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# Blackboard

1970: Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin made a tour of American universities – Harvard (from where I am writing these lines), Yale and Berkeley, among others.

The two members of the Dziga Vertov Group had just got back from a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, where they shot footage for the film *Jusqu'à la victoire (Until Victory / Palestine Will Win)*, commissioned by the PLO in support of the Palestinian revolution. The film was never finished. A few years later it would be reworked to become *Ici et ailleurs (Here and Elsewhere; 1975)*,<sup>1</sup> produced after the group broke up, taking the form of a meditation about the impasse which led to the revolutionary film never being finished: the death of the fedayeen filmed by the collective, to whom the images could no longer be returned. The reconstruction, or perhaps the compensation, would thus be *Ici et ailleurs*.<sup>2</sup>

When Godard and Gorin made their tour, American campuses were ready to rise up. They called on students to offer their support to the Black Panther Party – “the only revolutionary group in the United States” – and to become involved in the Free Bobby Seale movement.<sup>3</sup> Above all, they hoped to persuade students to support *Jusqu'à la victoire*, which was produced without money from the film industry, in which Godard had worked for ten years.

Godard had been involved with revolution since 1967. With May 1968, he shed his “proper name”, which had taken on an aura of celebrity, for the “com-

mon”, collective, revolutionary name – “borrowed” from David Abelevich Kaufman – of “Dziga Vertov”, author of *Kino-Pravda*, *Man with a Movie Camera* and *Three Songs about Lenin*, and the theoretician behind Kino-glaz (“film-eye”) and editing as an interval-based practice, and a pedagogy of heterogeneity.

That borrowed name would become the name shared by Nathalie Billard, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Armand Marco, Gérard Martin and Jean-Henri Roger: the Dziga Vertov Group, whose membership varied.

Under that name they made *Un film comme les autres* (1968), *British Sounds* (1969), *Pravda* (1969), *Vent d'est* (1969), *Luttes en Italie* (1969), *Vladimir et Rosa* (1971) and *Letter to Jane* (1972).

At the end of April 1970, addressing students from Yale University, Godard and Gorin tried to define what political cinema could potentially be:

— Gorin: “An image is nothing more than an image. We decided to build a new screen as a blackboard, as a possibility for the people . . . to discuss in front of it [*sic*].”

— Godard: “Making a film like this blackboard and nothing else than that. The place of the film is right there. But it is your job to see this blackboard and to work on it.”<sup>4</sup>

Godard pointed behind him to the blackboard in the lecture hall where the discussion was being held; the

blackboard that was usually used for writing up knowledge validated by the institution, by registration fees, by competition and by the making of élites.

Godard’s proposal reversed the proposition: the blackboard he pointed to was not that of knowledge as power, it was that of a pedagogy of the margins, to be circulated like contraband.

That moment when Godard talked to those Yale students was filmed by Ralph Thanhauser for a documentary about Godard and Gorin’s visit to the United States,<sup>5</sup> referred to in my latest film, *Twenty-Two Hours*.

In *Twenty-Two Hours*, two young African-American women, Quiana and Vanessa, go back over Jean Genet’s stay in the United States in 1970, starting from a simple question: Why did he come?

At the request of the Black Panther Party, Genet travelled to North America, stopping over in Canada, from where he would secretly cross the border to reach the United States.<sup>6</sup> Genet was in fact persona non grata in the US, probably because of his numerous convictions, and the huge success, simultaneous with the scandal it caused, of his play *Les Nègres* in New York in 1961.

From March to May 1970, Genet offered his services to the party, taking an active part in the campaign to free Bobby Seale, and tirelessly calling for unconditional solidarity with the Panthers. Until the American police let him know in no uncertain terms that it was time for him to leave. The Panthers asked him to do their bidding. Genet would carry on supporting them from the other side of the Atlantic, while the party fell apart as a result of the host of plots and undercover schemes visited upon it by the apparatus of the American government, as well as internal tensions.

