

Montage Against All Odds: Antonia Majaca and Eyal Sivan in Conversation

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In 2010, Eyal Sivan's *Documentary Moments* formed part of the first Berlin Documentary Forum. This four-part program of screenings and on-stage encounters with filmmakers and theorists explored what Sivan describes as the "rebirth of documentary."¹ It is indicative that the first event – or the first "take," as Sivan puts it – was entitled "Towards *Night and Fog*." "Towards" here implies that Alain Resnais' canonical film on the Holocaust was to be interrogated through the prism of what preceded it, both cinematically and historically. In 1953, just two years prior to *Night and Fog* (1955), Alain Resnais and Chris Marker made *Les Statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*, 1953), an essay film commissioned by the pan-African journal *Présence Africaine*. Reflecting on the reception of African art in Europe, the film advanced an early and compelling critique of colonialism. Also in the period preceding *Night and Fog*, Resnais made a number of short films in painters' studios, such as *Felix Labisse* (1947), *Christine Boomeester* (1947) and *Portrait De Henri Goetz* (1947), as well as *Guernica* (1950), a poetic lamentation pondering the horror of the massacre as depicted by Picasso. The fragments of these portraits of modern painters were screened in the same session of the *Documentary Moment* and analyzed by Marie-José Mondzain, Adrian Rifkin, and Eyal Sivan in the light of Resnais' later work. The next step of Sivan's dialectical procedure involved a juxtaposition of Resnais' work with *Le Regard du bourreau* (*Henchman Glance*, 2008), a film made by Chris Marker as a response to the controversy surrounding Sivan's *The Specialist* (1999), a film

inspired by Hannah Arendt's 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and drawn from the footage recorded during the trial.

In outlining this cinematic triangulation already in the first “take” of *Documentary Moments*, Sivan sets the stage for weaving together the scattered fragments of a complicated picture, adumbrating the lurking visual narrative of the continuity of extreme historical violence. The curatorial maneuver of *Documentary Moments* – in which cinematic intertextuality propels a particular form of performative montage in front of a live audience – in the final instance creates a blueprint from which the spectator is given an opportunity to assemble a map of the fundamental historical, political, and epistemic entanglements between the history of documentary cinema and the systemic violence that marks the project of modernity.

Sivan's project for the second edition of the Berlin Documentary Forum in 2012 was *Montage Interdit*, a web-based work that can be described as an “archive-documentary.”² This piece utilizes specially developed software in order to experiment with the possibility of interactive documentary montage.¹ Its zoom-based interface enables the user to click through and navigate two intersecting layers of film clips, predominantly from classic works by Jean-Luc Godard, including *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1959), *Alphaville* (1965), *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (*Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, 1966), and *Comment ça va* (1978), among others. The work also includes interviews the author conducted with thinkers, filmmakers, and philosophers, including Ella Shohat, Gil Anidjar, and Tariq Ramadan. In many ways, *Montage Interdit* is a contemporary pledge of fidelity to Godard's politics of montage, from which one could draw the essential contours of Sivan's documentary politics in general. But the possibility of montage as a political act is taken a step further: the process of editing is

¹ Made with InterLace software developed by Robert M. Ochshorn

transformed from a tool of filmmaking into a form itself. Marking his content with tags such as Algeria, Anti-Semitism, Arab, Jew, Christianity, Montage/Image, Genocide, Native American, Shoah/Naqba, etc., Sivan turns montage into a complex form that thinks and speaks, generating a dialogical configuration in which the spectator is invited to assume a decisive role in “finishing” the piece by undertaking the editing herself.

In *Montage Interdit*, as in *Documentary Moments*, Sivan gathers a community, in the sense of Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of the “inoperative community.”³ Community, as Nancy has shown, drawing from Georges Bataille, comes about only against the desire for homogeneity. *Montage Interdit* is an assemblage of images and words drawn together with the aim of pursuing a taboo montage, one that allows one to bring the Jew and the Arab into the same picture. Although the title of the project brings to mind André Bazin’s well-known essay “Forbidden Montage,” Sivan’s project could not be further from Bazin’s understanding of montage as a cinematic means to an end. We encounter the “forbidden montage” in both of Sivan’s projects not as a prohibition (as in Bazin’s instructional usage of the term), but quite the contrary: “forbidden” in this case points to exactly that which must be done in order for montage to become political. In other words, the only worthwhile form of montage is the one that is forbidden, the one that is against all odds. Filmic continuity is rejected in order to reveal another continuity: the chilling historical continuity of carnage and dehumanizing violence.

