

A populated opacity

OB In our interview in 2010, I was struck by the range of references that seemed to be a powerful influence on your thinking.¹ They revolved around the films and the intellectual output of a few maverick filmmakers and writers, such as Pasolini, Fassbinder and Godard. I've often wondered how, and at what point, an artist's mental world becomes established, and what might cause it to change. What about yours? Has it evolved over the last few years?

BK I think my mental world was fairly well established before I even became an artist and it certainly wasn't shaped by contemporary art. For example, I must have been thinking about Pasolini's idea of free indirect speech and his figure of the civil poet for about twenty years. It is a question that haunts me – an aesthetic question that is also an ethical question – and which can be summarised as follows: when someone speaks, who exactly is speaking? You can spend a lifetime thinking about it. Which is what I am doing. But I also realise more and more that my childhood was very important. I don't think I would have been as sensitive to the very radical positions of Pasolini, Straub or Marker if I had had a different childhood.

OB Can you say more?

BK I am loth to get into what can be simplistic explanations based on biography, so I won't go into

details. But I did realise that most of my work revolves around stories told in my family. The internationalist movement, the meeting between Che Guevara and Abdelkrim Al Khattabi, the story of the MTA and Al Assifa. And the fact that, as Moroccans, we all know young people who have attempted to cross the Strait of Gibraltar. Which means that there is continuity between the works. To reduce *The Mapping Journey Project* to a work "on migration" ignores the historical continuum and misses the real point of the work, which is: if the egalitarian utopias had been victorious, would several generations have been forced into exile? Isn't migration also a kind of resistance?

OB I was very moved by the last part of *Foreign Office*, the chapter entitled "Language". The lost heritage, the fact that a legacy was never passed on, the difficulty of reconstituting a heritage once it has begun to be undermined. I took this as a criticism by the two young protagonists of their parents' generation. But you are saying that you grew up with all that.

BK Yes, I knew every detail of the story. Naturally, I did a lot of work on it, especially to find the places that are shown in the photographs. At the same time, I became aware of the existence of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf while I was preparing the project. I was surprised to

find only one university thesis on the subject. And, of course, Heiny Srour's wonderful film, which deserves to be shown more. It is hard to imagine nowadays that there was once a revolutionary movement in the Gulf, prepared to sacrifice the oil for the sake of the struggle against colonisation and for a fairer society.

To answer your question about the last part of the film: I wrote it in Algiers with Inès and Fadi, the film's young protagonists. The rest was all written in advance, although I kept changing it to reflect Inès and Fadi's reactions. More specifically, what I did was cut into the text, to make it more and more factual, more accurate, to cut out the frills, and allow them to appropriate it completely. But I didn't feel I had the right to script the last chapter on my own. That's the moment when they speak for themselves, whereas what comes before is built on a continuous shift in the position of the speaker. When I met Inès and Fadi in Algiers, they didn't know that part of their history—"Algiers, the mecca of revolutionaries". The national narrative mainly focuses on victory in the War of Independence. The history books stop in 1962. During my stay, I realised that there was a generational divide. All the people I know in Algiers who are between sixty and seventy years old were involved in the internationalist episode and still retain a keen sense of nostalgia for it. But I wanted to make the film with young people. Ultimately, it's not so much a matter of putting the parents on trial as of questioning the national narrative. How can historiography be reclaimed from the powers that be? It may not be necessary to fill entire shelves in libraries: if you put a basket of provisions together and have it do the rounds, that may be enough. We need to get back to our old practices of solidarity and smuggling. After all, the oral tradition is a set of stories circulating off the books.

OB Many of your works (notably *Foreign Office*, *Garden Conversation* and *The Tempest Society*) feel

to me like exercises in resurrecting a forgotten historical moment. This involves physically displaying a research process. We see characters showing documents, handling archives, pointing to places. How do you give body to history within the image?

BK When I work on a project, I always keep empty shelves, which I know I'll be filling. I collect together books, written documents, sound documents, visual and film documents. I number them and make files of them all. I have my Stabilo highlighter, my little notebooks where I make indexes with crossreferences. It becomes a kind of map which is the "topography" of the project. The fact is, I'm already in the process of constructing and writing the film at that point. The truth is, all this preliminary work gives me time to think: it allows me to "clean up my head", as we say in spoken Arabic. To "tidy it up" to understand what it is I'm doing. And to do it in a state of calm and composure. But, out of all the enormous amount of paper, practically nothing gets seen in the final work. Its only raison d'être is to get me well prepared. I'm not at all fetishistic about archives.

