, *Race d'Ep* seems to testify to the passing of this paternalistic dynamic. Perhaps the film suggests that a more pluralistic time is at hand, in terms of who gets to speak as and on behalf of queer subjects. But it also suggests the dawning of a more banal era, as queer relationships rooted in differences of age, race, gender, and class are pushed to the margins by a mainstreaming movement anxious to present affirming images of gay citizenship and relationships not riven by imbalances of power and knowledge.

At the end of the film, the photographs that we see onscreen are oddly mute. They present an image of two men happily walking together side by side yet seldom if ever touching. The men are close in age, non-erotic in their behavior, and rather normative in their expressions of gender. And in the final moments of the film, when they have parted from each other presumably never to meet again, we watch as the photographic record of their encounter floats away, unmarked and unremarked, down the Seine.

¹ Dominique Noguez, “Une Ecole du corps?” *Politique Hebdo* 287 (Oct. 31, 1977): 40.

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² Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (London: Routledge, 1990), 223–28.

³ *Ibid.*, 223–24.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 1: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 59.

⁵ Lionel Soukaz, “Anti-stress et brownie sans crème,” interview by Jean-François Garsi, *Cinemas Homosexuels*, ed. Jean-François Garsi (Paris: Papyrus, 1983), 51–53.

⁶ René Schérer, “Lionel Soukaz, une vitalité désespérée” (no date), <http://www.pointligneplan.com/lionel-soukaz-une-vitalite-desesperee>

⁷ The phrase is taken from Bill Marshall, *Guy Hocquenghem: Beyond Gay Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 11. In the first chapter of his book, Marshall usefully traces the trajectory of Hocquenghem’s political thought.