The following conversation took place in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in April 2015.

ANTONIA MAJACA: Montage makes visible, says Jean-Luc Godard. It produces a “form that thinks.” The two projects you conceived for the Berlin Documentary Forum’s first two editions, in 2010 and 2012, share this impetus. *Documentary Moments*, shown at BDF1, speculates on the

interdependence and political implications of several canonical documentary films by staging discursive encounters and enabling what we could describe as a live collective montage. The documentary film in the postwar period was explored through screenings and encounters with filmmakers who shaped this moment, including Alain Resnais, Edgar Morin, Marcel Ophüls and Frederick Wiseman. The second project, *Montage Interdit*, is an interactive Web-based archive of short film clips, many of them from Godard's classics and accompanied by interpretive commentaries from various thinkers. You bring together fragments of cinematic and theoretical material from diverse contexts, which all implicitly converge in the historical and contemporary events and experiences of repeated, systemic violence and oppression. Both projects revolve around the capacity of montage to make visible connections between things and events and draw connections which had always been there but had not been made explicit. I propose to read these two projects as complementary in the sense that the first aims to stage an encounter aimed at "re-editing" the history of documentary as a political practice of the twentieth century, while the second tests the potential of montage today, utilizing the possibilities of the digital environment and interactivity. Each of these projects functions as an activated knowledge form, employing, in different ways, montage as a method of reflexive investigation about the relation between the political history of documentary film and histories of systemic violence, rather than as a means to a cinematic end. Let us start with the first. How did the idea for the *Documentary Moments* come about?

EYAL SIVAN: The question of the nature and definition of documentary has been with me since I first started my own practice as a filmmaker. The idea for curating a project around this question, however, was first clearly articulated during my conversations with Hila Peleg during

the seminar on “Lesser Evil” we co-organized at Bard College in 2008 as part of the preparations for Manifesta 7 (2008). That workshop could perhaps itself be characterized as a documentary moment. In fact, that “documentary moment” was a concurrence between a long period of my work on memory and the beginnings of my work on the figure of the perpetrator. During the journey to upstate New York, the conversations we had revolved around the question of how to exhibit documentary. Finally, instead of producing a collaborative piece on “Lesser Evil” for Manifesta 7, I made a new piece called *Happy Birthdays, Towards a Common Archive* (2008), a mixed-media installation comprised of the testimony of Israeli soldiers actively involved in expelling Palestinians from present-day Israel during the Naqba. This was also the beginning of my preoccupation with staging rather than exhibiting as the format in which to best explore the definition of documentary. The problem of this definition has, in my mind, always been directly related to the problem of historicization. Although I felt that there was a need to historicize documentary practice, that was not what I wanted to do. Rather, the key question for me was how to historicize without (re)establishing a canon: how to historicize against the grain, against the imperative of historical linearity and against the very idea of the canon. To propose that there is a year zero of documentary as a moment – not of a birth but, on the contrary, of a rupture – seemed to me to be essential in interrogating the ethos of the documentary as a political tool and as an instrument of contestation.

In contemplating documentary history, it was essential for me to differentiate between the birth of documentary and what I call the “documentary moment.” I depart from the basic claim that the first film, made by the Lumière brothers, was in fact a documentary – that is to say, that the cinema was first documentary. The moment of the train entering the station, which is generally considered the “birth of cinema,” is not what I consider the “documentary moment.”

The train arriving at the station is perceived not as fiction but as reality; that is its fascination. The aspect of fascination it involved will soon be abandoned by documentary and adopted by what we now call fiction. So fiction is a genre of documentary. Of course, the basic set-up of cinema as the triangle of projection existed long before, but was not staged as cinema; it was staged as a religious ceremony. What I was interested in *Documentary Moments* was the historical coincidence (or not) of two parallel regimes dominating the era of cinema's invention: secularism and colonialism. Secularism because cinema became a secular church, and colonialism because documentary cinema became one of its essential tools. If we look at the Lumière brothers' films as the cinematic-historical consciousness of the era, the "progression" in their subjects is telling: first there is the train, then the workers, the gardener, the child, and then, after all, the train appears again – only this time it is a train from Jerusalem, in *Leaving Jerusalem by Railway* (1897). And this is quite crucial. There is the inherent relationship between the DNA of documentary, which is the train, and the European DNA, which is the genocide.

