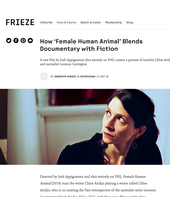
How 'Female Human Animal' Blends Documentary with Fiction

A new film by Josh Appignanesi deal secretly on VHS, comes a portrait of novelist Chloe Aridjis and unstable Lawrence Carrington

BY JENNIFER HOGGIE ON WEDNESDAY, 27 MAY 18



Directed by Josh Appignanesi and shot secretly on VHS, *Female Human Animal* (2018) stars the writer Chloe Aridjis playing a writer called Chloe Aridjis, who is courting the Tate retrospective of the surrealist artist Lawrence Carrington (Jude Rotondo) (left) in 2013, with Francesca Mazzucchelli (this starring Kim Hoonmann and featuring appearances from contemporary artists including Devorah Sperber, Stewart Home, Juliet Jacques, Tom McCarthy, Adam Thirlwell, Marina Warner and Gaseen Zaidi, the film is scored by Andy Cooke with new music from Tourist and Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark (OMD).

Jennifer Hoggie met with Chloe Aridjis, Josh Appignanesi and Juliet Jacques in September on a Lisbon evening in London's Soho to discuss the film's themes and preoccupations.

Jennifer Hoggie *What was the evolution of Female Human Animal?*

Josh Appignanesi I had recently made *The Man Man* (2014), which Chloe is also in, which is more or less a documentary about me and my wife Devorah trying to have children. We took a creative approach to telling the story which made us wonder if we could do a film simply by shooting what's in front of you. After all, the most interesting things about our lives is our time. But how do you represent an inner life with observable reality? The only way to a man's I / mental is continue working in a way that dug down deep into the unconscious.

Chloe Aridjis These questions about how to represent an inner life were circling in Josh's mind when I started working on the Lawrence Carrington show for Tate Liverpool with Francesca Mazzucchelli in 2013, and he asked if he could follow me with the camera and film us at Tate and at openings and various other events. Gradually, he developed more of a narrative.

JH *Was it an actor for you scenes to be very relaxed in front of the camera?*

CA I'd felt very natural, so both in a friend. He ended up writing that script since he's been a lot of footage, but I never read it before we began shooting, so every scene was fresh and spontaneous.

JH *So, you didn't write any of the script?*

CA No, but it was inspired by conversations we had.

JH *In the film, you're Chloe Aridjis, of course, but you're also playing Chloe Aridjis as a kind of fiction.*

CA It was important that I was playing a character, or a version of myself. The film Chloe is more socially awkward than I am, but it was fascinating for me to see how a male friend portrayed my inner life.

JH *What was your relationship to Lawrence Carrington?*

CA He was a close friend of mine in Mexico City. I've written about him and was close to her work, but I wouldn't say she was a huge influence on me. Although, that said, we didn't set out to make a film about surrealism, but it gradually developed into one.

JH *Josh, in the documentary footage of Carrington that you see in the film, much of what she says is related in the narrative, as to what she's says. You're using a semi-fiction film, but it still seems weird! How did that idea shape the film?*

Mary Hoonmann in *Female Human Animal*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Josh Appignanesi

JA When I found the footage, it changed the direction of the film, the became a sort of *Citizen Kane* documentaries between woman and about similar versus outside.

JH *How did Chloe herself shape your approach?*

JA Chloe is a close friend but she's also a very romantic figure and she comes with a whole aesthetic. To represent Chloe's life, we needed to include her friends and her art-looking, and so some of the film's scenes.

CA *Good friends performed versions of themselves.*

JH *Juliet, you of course are one of the friends or characters in the film – did you feel you were performing a version of Juliet Jacques?*

Juliet Jacques As Chloe said, the film begins like a documentary and then shifts into fiction. For example, an early scene, where Chloe and I are taking part in a North Israeli, is real. And in another, I'm talking to a couple at an art gallery and Tom and what I do, and I rehearse my transition moment. Tiates from three years ago and say, 'Oh, it's very fashionable nowadays'. At the time, I was genuinely left up with the repetitive conversation I was having around my book. Other parts were more fictional I have going to parties, but I had to go to a lot for the film with Chloe's friend Philippa. In one scene I wear a necklet not Barbier box, which took me about six months to get over. I did have mixed up.

JA I wanted that scene to reflect how we dress up to go out and perform. In the solo scenes with Chloe, she is very interior – we obviously all have different ethics to ourselves, in terms of who we are publicly and who we are when we're alone. In the scene, Sophie Calle was definitely someone I had in mind when I was making the film.

CA When Josh first came to my home for dinner with the psychoanalyst Dorian Lasalle, Dorian and of my house and all the objects in it. I've never seen someone whom unconscious is so much on display.

Female Human Animal, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Josh Appignanesi

JH *Chloe, you were a lot of THE topic running over like a line-item travelling. Josh, is it just a coincidence that you shot the film in 1950 when Chloe is such a fan of the medium?*

JA No, it's not a coincidence. I love the nostalgic, romantic feeling VHS gives, it's the format of our youth, it's an aesthetic that spin someone disenchanted with the here and now, so it reflected a feeling that Chloe has that she's out of time.

CA Using VHS also created a lot of comedy moments, we'll be in the middle of a scene and the VHS camera would give up the ghost.

JH *Josh, given the technical limitations, did you ever regret doing it on VHS?*

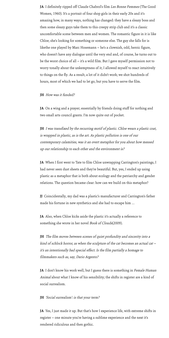
JA Yes! There are scenes where the light is so great I wonder if we wouldn't see anything, but we managed to make it good enough for the big screen using media you couldn't do five years ago.

