

THE TRANSLATION OF A TRANSLATION

A conversation between

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1.

While *Foreign Office* is similar to works like *The Mapping Journey Project*, (which took on the importance of place by refusing to depict a location in a stable or knowable way), it is organized around one location. In the work, Algiers functions as a historic cypher for international liberation and resistance movements. A shot of the 1969 poster for the first Panafrican Cultural Festival, establishes the scenography; the event took place in the city and the film goes on to portray it in maps, photographs, and words as a point of condensation for revolutionaries from across the African continent, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Black America. While its historic importance is acknowledged, it is rendered through acts of remembering, physical manipulation of images, and invocations in multiple languages by the film's protagonists, in the present. Tell me about the process of making the film: the visa applications, the search for the players, and the research you undertook. In what ways did the life and structure of contemporary Algeria inform the process of producing this film about its past?

Because I had been focused on producing this project for several years, I had, over time, collected a lot of different kinds of material. Originally, I had only thought of the project as a film, but it became obvious that a series of photographs had to exist as well. These photographs restore this fragment of history to its place and geography, even though they are traces of the absent. I also produced an "archipelique" map of Algiers produced from the geographical distribution of the various liberation movement headquarters that existed throughout the city. The local geography of these movements were then "translated" into island formations whose shapes are derived from and mirror the architectural structure of each movements' headquarters. This archipelago is a sort of poetic transposition of what used to be international solidarity: An "All-World" as defined by Edouard Glissant, composed of solitary islands which form a bigger and all encompassing world. This project also corresponds to the *Constellations series* (8 serigraphs, 2011), which is less a proposal to map the geography of migration and more about mapping resistance.

All of this was not easy to produce in terms of logistics. But my projects never are. They are based on a paradoxical balance between research and the most rigorous preparation possible, and what I simply call life: the unpredictable, easily summarized by saying "Life happens." This applies to most things; obtaining visas and permissions are part of it. Would it have been different elsewhere? I do not think so. During the location-scouting trip, I encountered Ines and Fadi, the two young protagonists of the film who, in real life are students. As with my previous projects, there was no casting. My only criteria is that those I encounter

have a desire to participate in the project. Their interest is what initiates the collaboration. In this instance, the fact that Ines speaks Algerian Arabic and Fadi speaks Kabyl was an essential aspect of our collaboration as well. By combining various languages, the film also suggests a kind of utopian language that responds to the intense debate that has been taking place in the Maghreb since the end of colonization: *Who are we? What language do we speak?* This is a very complex issue since many states in the region claim Arabism as a foundation of their identity and insist on Arabic as their official languages, which contradicts the factual reality. The Arabic dialects spoken in North Africa can in fact be very different from what is spoken in the Middle East; they are extremely dynamic languages that are constantly absorbing external inputs. In addition, one can also find variants of the Berber language Tamazight, from Morocco to Egypt. It turns out that many speakers of Tamazight, and in this case Kabyl in Algeria, do not identify as Arabs, and for good reason; they are the native inhabitants of this region before Arab conquest beginning in the seventh century. My resolution in the film is a kind of generalized creolization that corresponds to these linguistic realities. It reflects our multiple identities in the form of a quiet and confident reconciliation in our becoming Creole, as if we had surpassed those rigid identity assignments in favor of a creolization.

That's why I've never had the feeling that I was working on the past. Its more a feeling of working on a becoming that is written in the present with the past, in order to look to the future. Fadi and Ines had to be very young and resemble what they are: Algerian youth of today, who could also just as easily live in the West. They are of today, but they could also be of yesterday, and in their youth they are already of "tomorrow".

This portrayal of youth was particularly important for the project because the history of the city the film explores seems to be forgotten by the younger generations. Fadi and Ines learned the historical details during the preparation phase of the film. It entered into their present, and I hope that we can see in the film how their consciousness of it grows, and why an alternative historiography had to be produced.

2.

Foreign Office, like many of your previous cinematic works, makes direct and indirect references to both the history of 1960s filmmakers (Marguerite Duras, Jean Rouch) and revolutionaries (the Lusophone Amílcar Cabral, Samora Machel, Agostinho Neto, Malcolm X and members of the Black Panther Party, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf). At one point in the work, a player speaks directly to our relationship to the past: *We have inherited only*

disappointment and history into pieces. They wanted to change the world, and we only want to move away from this world.