A.M.: The Lumière train could be seen as the proleptic cinematic object of the European genocide.

E.S.: Yes, but the relation between film and train is even more fundamental. The moment of the train in Jerusalem is part of the moment when cinema enters the sphere of the "Oriental" and, in parallel, the moment when the cinema becomes the tool of secularism, performing the function of the suspension of religious belief. However, there is a connection, a correspondence of what is being projected: the object of redemption. In documentary practice, that object is the Other. The

first Other is the worker. Then comes the Native American, the Oriental, etc. In short, Otherness is invented through the image and documentary is always about the Other. This is why the documentary has been the tool of anthropology, colonialism, and propaganda in general. The rupture in this logic would be the recognition that documentary could be proof, which occurs during the Nuremberg trials. And this moment is the “documentary moment”; it is what I call the zero point of documentary. The Nuremberg trials, where the projection screen becomes part of the courtroom scene and a crucial element in the juridical process, is exactly that moment in the history of documentary. This was the inspiration for the *Documentary Moments* project. It was not about addressing the moments of the documentary; rather, it was about questioning how a documentary moment emerged through film being placed in the courtroom and declared a witness.

A.M.: Earlier you made a distinction between staging and exhibiting. This distinction seems to be above all a question of liveness. The dramaturgy of *Documentary Moments* as a four-part live event merges the stage set with the deliberate usage of narrative rather than documentary film terminology (“scene,” “takes,” etc.). This in itself seems to imply a form of documentary by other means – the means being multidirectional montage unfolding in front of a live audience and the format of repeated hypothesis testing. Simultaneously however, the format resembles a courtroom *mise-en-scène*: the speakers are called upon to enter into a mutual interrogation with the images and the images are asked to support the spoken claims or contest them. They are dissected and cross-examined while at the same time acquiring authority to talk back and probe the words being said.

E.S.: Certainly, when I say “take,” I connote the possibility of repetition, unlike in documentary filmmaking where you rarely ask the actor to say something again. In other words, repetition here means that it is similar but not the same. It is important to keep in mind that in this procession of images and words there are four takes but only one scene: the rebirth of documentary. The question of staging is in this case crucial: the stage is the frame. The choice is between staging a reality or staging with reality. While fiction construes a frame and then goes on to stage a narrative within that frame, the documentary stages and makes visible the frame itself: the frame is being framed. The basic premise behind the format of the event was to collectively investigate the documentary moment in the context of regaining confidence in documentary image-making and montage in the aftermath of the Second World War. The main hypothesis of this “interrogation” – to embrace your reading of the format of the project – was that the practice of documentary was until that moment (i.e., until Nuremberg) a practice in the service of power. Of course, much has been said about the special relation between totalitarianism and cinema and the possibility of montage to materialize totalitarianism and to frame time and space as a totality. It is a relation that was well understood by spectators like Stalin, Hitler, and Mao. But I was interested in what propelled the postwar generation of filmmakers to “return” to documentary. I wanted to explore their intervention into what had been, for fifteen years leading up to that moment, the tool of ideology and power. During my research, I talked to several friends and colleagues, among them Godard and Marker, and asked this same question over and over again but never got a clear answer. Finally, I received a brilliant, one-line response to my question from Jean-Marie Straub: “We turned to documentary because the documentary before us was absolute fiction.” It is precisely this recognition that is the moment of the political rebirth of documentary.

