

**Science Is FICTION: 23 Films by Jean Painlevé**

Celebrating the wonderful underwater documentaries of the early twentieth century French marine biologist and cinematic pioneer, Jean Painlevé, the selection includes sixteen of his “popular” films; two of his science research films; four science films he produced but did not direct; and the 1938 color animation Bluebeard, which he produced.

Son of mathematician and sometime French Prime Minister, Paul Painlevé, Jean Painlevé was a precocious scientific polymath and keen cinematic experimenter. Drawn to surrealism and dadaism, he crossed professional paths with Man Ray, Guillaume Apollinaire and Georges Franju, and supposedly served as ant wrangler on Un Chien Andalou. A friend of Artaud, Vigo, Eisenstein and later the French New Wave, his artistic and scientific passions merged in his pioneering development of underwater cameras, slow- and fast-motion photography and microscopic lenses – developments that allowed the creation of the aquatic nature shorts that are probably the best-known of his 200-odd films.

Throughout his career, Painlevé showed an acute interest in reproductive behavior that runs counter to the conventional expectations of human society. A compelling sequence in The Sea Horse (1933), shows the male of the species, in accordance with its unusual breeding behavior, giving birth to hundreds of hatchlings, while Sea Ballerinas (1956), which is about starfish, How Some Jellyfish Are Born (1960) and The Love Life of the Octopus (1967) throw all kinds of spanners in the works of expected gender definitions and sexual behavior. Even more beguiling are the subjects of Acera, or The Witches’ Dance (1972), – tiny

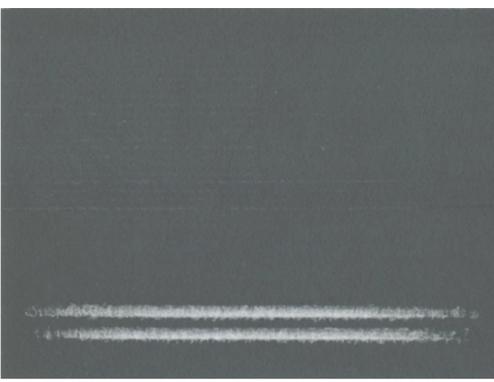
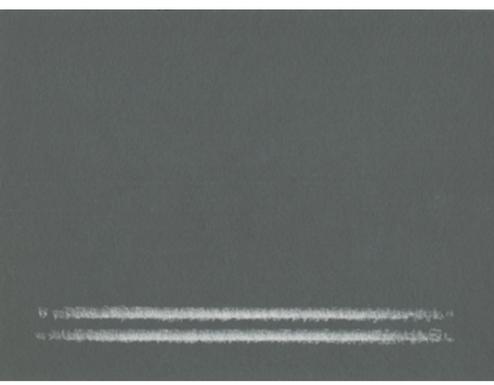
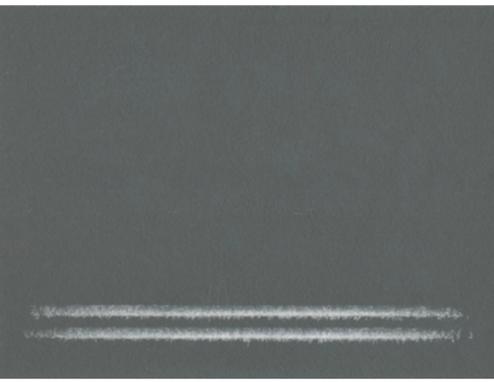
little sea-snails whose slimy bodies are captured, in intense close-up, writhing in sinuous dancing motions and propelling themselves through the water with the help of a fan sprouting from their bodies like a jellyfish’s carapace or a tutu. Their mating takes a particular wild-card quality from the fact that each snail is both male and female and can engage in sex in both roles simultaneously.

From the start, Painlevé incorporated humor into his work—both wry, understated narrative comments (“Shrimping is the most beautiful and most enviable of sports”) and absurd sight gags and jokes (a crustacean “conductor” directing with its antennae a dancing feather star). He was also fond of making analogies between his underwater subjects and examples from the everyday life of his audience. Most frequent was his use of anthropomorphizing: almost everything he saw had some human parallel, from the “labor pains” of the male seahorse, to the courtship rituals of the octopus, to the “vanity” of the hyas. But the two related aspects of his films, which continue to give them a power and fascination today, are their strong basis in science and their sheer beauty. Painlevé was a true poet of the documentary and these truly magical explorations literally have to be seen to be believed.

Stefana McClure



Science is FICTION, Jean Painlevé  
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