JH *The scene is deeply atmospheric and distinctive. How did it come about?*

JA It's composed by a close friend of Chloe's, Andy Cooke. The track at the end is *The Daughter of the Mountain* which was written for the film by Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, which we'll release as a single. There's also music by Tourist, and I found the grounds music we provide, contacted the musicians and they gave us permission.

JH *Chloe, what's the significance of the song you sing towards the end?*

CA Josh asked me to sing something in Spanish and I chose my favourite song from where I was a child in Mexico, it's about a female revolutionary. My mother told me that once I sang it in my sleep.



Female Human Animal, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Josh Appignanesi

JH *Josh, how long did the film take to make?*

JA We shot it in bits over three years, piggybacking on real life events such as openings and parties and somewhat staff.

CA We joked we could keep adding scenes so life continued ...

JA I got to a point where I was editing along the way but there were narrative gaps, so in the end I wrote a standard 90-minute script to pull it all together.

JH *What or who were your main influences?*

JA I definitely ripped off Claude Chabrol's film *Les Bonnes Femmes* (The Good Women, 1960). It's a portrait of four shop girls in their early 20s and it's amazing how, in many ways, nothing has changed: they have a dream home and they wonder about gross sales there to this creepy strip club and a lot of sexual harassment. Chabrol's film was a reference point for the tone of the film, Chloe, also looking for romantic or amorous ties. The pop-up shop in Soho is Lisette one played by Mary Hoonmann – he's a feminist, cold, heroin figure, who doesn't have any dialogue until the very end of, and she's a great actress so in the worst choice of all – it's a wild film. But I guess myself permission we've merely usually about the subtexpressions of it's allowed myself to ease internally to things on the fly. As a result, a lot of it didn't work, we shot hundreds of hours, most of which we had to let go, but you have to serve the film.

JH *How was it funded?*

JA On a wing and a prayer, essentially by friends doing stuff for nothing and two small arts council grants. You can quite out of pocket.

JH *I was visualised by the encroaching world of plants. Chloe wears a plastic coat, is wrapped in plastic, as is the set. An absent pollinator is one of her contemporary substitutes, was it your metaphor for you about how manual up our relationship to such other and the environment?*

JA When I first went to Tate to film Chloe scrutinizing Carrington's paintings I had some ones that shows and Rachel's beautiful. But, yes, I ended up using plants as a metaphor that is both about sexuality and the particularly and gender relations. The question because clear. Sure can we build on this metaphor?

JJ Coincidentally, my dad was a plant's manufacturer and Carrington's father made his fortune in non-sentimental and she had a escape from.

JA Also, when Chloe kicks under the plastic it's actually a reference to something she wrote in her novel *Book of Clouds* (2009).

JH *The film moves between scenes of quasi-psychodrama and semantic into a kind of archival footage, as when the sculptors of the set becomes an actual set – it's an intentionally that special effect, is the film partially a homage to filmmakers such as, say, Dziga Vertov?*

JA I don't know his work well, but I guess there is something in *Female Human Animal* about what I know of his sensibility, the ability to organize on a kind of social revolution.

JH *'Social revolution' is that your tone?*

JA Yes, I just made it up. But that's how I experience life, with someone shifts in organic – one minute you're having a sublime experience and the next it's outdoor ridiculous and then golfer.

Female Human Animal, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Josh Appignanesi

JH *Would you be able to make this film if Carrington was still alive?*

CA Her son seen it and said it was definitely in keeping with her independent spirit.

JH *So, in that sense, it's a film about friendship ...*

JA Absolutely. The only professional actors were the main creepy guy, the agent and the director. But almost everyone in the film has a connection to Chloe. She knew Mary Hoonmann's Berlin – he's a very well-known stage actor – but this was the first time he's acted in English.

CA The first time I saw him was in 2005, my first month living in Berlin. I went to see a four-hour production of Marat and Marguerite and he was one of Marguerite's/Marat's incarnations. He crawled about the stage in coffee shower – and it was somewhat hysterical. He was so striking and wired and baroque and then I saw him here at a club all dressed in white.

JA He's a natural comedian in the role of a trained man but he is also able to access an intense, sinister regime.

JH *Nice attractive and repulsive all in one.*

JA Well, that's what I think about men and myself and the male gaze. I don't want to label the film 'queer cinema' but it is indebted to cult scene making where sexual and pathology and so on is historically associated with marginal sensations. Chloe and the character she's obsessed with are not 'others', they're when heterosexual people trying to get it on. But Mariana was in the other and I wanted to show a science side to heterosexuality as opposed to the non-normative, which in the film is all completely fine.

JJ When we were making the film, I got me thinking about the films I like, such as early Werkel and Paul Morissey's films and the queer German filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim. His films also sit somewhere between documentary and fiction and they're full of semi-improvised scenes and dialogue and that to me is a fundamental characteristic of a lot of underground and queer cinema. The film also reacted me on the level that the bedrock of its plot is the dark side of heterosexuality.

JA Perhaps a queering of heterosexuality is what's needed now.

Female Human Animal premiered at Sheffield DOC/FEST earlier this year. It will have its London premiere at **Cinema Nova** on 7 October, followed by a discussion with Josh Appignanesi, Chloe Aridjis and Sarah Dunant. Further screenings across the UK through October and November at **FemaleHumanAnimal.com**

Main image: *Female Human Animal*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: Josh Appignanesi

JENNIFER HOGGIE
Jennifer Hoggie is a writer who lives in London. Her book The Women and the Women – Rebellion, Revolution and Reaction in Mexico City (Bloomsbury) is forthcoming in 2019. She is also a lecturer in Theatre, Film and Creative Writing at Birkbeck – where she teaches and also plays sketch.

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