A.M.: Art and visual culture have a history of intense relations with the law and courtroom setting, especially when it comes to narrating the past. Shoshana Felman claimed that art and law are the two poles in the vocabularies of remembrance. Part of *Documentary Moments* seems to involve tracing a cinematic trajectory from Nuremberg to Eichmann and examining how these two trials shaped the politics of documentary. Each utilized the documentary rather differently; each put the documentary image to different use. The films that were screened in Nuremberg – made from liberation footage produced by the Allies and found Nazi propaganda – had a role in the creation of an entirely new indictment, that of “crimes against humanity.” This eventually led to the United Nations Convention on Genocide and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In parallel, of course, the Nuremberg films played a major role in ethical pedagogy. So although they were morally justified, they themselves were also propaganda – only this time in the new, unified horizon of the Allies’ political and legal agenda. But even more importantly, they were crucial in consolidating the notion of humanity. It’s fascinating to think about these films from the perspective of their afterlives. These now-canonic images of atrocity entered all the cinematic representations of the Holocaust (including *Night and Fog* and *Le Chagrin et la pitié* [*The Sorrow and the Pity*, 1969]) until the 1980s and essentially shaped the normative visual code. They became *the* images for genocide.

Although the Nuremberg trials were generally perceived as efficient, they were believed to have “failed to reach the hearts of men,” as Gideon Hausner, the principal organizer of the Eichmann trial, put it. The Eichmann trial thus had to be meticulously planned as a show-trial centered on oral witnessing and geared towards reaching and mobilizing those remaining unmoved souls. And here the cinema simply had to step up: what would be shown in the

courtroom had to be an authorial film, not an assemblage of liberation footage. Thus the screening of *Night and Fog*.

It seems that in *Documentary Moments* the encounter between the cinematic and the juridical was distributed through several filmic objects. You advance a charged intertextual dynamic between the Nuremberg films, Resnais' *Night and Fog*, your film *The Specialist*, and Chris Marker's *Henchman Glance*.

E.S.: There was indeed a major transformation in the cinematic character and the juridical function of film between the two trials. First of all, in Jerusalem the screen was placed in the position reserved for the witnesses, not in the center as it was in Nuremberg. The film literally took the place of the witness. So this is the documentary moment: when authorial montage is brought in as a witness and not simply as a screen in the court, as had been the case in Nuremberg with the Allies' liberation footage and those films assembled from Nazi propaganda. Of course, Resnais' film was made partially with the material that had been shown in Nuremberg, but it is an authorial documentary film.

Eichmann's trial was completely video recorded: this is where the "meta" layer comes in. The recording equipment was invented in 1958, and in 1961 Leo Hurwitz had already managed to bring it to Israel. This was an amazing technical operation. There is a moment during the trial, in April 1961, when Eichmann is taken out of the prison in Jerusalem and brought into the court at night. He is there with the judges, his lawyer, and the attorney general, all gathered to watch some films the day before they would be shown in court. What Eichmann saw that night was *Night and Fog*. Hurwitz made a recording of that evening of Eichmann watching the film. There are thirty-three minutes of Eichmann watching *Night and Fog*. Chris Marker combined the

Hurwitz footage of Eichmann with the sound and image from Resnais' film to make *Henchman Glance*. When giving me this film, Marker told me that he made it because of the controversy around *The Specialist*, which had been made from the official court footage, i.e., the footage shot the day after, during the actual official seating of the court.⁴ I invited him to Berlin Documentary Forum, but Marker refused to come and also to sign the film; he said it was just a bricolage of images and that he made it just for me.

We should keep in mind that Marker worked as Resnais' assistant on *Night and Fog*, which has a voice-over written by a concentration camp survivor, Jean Cayrol. It was Marker who suggested that Hanns Eisler compose the musical score. And here we encounter the problem of perspective in witnessing again. I have a great affinity for Primo Levi's stance in his preface to the memoirs of Rudolph Höss, the commander of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camps.⁵ Levi introduces it as a major testimony. Somebody asked him, "How can you mean that? A criminal cannot be a witness. You are the witness!" He answered that, in fact, Höss was the witness; and he was a survivor. But to go back to Eichmann in terms of film and witnessing, it might be that Eichmann sees *Night and Fog* and all of these images for the first time on that evening of 1961, and he is intrigued. Watching this man witnessing this film and waiting for his reaction is interesting for us because we know who he is. And there is a striking difference in his behavior during that private screening and the next day during the official court seating, where he is just calmly taking notes because he already saw everything the night before. What is captivating in watching Eichmann is not so much Eichmann as the witness; it is my own position and what I see as I am watching his glance. It is about me watching him, or, in other words, it is about me as a witness. This is what Marker's intervention points out. Marker plays

against *Night and Fog*, against the masterpiece of the Holocaust film, reminding us that what is important is not the victim looking at himself, but the victim watching the perpetrator.

