

Unending archive and human agencies

An interview with Eyal Sivan

Eyal, you are currently preparing a project on Godard and the issues of Zionism, antisemitism and islamophobia called *Montage interdit* (Forbidden Assemblage). Before explaining in further detail the nature and content of the project, can you please tell us how the idea of both working on Godard and dealing with issues of European racism and Zionism did come up?

As a documentary filmmaker, an essayist and a lecturer at the University, I am involved in a vast range of activities which are usually related and interacting in my own work. When I directed *The Specialist* in 1999 – it is a movie about Eichmann's trial which is made up exclusively of images from the trial – I was already in a process of merging reflections on memory, movie editing (*montage* in French), and archives. I come from Israel, a country where the political use, or the *instrumentalisation* of what we call memory is an integral constitutive element of the political culture. Israel's policy gets its morale credit thanks to the common accepted idea of being the genocide survivor's homeland; everyone here claims that Israel's legitimacy has been vindicated by the sufferings of millions of Jewish people during World War II. As in many political appropriations of memory, the role of (moving) images cannot be overlooked. In the case of Eichmann's trial, 500 hours of images were recorded for posterity. As Hannah Arendt said, Eichmann's trial “was the trial done by Zionism to Nazism”.¹ This kind of political use of archive has always been fascinating to me. It is what allowed me to think that any archive is political, that any archive is a particular “setting up” of reality, through the *selection* and *assembly* of texts, images and sounds.

My latest interest is about how these selections and assemblies can somehow be changed, hijacked, defiled. This is the meaning of “forbidden assemblage”: what is forbidden is to change places, contexts and narrative “functions” of existing images and sounds in existing archives, to produce a new archive, which means inevitably, to put it bluntly, images serving *another political agenda*. It can explain my earlier work in *The Specialist*: transforming the way one might look at the trial, providing other images from Eichmann's trial to a wide audience.

To come back to Godard, the theoretical starting point for this film project is a conference that I gave at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie (Holland) in March 2011, as part of the symposium International Cinema Clash Continuum, Film and History in the Age of Godard. My lecture was entitled “Godard's Timeline 1939 - 1949. From Europe to Palestine and back”.

Based on the latest controversy about Godard's “antisemitism”, which resurfaced when he won an Oscar, it was an attempt to retrace the recurrence of the issues of antisemitism and Palestine in the work of Godard, and to investigate this “obsession” of a European filmmaker. Indeed, this so-called “obsession” is not about Godard's interest for the importance of the extermination of the Jews of Europe, but rather about the association he makes between the genocide in Europe and the issue of Palestine.

What was significant to me – and you will see that it is related to my earlier concerns – is that this association is indeed a transformation of archive and memory. While “Shoah” is often referred as the most evil of evils, a kind of moral absolute, any comparison or analogy with the Palestinian context is forbidden and outrageous. Furthermore, Godard does not juxtapose two separate historical themes. He establishes a historical continuity that points to European responsibility. This was, for me, a really interesting case of “forbidden assemblage”.

This lecture then led to collaboration with IssueZero and a commission consisting of adapting it into a film essay for the second Berlin Documentary Forum (BDF), which would be held at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in summer 2012.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A report on the banality of evil*, Penguin USA, 1963.

What was it supposed to be? Which themes from your paper were supposed to become a long-length documentary?

Amongst the recurring themes in the works of the Swiss film director Jean-Luc Godard, there is one that comes back in a symbolic and persistent way and which touches on the issue of anti-semitism and the issue of Palestine. More precisely, there is a recurrence of the issue of anti-semitism *and* of the issue of Palestine, of Jews *and* of Muslims. The images are brought together. A bringing together of two concepts in the way they are edited together, which is considered as the “true invention” of film:

"Editing, is the bringing together of things and a way of making sure that the audience sees things. What I call editing is simply a bringing together. That is the extraordinary power of images and of the sound that goes with them. Editing allows for things to be seen and not told. You put the images in a certain order so that a certain life style is created ; between two poles there is a current ; and images are the neutral, able to be pulled more or less ; that is why it is extremely powerful. What I really enjoy, is two images together in order to create a third, which is what is made from two images ; exactly what judicial system does... Well, what the judicial system is forced to do, by presenting the prosecution and the defence, and then the jury gets a certain truth..." Jean-Luc Godard

Editing has a double meaning: it is both a way of bringing together two things, two scenes, two images, as well as a construction method. Because the act of editing has power, it enables the articulation of continuity, a historical narrative. Editing therefore allows for the introduction and continuity of elements thought of separately in time and space. The frequent repetition in Godard's editing of anti-semitism in Europe and of Palestine underlines this continuity.