OB We see clearly in your films that, when the characters handle archival material, they do it in an informal way, without gloves. That seems very important to me, because it is all a part of reclaiming one's history. Archives, in your work, have no intrinsic value as archives.

BK No, they feature more or less in the same way as I use them when I'm preparing the project. And, above all, they have no more weight than the oral narrative. In Morocco, we have this dying tradition of the storyteller, of the *halqa*, for which I have always had a great fondness. I admire the *halqa* for its ability to mix the trivial and the scholarly. The storytellers are a living archive, because their knowledge and memory are brought to life in speech. And I

especially like the shape of the *halqa*: it's a circle of passers-by who stop and join the community of "listeners". Just like in an exhibition. The difference is that in a *halqa*, the "listeners" have no qualms about interrupting the storyteller.

OB This raises the question once again of who is speaking when someone speaks, and the question of where *your* voice is in the whole affair. We never physically hear your voice but, looking at your works, one can't help wondering about the complex position that you occupy in them. My impression is that your work is a kind of exploration of the different ways people are moved to speak and to let others speak.

BK Take *The Tempest Society*. I wrote the script both before and during the shoot, because I would change it every day. I incorporated a lot of elements: things I had heard, things that the participants told me, literal quotes from authors, characters from a book reading the account of their story as it had been transcribed by a writer who called it "a novel". There was Philippe Tancelin reading the book he had published forty years earlier. There was Ghani and Malek talking about their own lives in Greece. It covers a wide range of situated speech. Where's the author in all that? No one can say that their word is absolutely subjective. Those who speak never speak for themselves alone. My part in the whole thing is to be, as it were, the organiser of a mechanism that allows a multiplicity of voices to speak.

It's a metaphor and at the same time a method of free indirect discourse à la Pasolini. It is a plurality, but not in a choral way. It lies in the act of representation. In a very beautiful documentary by Jacques-André Fieschi, Pasolini gives the example of a Neapolitan way of speaking, where, when you introduce yourself to a stranger, you say "I represent myself to you." That's exactly it. The characters represent themselves to each other; each produces

his or her own representation in the very movement of mutual introductions.

Similarly, there is a difference between speaking for and speaking in lieu of. Speaking in lieu of means that your words act as a stand-in. But here, their words are not standing in for someone else; they are "representing themselves" to you in all their plurality, but they do not claim to speak on behalf of others, they do not replace others.

OB Are there differences from one work to another with regard to the act of speaking? For example, in *Speeches – Chapter 2*, the credits name the protagonists as authors of their texts, while in *Garden Conversation* the text derives entirely from existing documents.

BK In *Garden Conversation*, I was trying to represent a moment that had escaped the archive fever. There are witnesses, but no archive. In fact, for a long time I thought it was a myth. Until I found the link between Al Khattabi and Guevara: a Spanish soldier who had fled Franco's Spain and, years later, taught Al Khattabi's guerrilla tactics to Guevara in Mexico. This soldier had witnessed and admired the resistance fighting in the Rif. So I asked myself a very simple question: What did Guevara and Al Khattabi say to each other? Or, rather, what might they have said to each other? My answer was to make a montage from published texts, and these are all mentioned in the credits.

In *Speeches – Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*, each text is the result of numerous conversations I had with the protagonist who speaks it. The process could last several weeks, as it did with Kanté. I never used a voice recorder; I would faithfully transcribe our conversations as they happened, like a scribe, then I would go back to the individuals concerned, with a written version, and it might go on like that for days or weeks. Then, once they were satisfied, they memorised and recited the text they had written without writing. But it's their text, literally.

OB I thought I could sense a difference in kind between the discourse of the protagonists of the *The Mapping Journey Project* films and the protagonists of the *The Speeches Series* films. In the *The Mapping Journey Project* films, the discourse is of course political, but the politics is the consequence of a totality, which is made up of a sum of very factual accounts of trajectories – whereas in *Speeches*, for example, politics underlies every single sentence. I have in mind this sentence of Djilly's in *Speeches – Chapter 2*: "I used to think that the working class did not recognise colour differences, then I realised that class solidarity does not exist in reality... The struggle never ends, only its nature changes."