A.M.: The underlying question here is who is perceived to be in the position of maintaining a larger degree of “universality,” a better and “clearer” overview. To borrow phrasing from Denise Ferreira da Silva, who demonstrated how racialization has always been a constitutive force in the discourse of modernity, the question is who is perceived to be in possession of what she refers to as the “transparent I.” On the other pole of this “post-Enlightenment, white/European I” is what counts as the “affectable I,” “the other of Europe.”⁶ This racist principle of differentiation could be translated into the problem of perspectives as suggested by Fred Moten, whereby the “I” starts to relate to the optical machine and becomes the “eye,” turning the entire equation into the separation between the “universal eye” and the “affectable eye” – a gaze dismissed as affected or affectable.⁷ Ultimately this relates back to the foundational ontology of modernity, the *cogito* that prepared the terrain for the secular revolution. This subject, the post- Enlightenment, white/European, is the obvious perpetrator in the story of modernity and its violence. In your ongoing research you are scrutinizing the figure of the perpetrator. How do you frame the perpetrator as witnesses in your work?

E.S.: As we spoke about earlier, the relation inscribed in the screen is a relation that spectators at the birth of cinema were already familiar with: it is the church setting. I am sitting and facing a victim who is weaker than me. This is the redemption of the spectator. But facing the perpetrator is a very late practice in documentary and it emerges mostly in the field of contemporary art. There is nothing that provides redemption to the spectator in this case. When I talk about

redemption, I am of course referring to Christian redemption, which follows a simple formula: somebody is suffering for me. (By the way, the one suffering is a Jew, i.e., an Oriental.) It is not that I am compassionate and that there is thus a transfer of suffering, but that through confirming his suffering I confirm my goodness and my humanity. In contrast, the image of the perpetrator is the interrogation of my status, not its reconfirmation. This means redeeming the perpetrator from the status of voicelessness and facelessness for the spectator's projection, which does not allow redemption. While in power, the perpetrator permanently produces the regime of justification. This is also a cultural production; it produces an archive. The notion of montage has to be seen as the profanation of that product. The true era of the witness for me would be the era of the perpetrator speaking. The question of the point of view of the oppressed, of who speaks, and how this is related to image-making is in my mind crucial. I see Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and its central concept, the tradition of the oppressed, as essentially the handbook of documentary practice. In cinematic terms, the tradition of the oppressed should not be based on looking at the mirror from the position of the oppressed. Rather, it must be looking at the oppressor; in other words, it should involve framing the perpetrator. Looking at the victim would be the continuation of the tradition of the oppressor. The apparent universality of the perpetrator you are hinting at has been an important entry point for me in considering the figure of the perpetrator. And this is why the representation of the perpetrator cannot be historical, chronological, or geographical. My ongoing project, *Framing Perpetrators*, is envisioned as an exhibition, as an archive unfolding in physical space, but because of the nature of film the idea was to have the extension on the Web, which is *Montage Interdit*.

A.M.: Both *Montage Interdit* and *Documentary Moments* work with the belief that the specific conjunctive formation of words and images makes visible links between underexposed conceptual linkages. I am thinking of Godard's montage in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989–98) and his famous statement that there is no image, only images and the assemblages of images. This seems to be at the core of how the figure of the perpetrator enters *Montage Interdit*. To generalize the figure of the perpetrator is to bring into question the uniqueness of the crime. My own "take" on the encounter between *Montage Interdit* and *Documentary Moments* would be the hypothesis that the European genocide was the return of genocidal colonial politics, something Hannah Arendt tackles in a disputed way in the *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and from which Michel Foucault later draws out while discussing Nazism and biopolitics. The mass incarceration, concentration camps, and genocidal ideologies of the twentieth century may be seen as the boomerang effects of European imperialism. It seems to me that in *Documentary Moments*, this genealogy is implicit but surfaces most clearly in the session "Towards *Night and Fog*," in which you imply that what led to *Night and Fog* was precisely *Statues Also Die*. To return to the perpetrator within this boomerang thesis means that colonial violence was not only transformational for the colonized but also for the colonizer; the perpetrator was already psychologically prepared to commit such crimes – crimes that would only be recognized as "crimes against humanity" after they had happened on European soil. But before *Statues Also Die*, there were the films Resnais did in painters' studios, and also his work on *Van Gogh* (1947) and *Gauguin* (1950). During the encounter on Resnais you ask: why on earth did Resnais go to the artists' studios after the horrors of World War II? To pick up on that question, we could also ask: what is the opposite of the image of the camp, the image of complete dehumanization, the "nomos of the modern," as Agamben would have it? Well, it must be the artist's atelier! If we

