

# LIGHT MANOEUVRES

Both celebrated and overlooked, the cinematographer and director Babette Mangolte has quietly been producing cinematic landmarks

By Scott MacDonald

For older cineastes dedicated to a broad sense of film history, it can seem strange that younger generations need to be reminded of the accomplishments of the independent filmmaker Babette Mangolte – though even in her most productive years, some of her most significant contributions were ignored. She was, and remains, best known for her work as a cinematographer, first in her native France, then in the United States, where she has lived since the 1970s. Indeed, it is difficult to think of another cinematographer working outside Hollywood and other national film industries during the 1970s and early 1980s who is as sought-after. Her contributions as director of photography enliven many classics of the era: Chantal Akerman's *Hotel Monterey* (1973), *News from Home* (1976) and the epic *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975); Yvonne Rainer's *Lives of Performers* (1972) and *Film about a Woman Who...* (1974); Michael Snow's *'Rameau's Nephew' by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974); Jackie Raynal's *New York Story* (1979) and *Hotel New York* (1983); and Sally Potter's *The Gold Diggers* (1983). The no-bullshit, minimalist elegance of Mangolte's composition and chiaroscuro came to be understood, at least in New York (during the height of the Vietnam era, when self-indulgence seemed politically oblivious), as a model of Downtown Manhattan cinematic chic.

As well as her cinematographic work, Mangolte supported herself by making still photographs of Downtown dance and performance art; but she was also focused on doing her own films, producing four noteworthy features between 1975 and 1983. The 1970s were a period when many independent filmmakers were exploring the fundamental elements of cinema, including the physical apparatus (the zoom lens, for example, in Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity*), as well as the nature of cinematic performance and spectatorship – imagining that their explorations might constitute new approaches to cinematic art. Mangolte's first feature was part of this moment: *What Maisie Knew* (1975) is a riff on the Henry James novel, in which the reader experiences what a young girl, Maisie, understands and doesn't understand about her parents' divorce and the new relationships in their lives. In Mangolte's version, the filmmaker, or her camera, is the innocent gazing on complex lives, in this case various tableaux (enacted by Mangolte's friends and colleagues: Rainer, Philip Glass, Kate Manheim...) that together create a loosely structured narrative. What 'Maisie' discovers is elements of cinema, including the way in which the spectator tends to transform any series of sequences into narrative. A second feature – *The Camera: Je* (1977) – focuses on Mangolte's work as a photographer: in the film's opening section, the protagonist photographer films portraits of people; in the second, she

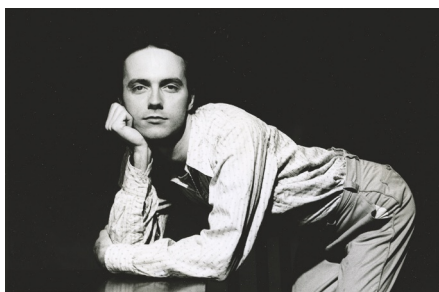


Figures in a landscape: *The Sky on Location* (1982)

scans the city for good compositions; and at the end she evaluates her contact sheets. The film's rumination on the work of still versus motion photography is particularly dramatic in the brief moments of darkness each time the still camera's shutter is heard "making the photograph" – the only moments when the image is invisible.

Mangolte's most engaging features – *The Cold Eye* (aka *My Darling, Be Careful*, 1980) and *The Sky on Location* (1982) – are entirely different from one another. In *The Cold Eye*, as in Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1946), the camera's gaze is the first-person gaze of the protagonist, in this case, a young painter, Cathy, as she ponders the nature of art-making and speaks

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*The Camera: Je* (1977)

with friends. Cathy's point of view is literally ours, but at times we find her, as Mangolte has said, "a pretty unbearable character" – this distance between Cathy's sensibility and our own generates the energy of the film. At its conclusion, the credits include the subtitle "an education re-visited", reflecting the fact that the film is a fictionalised version of Mangolte's early years in New York City: the character of Gertrude, "an art critic in her late forties" who "knows everybody", is a homage to Annette Michelson, who was Mangolte's mentor at the time, helping her find her footing in the Downtown art scene.

By the early 1980s, a new cinematic feminism seemed the crucial issue for many female (and some male) filmmakers – and as a result, Mangolte's decision to make a feature film about, of all things, the landscape of the American West, received little attention. But *The Sky on Location* is an early landmark in the substantial tradition of landscape filmmakers (Larry Gottheim, James Benning, Peter Hutton...) produced in recent decades by the continuing onslaught of modernisation. Inspired by the art historian Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture* (1980), a groundbreaking history of 19th-century American landscape painting – and perhaps by her own lifelong fascination with light – Mangolte drove nearly 20,000 miles, crisscrossing the West over four seasons to produce a visually gorgeous panorama. In the voiceover soundtrack, clearly recorded in a studio, Mangolte and two others (Bruce Boston and Honora Ferguson) consider the idea of wilderness – an idea, Mangolte has said, "engrained in American culture but totally bewildering to Europeans".

Her own severest critic, Mangolte has done little to trumpet her films' importance. But she remains active; her website lists her recent work, most of it documenting the work of other artists. And hopefully her early work will soon receive the attention it has always deserved. 📍

**i** **Jocelyne Saab and Babette Mangolte will attend screenings of their work at the Essay Film Festival in London, 24 March – 1 April. See [www.essayfilmfestival.com](http://www.essayfilmfestival.com)**

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