BK Djilly was one of the organisers of the first Social Forum demonstration against the G8 in Genoa in 2001. It was the first time that undocumented workers had demonstrated in broad daylight in Italy. I didn't know that when we met. But when he told me, I wasn't surprised. For *Speeches – Chapter 3*, I worked in New York with people who identified as working class, so the starting point was already one of class-consciousness. There is a tendency to overlook – whether intentionally or not – the fact that those we reduce to the status of "migrants" are political subjects. They have a political consciousness, and an awareness of themselves as political subjects. Think back to Ghani in *The Tempest Society*: he arrives in Greece as a student and a few years later becomes the spokesman for a group of 300 undocumented workers on hunger strike to demand equal rights. Like Djilly, it was the first time in Greece that undocumented workers had demonstrated in broad daylight. Djilly and Ghani talk to each other, from one work to another. Just as they speak to Kanté, Anzoumane and even the young man from Ramallah (in *Mapping Journey #3*). This young man recounts how he can no longer go to East Jerusalem, but that he will find a way around the checkpoint and the separation wall "because the routes must always change", which is

a way of saying "because the struggle never ends". Which is exactly what Djilly says. That is why I keep saying that to reduce *The Mapping Journey Project* to a work about "migrations" misses its real point: it is about resisting the arbitrariness of power.

What is more, the extreme precision of the narrative, the total neutrality, the absolute absence of sentimentalism, is a political position in itself. And if you listen to the sound, the voices, from the *The Mapping Journey Project* films through to *The Tempest Society*, it's the same music you hear.

It is also the same distancing effect. In the *The Mapping Journey Project* films, it is located in the fact that you don't see any faces, as well as in the filmic vocabulary, which is reduced to the bare minimum. The distancing is embodied by the map itself, because it is a cold image. A cold image that gradually fills out.

The filmic language of the *Speeches* films is not that different. They're still fixed shots. And the distancing effect is the same, because it makes it possible to return to the question of free indirect discourse: when a political or ethical position is involved, there is always more than one person speaking.

OB In the *Speeches* films, you film certain parts of the protagonists' bodies a lot – particularly their hands.

BK I love what are called "insert shots" in movies. "Disconnected" fixed shots. My film vocabulary is very minimalist – including when it comes to lenses. I have never used anything other than 35 and 50 millimetre. 35 mil for the slightly wider shots, and 50 mil for the rest. I am deeply suspicious of the "cinema effect", I mean forms that insist on asserting their status as cinema, but which are in fact just imitations. Not even a pastiche. Daney defined the mass of films that play on the cinema effect in a definitive sentence, which I read in the first issue of the magazine *Trafic*, which he co-founded a few months before he died: "The cinema effect is like a self-degradable

fanfare or an accelerated-motion fashion show."² It could also be a perfect description of advertising. Daney's text made a big impression on me, especially as I read it a few months after his death: it had turned into a prophecy in my eyes. I wasn't even twenty, and Daney was telling me that cinema as I loved it was dead.

Therefore, I feel that my works do not look like what is now called "a film", or rather, I feel that many films essentially rely on a "cinema effect".

A tripod for fixed shots, a set frame, a precise logic of montage, direct sound – that's all I need.

OB It's very striking at the beginning of the chapters in *The Speeches Series*. You establish the geographical and social context in a sequence of two or three shots, like Lumière views: a street corner, a bridge, a few people passing through the frame. One might have expected you to shoot those shots with a wide angle, but you didn't, the shots remain relatively tight, very focused.

BK They are fragments. To imagine being able to capture the general movement of life is a fiction that we deceive ourselves with, even if there is a great tradition of wide-angle shots. For example, William Klein's remarkable books, or some of his documentaries. They're beautiful, but they're not my thing. It has to do with the logic of the shot that everything starts from. For example, those insert shots I was telling you about: the back of someone's neck, an outstretched hand, a breathing chest. In the detail, there is also a question being asked. When we speak, where do we speak from? Where does speech come from? Does it begin in a bust? A throat? A hand? It is basically a way of saying that speaking is a gesture, while at the same time situating it.

OB I get the impression there are more and more bodies on screen in your films. In *The Mapping Journey Project*, there is always an absent body – apart

from the person's hand and their voice. In the *The Speeches Series*, there is a body on screen, saying "I". In *Foreign Office*, there are two bodies on screen. In *The Tempest Society*, there are three of them in the picture at the same time, and the pronoun "we" is often used. It seems to me that one of the challenges of your work is to construct frameworks that allow a "we", a form of solidarity, to emerge. In some works, this collective sense would be created by juxtaposition through a set of echoes between individual stories. It seemed to me that it was different in *The Tempest Society*, like a scaling up of corporeal presence. For example, at the beginning of the film, there is a kind of turn-taking game in which each person finishes what another had started saying. We don't know how many of them there are anymore: a collective figure has emerged.

