

# "Look at the sky. Is there no constellation called 'Rider'?" On Pauline Julier's Practice

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“Sieh den Himmel. Heisst kein Sternbild ‘Reiter’”?

– the title is a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Die Sonette an Orpheus*  
[Sonnets to Orpheus], (I, 11, 1923).

Making art films has become more and more difficult and, therefore, daring and adventurous. Why more difficult? Because – over the last decades and increasingly so – we have been truly absorbing films and moving images almost daily. We have been learning to see the world through the lenses of cameras and are much more aware both of the space film can produce and of what to expect there. Also, we have grown used to the voices that are often superposed onto images by artists and film makers. Somehow, these voices become like surrogates of ourselves reading a text, making the effort of a commitment that goes beyond the action of just watching. We have also witnessed a proliferation of mainstream films using similar tactics and methods to art films and video art. All in all, we have become a better audience, and yet one increasingly difficult to surprise. Something else happened as well. We have become impatient: we do not enjoy long durée that much and find it more and more difficult to soak in a substance, preferring to jump from one thing to the next. Social media, alongside many other factors, conditioned us to anticipate shorter and “sparking” content.

I just wanted to share these remarks to be able to adequately address the adventurousness of the work of Pauline Julier. An adventurousness that consists in taking all these factors into account and turning each problem – one by one – into a new possibility for the genre and also for the causes her films thematize.

There is a trait that cinema and fire share: the imagination of movement. In that sense Pauline Julier's films, videos and installations partake in the effort of reconnecting the moving image with the question of the fundamental constituents of the world, the “elements” – as pre-Socratic philosophy would put it. What does this mean? That a film allows us to go deep into the basic principles that constitute the material world, humans included. What are these elements? They are culturally diverse. While in the West we only name air, water, earth, fire and aether, in Eastern traditions, metal was added. Indeed, matter and how it emerges in the filmic matter is a very important element in the epistemology created by Pauline Julier. Her films, while demonstrating the need for systematization associated with all rational thought – because of its sequential narrative flow – also reveal and insist on the collapse of any system in the face of the infinite richness of experience.