accept to think in terms of simplified binaries, visiting the studios of European modernist artists might seem like an antidote for the horrors of the camps. But if the “boomerang effect” of colonialism is related not only to physical violence but also to modernity as a periodizing and differentiating category, then the genealogy that takes us from the modern painters through *Statues Also Die* and to *Night and Fog* starts making sense as an attempt to glue together the dispersed elements of the genocidal continuum. Modernity and modernism are obviously rooted in the same matrix of colonial and racist differentiation. Or, to go back to the train from the beginning of our conversation, if the train is the ultimate proleptic object of genocide, then modern paintings and African masks after the historical event of the European genocide and before being able to deal with it cinematically (in *Night and Fog*) are a temporally reversed cue that hints back at the colonial genocide as the prequel of the Holocaust.

E.S.: Documentary and genocide walk together. The tension of cohabitating modernities is present in all of these films. We could also ask: what is hidden in the artist’s studio? If an artist is a key protagonist of Western history, of modernity, what is there in the painting itself? Going back to the artist’s atelier is a return of the gaze towards ourselves to see what is there to learn or unlearn about ourselves after the experience of colonialism and Nazism. But what I saw in Resnais’ visits to the painters’ studios before anything else was an attempt to regain confidence in the possibility of making a subjective image, of re-learning the gesture of making the image. I was interested in how this attempt to regain confidence took shape. Artists’ ateliers are supposed to be the ultimate spaces of subjectivity, and subjectivity was not part of the language of documentary until that moment. I was interested in how Resnais was fighting to regain confidence in an essential aspect of the practice, which is montage, and, more explicitly,

montage as an authorial manipulation. We should just remember that manipulation quite literally means “to do with the hand.” But you are absolutely right, I was not so interested in *Night and Fog* itself, but in what led to it – thus “Towards *Night and Fog*.” I wanted to think through the fact that the documentary image was reclaimed by documenting the makers of fiction: the painters in their ateliers.

Interestingly, in terms of your take on these connections, Gauguin’s work also appears in *Statues Also Die*. Of course, from today’s perspective, *Statues Also Die* looks like a colonial film, but I believe that its attempt to decolonize the masks is a documentary moment as well. Although the film was an important part of the discourse of *négritude*, commissioned by the journal *Présence Africaine* and censored by the French government, I always thought the film was still too white and too Western to seriously ask questions on race. I ask myself: why do the statues, when they die, go back to the museum? The only thing that can dismantle the colonial gaze is montage. *Statues Also Die* is an attempt at an anti-colonial montage done with the colonial gaze. That is the tension of that film. So to go to painters’ ateliers just after the war and after the years of documentary as propaganda was to attempt to return to the subjective gesture. By focusing on these painters, Resnais attempts to regain confidence in what was until that point plagued by a futile and erroneous attempt at objectivity. The question of regaining confidence in the gesture also means to once again enter the *vita activa*: not work, not labor, but action. Staging and interrogating this moment means simultaneously capturing, editing, and presenting – it means examining the ways of laboring, working, and acting proper to documentary. It is about instantiating what I like to call the documentary attitude and, through it, entering the mode of action, the *vita activa*. What I refer to as the documentary attitude is an encounter with the *vita activa* as described by Hannah Arendt.

A.M.: In the same text, Arendt equates action to speech, in the sense that action is the moment when the agent comes forward through a speech act in a space of encounter. *Montage Interdit* expands and complicates Godard's project of the restoration of images and meaning through its fundamental imperative of pursuing a taboo montage, a kind of a "montage in spite of all," to paraphrase Georges Didi-Huberman.⁸ According to Arendt, we are only free as long as we act, neither before nor after. To be free and to act are basically the same. If montage is indeed a form of action, then *Montage Interdit* turns to the action of montage as a way to generate a form that not only thinks but a form that has the capacity to think politically.