Is *Foreign Office* an enactment of history in this abyss? An attempt to sound a historic echo? A break in distinctions between "then" and "now"? The making of historical narrative from the space of circumspection? An act of faith or speculation? A proposal to map, picture, archive a new world order? Is the "foreign office" an imagined location, a fantastical destination allowed by the particularities—and peculiarities!—of the agents movements for national liberation living in exile?

I would say that the "dispositif" is a kind of small speculative manufacture of history, interrogating history with stories, pictures, language, and sound. From this point of view, I see it as less of a mise en abyme and more as a device that reproduces a film editing room. This room becomes the enunciation site of the film, as well as a place for speculation and making within the meaning of its production. That's why the film begins with shots of images hung on a wall, which we see later used by Fadi and Ines. This works both as a presentation of the film material, its timeline, along with its constructed puzzle dimension that we may find in an editing room. The film to be edited rests on the flatbed editor, as well as on the wall. On the same wall, small photo prints are hung to allow envision the narrative and the visual shape of the film that is being edited. I would say that this is the space where the film binds history as a narrative and cinema as a potential manufacture of history by telling stories. But, I do not invent anything here. No one has done this better than Godard with *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, which exemplified how cinema has embodied this idea of "non-archival" manufacture of time, memory, and history.

In *Foreign Office*, the images are anchored in the present-time. They are neither archives nor illustration. They are a living material that is animated by gestures of concrete editing and montage produced by the hands of the protagonists, responding to their own speech. It was important to me that this gesture of producing time and history could be a cinematic material. Likewise representing this beautiful original vocation of cinema that can be summarized in a pure and simple deictic gesture: showing something to someone. It is as if film and montage were returned to their essential nature of gesture in the proper sense of manual work. But it is also true that hands are often seen in my videos. Godard—him again—said that if he had to choose, he would rather lose eyesight than the use of his hands, because films are less made with the eyes, than with the fingers. I think at least with regards to montage, this is absolutely true: when editing, it is the hand that thinks.

3.

One shift or movement I've noticed in your work—from the series, "Straight Stories" and "Speeches" to your more recent work, including *Garden Conversation*—is the increased emphasis on dyadic relationships. In addition to the camera capturing the two speakers in *Foreign Office* looking at one another, the work sets up a contingent relationship between what is pictured and what is spoken, that pits the viewer as a mediator between these two realms of knowledge. What is made available for you in this intersubjective or dialectical space?

You're absolutely right. Up until *Speeches*, all my video works have been based on monologues addressed to oneself, which gradually become a public speech. Or more specifically, a singular voice that articulates in the course of its enunciation a collective voice. With *Garden Conversation* another cycle is introduced which is no longer about lonely voices, but young female/male duos, staging a dialectical theater. *Garden Conversation* and *Foreign Office* more directly interrogate a history that must be collectively written into the present by emphasizing that it only takes "two" to form a collective.

It is within this relationship that a circulation of speech can build a dialectical work much like a "History Lesson" as the filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet have proposed in a film titled similarly. I greatly admire this film for its proud austerity and its quiet control of temporal anachronism. But in this collective work, there is also the viewer that not only connects with the protagonists, but also with the discursive articulations. That is why these two films were based on a denser montage, unlike the one long shot I used almost exclusively in many of my previous works. I do not say that the one long shot excludes a process of montage. *The Mapping Journey* and *The Straight Stories* both relied on a process of montage though using one long shot. But, the montage was based on the connections and disconnections of the sound and the image, the visible and the invisible.

With the emergence of the duo in my work, I had to approach the montage from another question that is very simple, but infinitely complex: How do you film two people speaking to each other? Of course, the traditional language of cinema gives the answer: the shot and the counter shot. Except, neither of these films exhibit the shot/counter shot produced in the classical tradition. There is always a floating disconnection, an interstitial space that Dziga Vertov defined as "interval". I see this space as the site from where the viewer can situate him/herself to produce new montage seams.

4.

The arc of the *Foreign Office* and its diegesis are bracketed by invocations of by black Americans, including Eldridge, Kathleen Cleaver, Huey P. Newton, among others.

In their collectively authored work, *The Undercommons*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write, "The black aesthetic turns on a dialectic of luxuriant withholding—abundance and lack push technique over the edge of refusal so that the trouble with beauty, which is the very animation and emanation of art, is always and everywhere troubled again and again. New technique, new beauty. At the same time, the black aesthetic is not about technique, is not a technique, though a fundamental element of the terror-driven anaesthetic disavowal of 'our terribleness is the eclectic sampling of techniques of black performativity'."

In what ways does something we could call specific kinds of blackness make space in this work, and work in the history of this film essay and essay-poem suggest?