But this repetition also gives rise to recurring criticism. This takes the form of controversy and multiple accusations aimed not at what the editing by Godard suggests, but of the act of editing itself, accused of being an amalgamation, a provocation or a short cut. One matter in fact literally provokes a scandal in the work of Godard: that of the introduction of the Jew and the Muslim. The idea put forward by Godard seems to be inaudible and unacceptable. It seems in particular to be incomprehensible, because to understand would be to accept, to a certain degree, this bringing together.

This suggestion is systematically rejected and so finds itself relegated to the realm of the forbidden. It thus triggers a refusal to consider a forbidden assembly.

So what does it mean to reflect on a forbidden assembly? That was the very question I was going to ask in the long-length film.

Reflection on a forbidden assembly is a paradox, since reflecting (in both meanings of the word, i.e. reflecting in a visual sense and reflecting in a thoughtful sense) is in itself a way of assembling. And if reflecting is an act of assembly, then reflecting meaningfully means to know how to assemble meaningfully, how to bring together, associate, in continuity. This continuity is represented by the timeline of the editing tool of the film editor.

The whole idea was then to do a film that take place in an editing room. It would have been a movie about editing. The field of vision is made up of the different editing screens. This is in effect a mise-en-abyme of the editing process, since the process itself is shown. The film is a workshop: the audience can follow not only the result of the editing process, as is nearly always the case, but the process that leads to the assembly or editing. It is a process of revelation, since the actual design process is revealed, which is the hidden element of film. It is then a film essay about the notion of editing itself and that develops through the idea that islamophobia and racism as experienced in Europe today are indeed the prolongation of the Jewish problem and of anti-semitism. It is therefore, initially, a matter of demonstrating through various excerpts of Godard, the recurring notion – which manifests itself in different ways – of Jew and Muslim. The material is firstly excerpted from Godard but also archives and interviews. The film would have shown different sequences from Godard's films, which I had roughly taken from *Ici et ailleurs*, *JLG/JLG: autoportrait de décembre*, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, *Notre musique*, *Film socialisme*, and so on. Then,

the idea was to show commentaries by Giorgio Agamben, Gil Anidjar, Georges Didi-Huberman and others, but also images from current affairs which illustrate the continuity between antisemitism and islamophobia – one could think of the various so-called satirical cartoons on Islam which clearly fuel islamophobia today, and could be related to earlier antisemite cartoons in prewar European newspapers.

Following continuous discussion with Florian Schneider, progressively, the idea of producing a linear documentary film seemed less and less relevant. The project had to be more ambitious. What came to my mind, in relationship with the notion of archive, was the idea of a “database”. If I want to describe how one would defile or desecrate existing archives and audiovisual assemblages, in other words, how to hijack them, I would provide you with the image of a database: you can imagine shelves, files, with specific labels. And I always dreamt about the possibility of going in an archive and reshuffle all the shelves, making new labels, associate documents which the institution does not want to get associated.

To make a long story short: if I wanted to make a movie about “Godard's timeline” and about “forbidden assemblages”, I had to render both the timeline and, in a way, shelves which are reshuffled and labels renamed. And I wanted this process to be in a way more participatory. Later on, Thanks to Florian Schneider and his collaboration with the Jan van Ayke post graduate academy in Maastricht, I met Robert M Ochshorn, a young computer science researcher and designer, and a researcher who gave this project really another shape.

What was this new shape ?

ES: The idea became to build an online platform. Ochshorn have worked out an open source web-device which consists in storing audiovisual material, displaying the material with the first image of the video. You have then a kind of mosaic picture, with all images referring to a given excerpt from Godard or any external footage we chose to introduce in the project. If you click on an image, there is a kind of “unfolding”, with the image being transformed into a timeline band (displayed as an innovative sort of compression of the entire video footage) and with a small screen where the excerpt is showed while travelling along the timeline band as the excerpt is shown.

The idea was to propose an online database, available to a wide audience. We discussed the matter with the web designer, co-author, Robert: we had the ambition to provide a totally new way to store images, to see them, to assemble them and to add materials to the database. The idea was to allow users to record people or themselves and to upload on the database real-time commentaries of the existing Godard archive. We also imagined the device as a kind of unending labyrinth: users watch excerpts with tags, and these tags point themselves to other ranges of movies, audiovisual commentaries by leading intellectuals, and so on. The project needs to develop the framework so that it allows people to record their “travel” in the database, or to allow them to edit an original movie footage with the excerpts they want.