E.S.: The political is the action; action is the political. And to be free as long as we act also means that it is not about the practice of politics or the politics of representation. Montage is an encounter that brings together work, labor, and action. When Godard suggests in *Notre Musique* (2004) that in 1948 the Jews got out of the sea towards the Promised Land to save themselves and the Palestinians got into the sea to drown, he goes on to show two images successively saying: the Jewish people entered fiction and Palestinians entered documentary. Also, to consider putting together, through montage, the Palestinian catastrophe (the Naqba) of 1948–49 and the Jewish catastrophe (the Shoah) of 1939–45 is indeed about the ability and freedom to perform that encounter, to put it on the same timeline. *Vita activa* is the action of montage; in this case, it is an active relation to life lived independently from its inscription in materiality. Such action is always necessarily grounded in a political attitude, which is what I call the documentary attitude. It is an understanding that to do montage – to edit – means to critique. This in my mind constitutes political action. The same is true of *Montage Interdit*: it opens the possibility of

contesting historical master narratives by way of an open process of montage. In the Jewish tradition, the Talmud must be the best documentary ever made; it is a discussion between the Rabbis about the meaning of a certain section from the Torah. It is a montage. This discussion never took place as such; these are commentaries done over hundreds of years and put together by an editor, *a posteriori*, as if it was a discussion. What I wanted to do with *Montage Interdit* was to open the process of montage.

In the cinema, the spectators do not possess the same control; you can never choose how to narrate a story. This is part of what I wanted to try out with *Montage Interdit*, in which connections are forged between the Native American, the Arab, and the Jew, but the story becomes known only after you edit it. Colonial violence and the camps come together again, but the spectator is there to do the montage.

A.M.: The same colonial matrix that produced race, its institutions, and its regimes of justification – from legal codes, to anthropology, and biology – also produced the individual and the social group as objects of observation and investigation. And observation has often been erroneously equated with objectivity. By the choice of films you include in *Documentary Moments*, you seem to be performing a political intervention into such claims of objectivity. Like many of the films we have discussed so far, Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1960), which became a canonical piece of visual anthropology, was organized around self-reflection and encounter while deconstructing the possibility of uninvolved observation. The other film you bring into the discussion, Frederick Wiseman's *Primate* (1974), subverts the assumption of the objective gaze of scientific observation through the intentional disregard for capturing the other. The camera-eye in *Primate* explores, often in

obsessive close-ups, not the monkeys but the scientists observing the monkeys. And here again we encounter the framing of the perpetrator and the framing of the “transparent” I/eye.

E.S.: As spectators, we should know what the function of the frame is. If I declare, “Now I will tell you the truth,” you should immediately raise a question mark. *Chronicle of a Summer* was made just a couple of years after *Night and Fog*. Here again, the concentration camps and the Algerian War come together, just as Ophüls brings together the European Genocide and the Vietnam War in *The Memory of Justice* (1976). But the important endeavor of *Chronicle of a Summer* was to interrogate the machine. This meant investigating how the camera that faces the train creates fascination and subsequently creates the Other. Morin’s biography is fascinating. He wrote a brilliant article on the relation between documentary practice, anthropology, and sociology, and on the role of documentary in the creation of the image of the Other. I was intrigued to find out that he also wrote a script for a fiction film, *L’Heure de la vérité* (*The Hour of Truth*, 1964), directed by Henri Calef. It is a story of a German journalist who comes to follow the Eichmann trial, pretending to be a German Jew while he is actually a Nazi. He plays a survivor but is actually a perpetrator. This episode in Morin’s biography is mostly unknown. My decision to include the *Chronicle of a Summer* in the Documentary Moment, was based on the discovery of unedited original rushes of the film by a group of young artists. But what was more important than introducing the previously unknown original footage, was to interrogate this film as it entered the canon. What we needed was profanation and demystification. When we interrogate inside the film it becomes *cinéma vérité* and opposes the observational.

