Beatrice Gibson & Laida Lertxundi: Uncanny Resonances

The films by Laida Lertxundi (b. 1981, Spain) and Beatrice Gibson (b. 1978, UK) share a certain aura of mystery. "I suppose I'm looking for the enigmatic, something that catches you, some drama, even a story," Gibson says. Similarly, Lertxundi's films present us with unexpected landscapes and indescribable characters whose relationships to one another are made suspect by her idiosyncratic use of diegetic sound. Both artists propose films that read as open narratives, but emphasize the tensions between construction and reality inherent to the process of filmmaking.

Laida Lertxundi makes films in and around Los Angeles, the city where she studied under James Benning and Thom Andersen, and where she has been living and working for a number of years. Shot under the blue Californian sky, her films feature the same topography as Hollywood cinema. Appropriately, Lertxundi questions cinematic conventions of representation and storytelling in her work at the same time that she proposes new associations between sound and image. An ocean and a continent apart, in London, Beatrice Gibson — who rose to prominence in 2008 with her debut film A Necessary Music, not long after Lertxundi's breakthrough Footnotes to a House of Love (2007) — addresses similar formal and conceptual concerns, often shaped by the material constraints and aesthetic properties of working with 16mm film. Beyond the differences in the specific subjects of their films, the underlying themes in their work — speculative narrative, film as landscape, sound as material, the production process, collaborative practice — resonate in an uncanny way.

The Argentinean writer Adolfo Bioy Casares — a friend and colleague of Jorge Luis Borges — constitutes one of their many shared reference points. Gibson uses excerpts from Bioy Casares' novel The Invention of Morel for the narration of A Necessary Music, a science fiction film about modernist social housing on Roosevelt Island in New York. The influence of Bioy Casares can also be felt in the overall mood of mystery in The Tiger's Mind (2012), which was also filmed against modernist architecture, a Brutalist English villa by Denys Lasdun. The enigmatic building, the repetition of speech, the absence of actors, and the roles that objects (and place) assume as protagonists, are some of the motifs that Gibson may have subconsciously borrowed from the novel.

While The Invention of Morel could be described as an abstract science fiction novel, The Tiger's Mind is an abstract crime thriller based on an experimental score by British composer Cornelius Cardew in which six characters (the tiger, the wind, the circle, and a girl called Amy) interact with each other musically, according to the relationships outlined in the score. In Gibson's film, the six characters are represented by the props, the music, the foil, the special effects, the author, and the narrator respectively.

For her most recent film We Had the Experience but Missed the Meaning (2014) Laida Lertxundi recorded one of her students in San Diego reciting passages from Todos los hombres son iguales (All Men Are Equal), a short story by Bioy Casares about an Argentinian widow who is having an affair with a young man. He begins to arrive later and later to their meetings, so she has him followed because she thinks he is seeing someone else. It turns out that he just prefers to drive the car that she has loaned to him. As the narrator in the book points out: 'Love ... among honest people is never innocent.'

Born in Bilbao, but formed as a filmmaker in the United States (first at Bard College where Peter Hutton and Peggy Ahwesh were her tutors, then later at CalArts), Lertxundi's work has gradually become more bilingual and more comfortable with its dual identity, Cry When It Happens (2010) also exists under the Spanish title Llorando Te Pase. In fact the film opens with the Spanish title and closes with the English one. Since then, Spanish has slowly gained importance in Lertxundi's films. In Utokor: Either/Or (2013) the sounds of 23-F, the 1981 attempted coup d'état in Spain, are immediately recognizable to a Spanish audience. Lertxundi, who was born two months after the failed coup, describes the film as echoing what she heard and sensed from her pregnant mother's belly, and even though it was filming in Norway, it feels closer to her native Basque country than any of her American films. In We Had the Experience but Missed the Meaning (a phrase borrowed from a poem by T.S. Eliot), the title is English but the voice-over narration is entirely Span-
Both Gibson and Lertwund’s films, although they are never shown in their films, are characterized by a sense of space and time and by the use of light and shadow. As Genevieve Yue notes, Lertwund’s camerawork is reminiscent of the dilapidated rooms in Gibson’s films, “crossing the expanse of barren space and time in search of the unknown.” The camera in Lertwund’s film, “The Tiger’s Mind,” is a familiar figure in her films, “crossing the expanse of barren space and time in search of the unknown.” The camera in Lertwund’s film, “The Tiger’s Mind,” is a familiar figure in her films, “crossing the expanse of barren space and time in search of the unknown.” The camera in Lertwund’s film, “The Tiger’s Mind,” is a familiar figure in her films, “crossing the expanse of barren space and time in search of the unknown.” The camera in Lertwund’s film, “The Tiger’s Mind,” is a familiar figure in her films, “crossing the expanse of barren space and time in search of the unknown.”