Through the experimental production platform IssueZero you can access the *montage interdit working space* it provides a collection of Godard's films excerpts. My team labelled the short scenes: colonialism, antisemitism, Zionism, Israel, Palestine, muslim and so on. The key thing is that each scene is multi tagged. It means that any image is connected to a given set of themes, and that if you go through the database and you visit by clicking on tags, you have a very awkward impression, which was summed up by Fredric Jameson as a motto of the entire epoch in his masterpiece *Postmodernism, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: “difference relates”. It is a really important aspect of the device: it was intended to allow a very varied range of interpretations, connections. We wanted to enhance creativity by suggesting the viewer to watch very different excerpts. Because you have to understand that all of the device boils down to the idea of an unending and always transforming archive. I think this is the conclusion of the whole notion of a “forbidden assemblage”: that of an unending assemblage. In the end, if you bring together the idea of the archive, the possibility to reshuffle the shelves and labels, and the idea of a forbidden assemblage, then I think you are bridging the gaps between different historiographies, and you bring

up a new way to think with images: you provide the possibility to create new political analyses – I am more and more convinced that any political analysis, in the strongest sense, proceeds essentially from making visible invisible continuities. In *Capital*, Marx shows the invisible continuity between wage-labor and slavery, between labor and surplus-labor in the working day. In her texts on *Imperialism*, a work which is of great influence on my work, and especially on issues of antisemitism, Hannah Arendt laid bare the relationship between methods from settler colonialism and nazi violence. The idea of associating the act of showing invisible continuities and movie editing (or photomontage) is part of a very strong legacy of progressive art making, from Brecht to Benjamin through John Heartfield's work published by the german communist art organ AIZ.

I wanted to ask you a question on your views on archive and memory. Can you further explain how specific (audio, visual, textual) assemblages promote different political uses of memory and, as you said, different historiographies?

I have first of all to lay out my own understanding of what is an archive. What is basically the purpose of an archive? You can say that its main purpose is remembering. Well, I am quite at odds with this definition. Because an archive involves more than what remembering is. An archive means collecting human artefacts, be they audio, visual or textual, which is: extracting meaningful aspects from human reality, and bringing them together under a specific label.

What is particularly interesting to me is that institutional archive have a dual function. On the one hand, they provide historians, artists and a more or less wide audience with a great amount of material which can be reassembled, which can be subject to critical examination. But on the other hand, institutions provide an implicit narrative which is conducive to official ideology and the narrative of the Nation-state. Again, there are basically two dimensions in this: first of all, there is the chronological and linear narration of the institution. Very often, archives involve a chronological storage. But this linearity is itself a way to isolate moments of time; history is much more complex than chronological linearity. There is what Annale historians used to call the *long terme*, which means slow structural evolutions (social classes, economic cycles, demographic changes) or persistent structural characteristics, which encompass an important chronological span. Well, institutions cannot render this. Historians of long period have to reconstruct data out of archives, so that their theories are new artefacts.

Apart from the *long terme*, there are other persistences in history, which are determined by the circulation of techniques of power, and inner logics of social institutions which perpetuates practices of oppression for example. If you look at the archives of colonialism (which, by the way, do not really exist as such) and archives from the French police, you have two different “shelves” and series of data. But if you look more closely, you will see how after the colonial war in Algeria, important colonial occupiers were requested to recast French police along techniques and modes of functioning that they learned from colonial war and colonial preventive war. Well these units were allocated to popular suburbs, where there are immigrants or immigrant's children who have colonial origins. As you see, if you reassemble the settler colonial archive and recent French police archive, then you can show continuities and begin an archive of internal colonialism.

The other dimension of the institutional archive, is that it has to be conducive with social order. Archive is the way a given society provides its members with an imaginary from the past. Its purpose is to draw a continuity of the Nation-state, of one history involving generations of citizens who belong to the same social fabric. It has to unite a saga of events in the same linear space-temporal matrix, but at the same time provide different labels to isolate all these episodes. These labels are there to reify social institutions. To make them appear timeless, to dehistoricize them. If you have an archive for First world war, an archive of colonial Algeria, an archive of colonial Indochina, the Vietnam war, an archive of May 1968 in France, which is different from the archive of the same year in Mexico, in Japan, different from the Creeping May in Italy and so on, how do you make relationships, analogies and parallels? How do you cast a political analysis? Official archive only tells us that “things” happened, in a continuous space-temporal framework, which is

basically the Nation. That is why, in France, where I live now, for example, nobody tells about the Black Atlantic, which is transnational, transcultural, and tranhistorical, dealing with histories of population transfer in the Atlantic, colonial slavery and a rich history of resistance to slavery, a history of revolutions, Black nationalism, Afro-Caribbean internationalism, popular cultures, sports and musics circulating from the Caribbean through Americas and European harbours, and so on. If you cross boundaries you find the places of human agencies. It is the place of history in the most subversive sense of the word “history”.