Although Wiseman is often seen as the epitome of observational cinema, I would argue that his films, and especially *Primate*, first of all question the nature of documentary itself. He

refutes the idea of objectivity entirely, dismissing *cinéma vérité* as paradoxical since he knows that you cannot separate the moment of observation from that of montage. The bare fact that you are choosing the frame and that there are people looking at the camera makes it non-observational. The observation is of course there but not without the inscription. All of this shows that after the war, cinema starts to interrogate itself, to enter a self-reflexive mode. *Primate* is based on the observational attitude but critiques the observational film by questioning observation itself. Even if you put your subject in a cage and start to observe, your framing is performative. In the context of *Primate*, there is no mirror between the scientist and the filmmaker, between the scientist who frames the animal and the filmmaker who frames reality and gives it the status of observation. Wiseman studied law and immediately started interrogating the status of the institutions in United States. He asks, “What does the modern institution institute?” This is a post-genocide and postcolonial question. He witnesses historical consciousnesses. It might be that I am appropriating Wiseman and his film for the advancement of my hypothesis, but yes, I could say that it’s a film about the camps. It’s the scientists and scientific activity – not the monkeys – that are “observed.”

Wiseman’s other canonical film, *Titicut Follies* (1967), is also not about the “mad people,” but about the psychiatric institution – the guards and the psychiatrists. To show the result of evil, of modern institutions, Wiseman does not go for what is established and accepted as evil but dissects the institutions of normalization and “normality”: schools, psychiatric hospitals, public housing, etc. He is interested in the nature of power, not in the portrayal of suffering. There is an expectation that documentary will show us suffering. The tradition of the oppressed, however, which I translate into cinematic language as “the point of view of the oppressed,” here means looking from the position of the primate. The camera is in the eye of the

monkey, looking at the perpetrator from the position of the victim, not looking in the mirror. Wiseman transforms the scientist into the object of the gaze. We, the spectators, look at him, the supposed spectator. What we are facing here is the deconstruction of the idea of observational cinema itself. Observational cinema does not exist: there is only projectional cinema, an object onto which I project.

A.M.: A militant exodus seems to be in the cards for the political documentary. A hint of this promise of liberation from the corporate and populist regimes of production and circulation, as well as from the predetermined linearity of the cinematic mode, is certainly already there in *Documentary Moments* and *Montage Interdit*, and even in the Berlin Documentary Forum itself. The encounter of the “documentary” and the “curatorial” seems to push for a different understanding of montage altogether. Essentially, montage is turned into a kind of optico-cognitive machine that helps depict complex interdependences crucial for thinking beyond the status quo.

E.S.: Indeed, what is currently happening in documentary practice within the sphere of film and documentary practice within visual art is very different. The “curatorial” becomes the project of documentary montage, whereas the documentary in the field of cinema becomes fiction. To paraphrase Straub, we must turn to documentary because the documentary has become pure fiction.

¹ “Documentary Moments,” Haus Der Kulturen der Welt, last modified June 3, 2010, http://hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/veranstaltung/p_44014.php.

² Eyal Sivan, “Montage Interdit,” <http://montageinterdit.net/>. Last accessed June 10, 2015.

³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

⁴ Sivan’s film *The Specialist* (1999) was based on the original tapes of the Eichmann trial that he found during his research at the Spielberg Archive in Jerusalem. The film draws from the 350 hours of original footage but uses cinematic means to present what the subtitle calls a “portrait of the modern criminal” based on Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. *The Specialist* raised much controversy and was harshly criticized by the Spielberg Archive, especially by its former director Hilel Tryster for “fabricating,” “forging” and “fictionalizing” the event and distorting the footage in order to present Eichmann as a banal bureaucrat. See Eyal Sivan, “*The Specialist*, portrait of a modern criminal, 1999,” Personal Website, <http://eyalsivan.info/index.php?p=fichefilm&id=11#&panel1-11>. **Last accessed July 1, 2015**

⁵ Rudolph Höss, ed. Steven Paskuly, *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, trans. Andrew Pollinger, Foreword by Primo Levi, New York: Da Capo Press, 1996.

⁶ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

⁷ Fred Moten, “Geographies of Collaboration I. Writing History,” Keynote Address, presented at After Year Zero: Geographies of Collaboration 1945 Conference, Berlin, October 2013. Audio recording available at: <https://soundcloud.com/hkw/fred-moten-after-year-zero>.

⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs From Auschwitz*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.