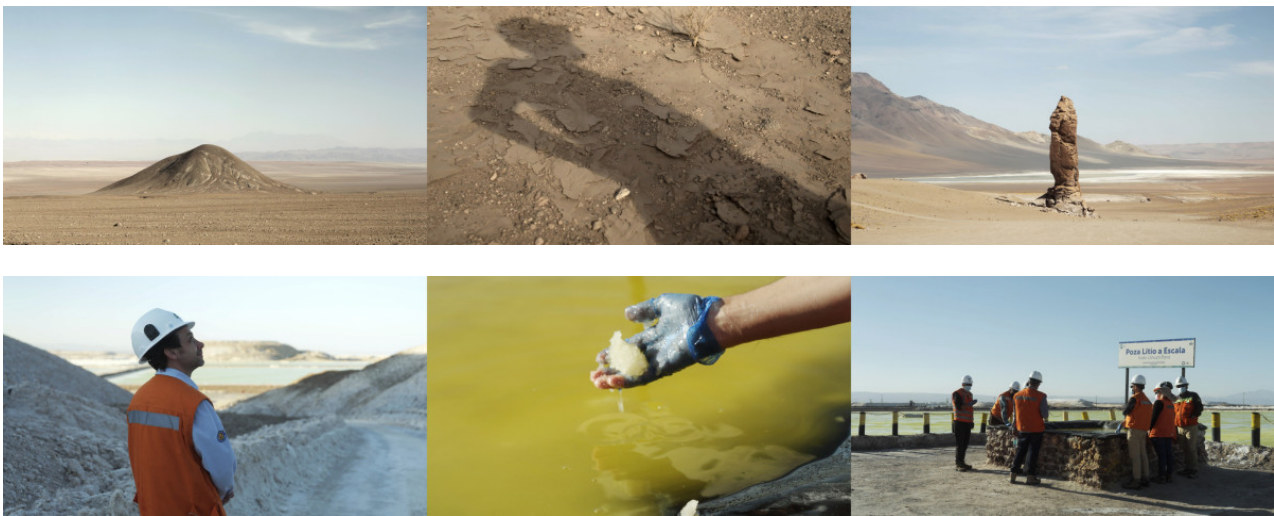
1 / 4

Pauline Julier et Nicolas Chapoulier, *Titanic*, 2021

Film, HD, 4K, stéréo, 12 min 34 sec

Videostills © Pauline Julier, Nicolas Chapoulier

Take for example her short film *Titanic*, made in 2021 as a result of a commission by the Grand Théâtre de Genève together with Nicolas Chapoulier. The film is set in a forest, taking nature as the ground to perform life as a force, and not as a habit. Still very influenced by the pandemic, the work has the energy of a folktale, it inscribes itself in the domain of the fables. In order to address death and a danger without any bodily evidence – the virus – the film shows parabolic images that convey the laws of wisdom. What are these laws? The laws that are able to assure us that after disappearance appearance may occur. That is why the armoured man is there and the older couple kissing and the violin music playing, to say that the sense of time is not linear but quantic. Different times coexist in the same space. But our minds, our biology and even films are not made this way: it is very difficult for us to grasp a multiplicity of epochs being present at once. That is why fiction and its constant recreation is so important, because fictions are rarely sensible to the consequences of logical thinking and distinctions.



1 / 2

In *Follow the Water* (2022), a more recent three channel video-film installation (co-directed with Clément Postec), Julier addresses the paths of water and mining – lithium mining – in the Atacama Desert in Chile. The desert of Atacama is full of myths and all reveal the relationship of a territory to water. It seems paradoxical – at first sight – to meet people of the desert and talk only about water. But where else to address its existence, its presence and absence if not there? I clearly remember my first conversations with inhabitants of the desert and the practice of fishing for fog. Indigenous and vernacular inhabitants of Atacama had, for centuries and centuries, tried to catch clouds of fog with a cloth that would retain the precious liquid of life and transfer it from the clouds to Earth and to their thirsty mouths. Apparently in the desert there are plant species that only bloom once in a century. Water is here like a life clock, ticking silently under the surface and making realities emerge that we would never even suspect. On the other side of life there is mining. The desert contains many minerals and it has been the victim of permanent extraction and pollution for centuries. Julier's film addresses a particular mineral: lithium – the magic mineral that was supposed to fix the unbalanced mind but that is used for many industrial applications too. The film has an elegiac

character stressing the metamorphic capability of the medium, of allowing the viewer, through these three screens, to comprehend the many changes that life forms undergo. Water and lithium become reciprocal motives. They are not the same, but in the film their stories influence one another – in a sort of *Wechselwirkung* – a reciprocal effect. Actually, this film becomes a great opportunity to understand Pauline Julier’s insistence on how elements influence other elements and create an entangled system of storytelling that influences the nature of the images in her work itself. Indeed, her image-making is grand, assertive, unapologetic. As a result, we feel the embrace of a profound visual and physical imagination imbued with poetic experience that transcends the subject. The subject here is the ecological and the climate emergency itself.



Pauline Julier, *Follow the Water*, 2022  
Vue d'exposition, Institut d'art contemporain, Villeurbanne/Rhône-Alpes, France  
Photo © Thomas Lannes

*Follow the Water* (2022) addresses, through different testimonies, lithium mining in Chile’s Salar de Atacama, a practice with a long and controversial history, especially when it comes to the local indigenous peoples. Julier confronts us with a material and how it embodies the impossibility of capitalism to face the requirements of a proper energy transition: how capitalism refuses to take indigenous voices seriously, how it refuses to recognize their rights, their territories and the constraints they face. The film reflects the

agreements between mining companies and local communities and how these agreements may benefit certain individuals, while also generating inter- and intra-community tensions over these issues. All along we sense the main concern with water scarcity, the tension around the survival of this unique ecosystem's biological diversity. The images take us through different moods – consensus and tension, beauty and danger, exploitation – unveiling the asymmetrical patterns of constraint and opportunity. Why so? Because, paradoxically, lithium is a key element for energy storage technologies and thus the ethical and ecological consequences of using it are hugely problematic. While popular opinion says mining lithium from salt flats is relatively “clean” compared to more visually-shocking open-pit mining, short-term and longer-term impacts are in fact less well-known.

There is no simple answer to these questions. But the film is there to expose the agency of the territory in itself, the agony of the materials – mineral and water –, the agency of those to whom the land belongs.

The work of Pauline Julier tells us one thing: film has the capacity to orient the human senses within the horizon of after-the-Modern alienation, introducing a sense of values and questions that push us towards a sentient film, a sentient world. Film is, in her practice, the exercise of seeking orientations without reducing these to images or illustrative examples of ideas and narratives. Film activates sentiments where the social, political, poetic, psychological and philosophical aspects dance together.

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