So, this is what I meant by “defiling” and hijacking existing archives. It means that archives are basically linear and often chronological narrations, and that the purpose of documentary essay is to challenge the official narrative. Documentary essays try to bypass the isolation-effect of institutional archive, by proposing analogies, parallel readings, echoes between materials from the real.

But the problem I wanted to overcome in *Montage interdit*, was that documentary cinema provides another linear narration: that of the linear timeline, linear editing, linear watching of the film. The new device I am now working on is a way to overcome this linearity.

How would it overcome linearity?

Because first of all, the whole device involves a rupture with linearity. You have the availability of the footage. In the end, people can go to the website and there are multiple ways to see the Godard archive, because, as I said, there is multi tagging, because the mosaic-type display allows people to pick images they want to see. You know, there is a big difference between this kind of archive and Youtube for example. Youtube provides a narrative of free and unending archive. But it is profoundly biased, not only because of advertisement, but because there is no possibility to do an assemblage with the existing videos and, most important, you cannot find an image on Youtube. You first have keywords, then images.

Montage interdit is really different because images are at the center of the display. Then, I tried to experiment something Godard had already done in his movies: the idea of multiple image display. If you watch *Ici et Ailleurs*, for instance, you will find different screens playing moving images, with only one of them playing the sound of the movie, and the other moving images being silent. Now, in *Montage interdit*, we tried to allow the user to associate moving images. Then when you play a sequence, you have for example an excerpt from a movie by Godard, and another little moving image with the commentary from e.g. Gil Anidjar or Robert Stam and Ella Shohat. You can choose to listen to one video or the other, while both are playing.

This is really what I meant with non-linearity, these two dimensions: on the one hand, an infinite possibility of reshuffling the archive, and the other hand, an audiovisual device of playing various videos at the same time.

What is so important about allowing non-linearity in the very making of the film? What is the political stake behind non-linearity?

As I said, linear archives very often reify what they show: institutions, temporalities, epochs, historical events, and so on. I do not think that every documentary essays do the same thing. But I think that there are major political stakes to be associated with collective creation, with multiplying possibilities of narration. This is not for me the bad brand of postmodernism whose motto is: every narrative is partial, we have to create a proliferating space of narrativization and so on. I think it has more to do about collective agencies and a very broad notion of the General intellect. In a very rough sense, it has to do with political unity. Political formations and ideologies tend to think that political unity can emerge from linear narratives of progress, from what Benjamin called “homogeneous and empty time”. Benjamin's messianism teaches us that, on the contrary, the tradition of the oppressed has to be collected – and redeemed – from the fragments of political and social catastrophe. To do this, one has to reshuffle existing archives, to challenge their linearity,

because the tradition of the oppressed lies in the subtext of these archives: archives are always those of the victors. Today, new technologies of information and communication can provide frameworks for a General intellect to gather, for a collective redeeming of defeats and an elaboration of human agency. But there are important pitfalls, which are to be associated with two things. The first thing is, as I said, official archive and linearity. It means that public access to audiovisual archives are seriously limited by what is available on the dedicated websites. The second pitfall is false idea of freedom of expression implied by platforms like Youtube. I think Youtube provides the ideology of neoliberalism, this is the archive paradigm of Youtube: the fact that everyone has the formal possibility to post their videos is concealing the fact that it is the cultural industry that benefits from the platform, via the huge dissemination of music videos, advertisement and so on. Images from the Arab revolutions for example, can receive no proper treatment, no editing: mobile phone images are thrown in the “cloud” with no capacity to be disseminated via Youtube itself, but via social networks, which involves a deep fragmentation of audiovisual material from the revolution. So, if you want to get a sense of what is going on Tunisia, in Egypt, in Syria, in Lybia, you cannot do it while staying on Youtube. You have to re-collect again the videos from people's messages on Facebook or Twitter.

The political stake related to archive today is to produce a new audiovisual intellectuality. An intellectuality which is open-source, inherently collective and with devices which really provide access to relevant images and allow people to reassemble them, to reshuffle them. Non-linearity can contribute to building human agencies with its dimension of creativity and its didactical aspect. *Montage interdit*, more than simply with Godard or islamophobia, has to do with such an important political project.

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Interviewer: Félix Boggio Éwanjé-Épée.

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