BK Bodies in my work are always ambiguous presences because they remain opaque. I'm thinking of the "right to opacity", as defined by Glissant, which I consider to be fundamental: we don't need to know everything. But there is also the opacity of what will happen. In *The Tempest Society*, the protagonists know that their work will consist not in dispelling this opacity, but in populating it more and more. That's why there are so many people in that film. The non-completion of the figure is something that has always been of great concern to me. Its completion would imply that the coming community has been achieved, when it actually builds up gradually. It grows.

OB At the end of *The Tempest Society*, the form that is given to the "missing people" is that of a constellation. Of course, it reminds me of *The Constellations Series* in *The Mapping Journey Project*. But they are also very beautiful, those paths drawn between discrete entities. It is a form of unity that is not an authoritarian narrative. It preserves individualities, and at the same time acknowledges the precariousness of community as a constellation of tenuous strands.

BK I think that we are currently witnessing the end of the nation-state as an authoritarian, normative concept, as a corollary of national narratives. For example, even though I have lived in Germany for several years, I keep a very close eye on what is happening in France, and I am extremely worried about it. We are heading towards catastrophe with the rise of nationalism, this collective spluttering about “French identity” and “French civilization”, the injunction to assimilation, to non-difference. There’s a sense that the whole thing is going to break down. Europe and the United States are breaking down all around us.

As an alternative, a constellation is an egalitarian proposal, because no one narrative prevails over the others, but they have things to say to each other, and that is how the story is constructed. The logic of editing is also a logic of constellation. Sometimes the elements have absolutely nothing to do with each other, but if you find the connection, if you invent the connection, they begin to interact. In fact, when I do an exhibition, that’s also how I work it out. I make a proposal for a constellation that suggests a path. I know the path that I have outlined, but I don’t actually signpost it. Because the constellation can be approached from any side. It is one of the oldest of human narratives, one of the oldest ways of telling stories.

OB What does the notion of bearing witness mean to you?

BK When Philippe Tancelin appears in *The Tempest Society*, if we were in a “normal” documentary format, he would be there to “bear witness” – to relate what Al Assifa’s adventure was like. But that’s not what he does at all. First, he appears – in the literal sense of the word – although we have already seen him in photos and in a film excerpt, where we see him dancing with Mokhtar. And when he does appear, his book is there waiting for him on the table. He hasn’t come to bear witness, because his testimony is his book. There

is no point in piling testimony upon testimony. On the other hand, I’m interested in the fact that he “reappears”. What is this apparition? Is he a ghost, or is it the protagonists of the film, sitting there waiting for him at a table, who are the ghosts at that particular moment?

Now, if you cast your mind back to *The Mapping Journey Project*, what are the protagonists bearing witness to? They are bearing witness to the fact that they survived. Their testimony is not in what they are saying. What they are saying is factual.

But, by the simple fact that they can tell us about it, they bear witness to the fact that another life has begun, a new struggle, which will be one for equality.

In *Speeches – Chapter 1*, when Sadja performs a letter written by Abdelkrim Al Khattabi in 1921, in which she recognises today’s Afghanistan, she is bearing witness to a continuum; she is bearing witness to the fact that the struggle continues. It goes on from one era to another, from one end of the world to another, from one mouth to another, from one language to another, from one body to another. It is a vast circular flow of the story and the telling of that story.

In *Speeches – Chapter 2*, what they are testifying to is a becoming-citizen, the role and the state of speech in the struggle to become a citizen. Hence the title *Words on Streets*. These people, who are excluded from the national body, literally encounter the figure of the civic poet in the purest Italian tradition to bear witness to a state of discourse in the struggle for a radically equal citizenry. That’s what their testimony is about.

OB I love this idea of testimony as incarnation or reincarnation, as a way of giving voice and body to a future rather than to a past.

BK Exactly, bearing witness is not a matter of talking about the past, but of talking about what must come to pass.

1. Omar Berrada and Bouchra Khalili, “The Opposite of the Voice-Over”, in *Bouchra Khalili, Story Mapping*, Marseille, Bureau des compétences et désirs / Dijon, Les Presses du réel, 2010.

2. “L’effet-cinéma tient de la fanfare auto-dégradable et du défilé de mode en accéléré.” Serge Daney, “Journal de l’an passé”, in *Trafic*, issue 1, winter 1991, p.9.