What one can call "blackness" definitely has a special place in the project, including its contextualization vis-à-vis African liberation movements, such as the one led by Amílcar Cabral, which the film evokes with views of the Black Panthers. At the same time, I hope to give the sense of a convergence of aesthetics and politics, which the Panthers embodied. In his introduction to *Soledad Brothers* by George Jackson, Jean Genet who supported the Black Panther Party, wrote very beautiful words that accompanied our production of *Foreign Office*: "If we accept this idea, that the revolutionary enterprise of a man or of a people originates in their poetic genius, or, more precisely, that this enterprise is the inevitable conclusion of

poetic genius, we must reject nothing of what makes poetic exaltation possible ... because poetry contains both the possibility of a revolutionary morality and what appears to contradict it."

Similarly, the Panthers knew they were not only building a collective iconography, but also a culture from the consciousness of their own history, which could give rise to this unique beauty-style and incredible elegance, that transformed the "Black is beautiful" sentiment from an abstract slogan to its incarnation into bodies and faces that had not been seen before. In "Four Hours in Shatila", Jean Genet also addressed the new beauty generated by the emancipation. He describes the Arab workers he used to meet on the streets of Paris before the beginning of the Algerian revolution, and how he saw the birth of their beauty with the beginning of their liberation: "We had to admit it: Arab workers achieved political freedom in order to be seen as they were: very beautiful."

In the film, however, this new beauty is not the exclusive feature of the Panthers.

For example, in the section dedicated to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf, Fadi quotes an excerpt of an article published in 1972 in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, entitled "Algiers, capital of the revolutionaries in exile," in which a man named Issa is mentioned as a kind of "revolutionary model", though what is shown in the film is not Issa but the androgynous face of a Omani woman fighter. This allows for the "gendered" identification to be surpassed and reveals this new beauty. I also hope that one notices how the beauty of Ines and Fadi is also revealed as the movie progresses.

5.

In the movie, one of the unnamed speakers describes the Angolan poet and politician Coelho Mário Pinto de Andrade with an invocation: "Write with a gun. Fight with a pen." It also makes reference to Eldridge Cleaver's film *Voodoo*, unseen until nearly four decades after its making by a librarian at the New York Public Library; and to the work of the Berber writer and activist Kateb Yacine, who wrote in the immediate aftermath of the end of colonialism that "French remains the spoil of war". First of all, have you seen *Voodoo*—this forgotten, belated project supported by Chris Marker? Secondly, how do you think the demands for poetry and film directed in processes of social change have shifted as the political tactics and backgrounds have moved from militarization to organizing, and from nationalism to the restructuring of the nation-state?

Eldridge Cleaver nicknamed the film *Voodoo*, although its original title is *Oye Congo, We Have Come Back*. I then had to insert a fragment of *We Have Come Back*, which Archie Shepp generously allowed me to use, which was performed in Algiers during the Panthers' participation at the Pan-African Festival. Cleaver shot his film in Congo. I had the chance to see it before filming *Foreign Office* through the help of a friend, whom I would like to thank here.

The film is a valuable document for several reasons: first, because it was shot with one of the first video cameras, secondly because of the collaboration between Cleaver and Marker, and finally because it helps in understanding Cleaver's strategic choices in linking the struggle of the African Americans to

the one of the African brothers. I must say that it is incredibly touching to see Cleaver so moved by witnessing the realization of his dream: the achievement of a black revolution. But in Congo, this "dream" didn't last long.

The second part of your question is more difficult to answer. Those movements of liberation were also intended to engender a cultural and aesthetic revolution.

Cabral addresses the issue in one of his famous texts called *National Liberation and Culture*, which echoes what Pasolini called "the outrageous revolutionary force of the past," defining tradition as what gives birth to the new. The *dispositif* of the film with its constant permutation of images aims to raise this dialectic of the old and the new, by developing a kind of visual and audio palimpsest: a picture and a story is added, that covers the previous one, but it still shines through the layers. This reminds me of a phrase I heard in a film by Jean Cocteau, I think, but originates with Meister Eckhart. "Only the hand that erases can write." This could make a beautiful definition of montage, but also of history and the residual forgetfulness that accompanies its writing.

But I digress from your question, and I'm definitely not sure I can answer it. What is certain is that the nation-state model remained an ultimate horizon, or the "unthought" of emancipation struggle. It is also true that the poetry and new beauty we managed to evoke did not survive. But they are always reborn, unexpectedly, the same, but differently. Maybe, because they are still needed.