In *Twenty-Two Hours*, Quiana and Vanessa are at once storytellers, recounting stories and History, and the editors of a film in the offing, the making of which is the visual and conceptual core of the film itself. They reflect upon the position of the storyteller as

witness, the poet or poetess as witness, and the militant who will become a witness when the embers have been extinguished. A member of the Black Panther Party, who bore witness to and was involved in Genet’s visit, appears in the film.

But does he appear as a witness? Or does he testify to the fact that his role is henceforth to bear witness? Just as the two young women testify that they are henceforth the living repository of those words, which they will subsequently do their utmost to hand down to anyone wishing to listen to them.

Interviewed by an American journalist about why he was in the United States at that time, Jean Genet replied that he had gone there “to bear witness to the injustices being suffered by the Black Panther Party and the racism suffered by Afro-Americans”.

Fifteen years later, winding up his last book, *Un captif amoureux (Prisoner of Love)*, a long, all-encompassing, syncretic poem about his engagement with the Palestinians and the Black Panther Party, Genet came up with a definition of what a witness is: “The witness has sworn to tell the truth, not to tell it to the judges. . . . The witness is alone. He talks. . . . but, in order to show the why behind this how, he sheds light on the how, he illuminates it with a light which is sometimes described as artistic.”<sup>7</sup>

Genet was often that solitary witness. Always, a modest witness. At times, a key witness. A witness who, among the first along with Leila Shahid,<sup>8</sup> entered the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps, the day after the massacre. It was to bear witness that he wrote *Four Hours in Chatila*. And it was as a witness that he returned to poetry after a twenty-year silence.

Like all my works, *Twenty-Two Hours* matured over several years, which I devoted to collecting images, sounds, texts and stories. It was during that task that I discovered these pictures of Godard and Gorin at Yale, while I was undertaking research about Genet’s visit to the same university, which at the time was occupied by students up in arms over the

freeing of Bobby Seale and the members of the New Haven chapter.

A first coincidence that the film-makers and the poet were in the same place. A few months later, it was Genet who would go to the very place where Godard was filming the images of *Jusqu'à la victoire*.

In front of Godard's "blackboard", I recall the many hands that fill my work. Shots in the form of inserts, as a suspension of the continuity that defies the continuous assembly line of editing, and signifies nothing more than the invitation to "I'm showing you this."

Hands which draw while writing – *The Tempest Society* – hands which write while drawing – *The Mapping Journey Project* – hands pointing at something – all my films – or showing something to someone – *The Mapping Journey Project*, *Garden Conversation*, *Foreign Office*, *The Tempest Society*, *Twenty-Two Hours*.

But these hands are not inviting us to look at a true image, or not even to look at an image, but just at the reciprocal nature of a gesture: showing/looking at.

*The Tempest Society* ends with a blackboard around which are gathered Isabella, Elias and Giannis, the film's "passeurs".<sup>9</sup> In front of that board, they literally draw the script of the film, which does not come across as a premise, but as a conclusion.

In real time, what takes shape is a constellation. They call it "Equality", thus describing the community that the film gathers around it.

On this board unfurls the horizontal narrative, in which no one word dominates the others, where each one is side-by-side with the others on the flat surface, in the place where the board as surface meets the cinematographic frame as representation.

In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Gilles Deleuze explains this function of the frame in film, this surface filled with images and sound: "The frame has

the implicit function of recording not merely sound information, but also visual information. If we see very few things in an image, this is because we do not know how to read it properly; we evaluate its rarefaction as poorly as its saturation. There is a pedagogy of the image... when this function is made explicit, when the frame serves as an opaque surface of information, sometimes blurred by saturation, sometimes reduced to the empty set, to the white or black screen."<sup>10</sup>

The white surface of the projection screen, the blackboard of the film frame. Plunged into darkness, the protagonists of *Twenty-Two Hours* combine images on small video monitors. As editors-cum-storytellers, they share images with each other, relate them to one another, create links between them, which, in their turn, give rise to other images and other words, in a permanent to-and-fro that forms the narrative of the radical solidarity offered by Genet, and the starting point for their thinking about the *passeurs* as witness, another face of the civic poet, a recurrent figure who runs through my whole work.

From those monitors a video installation is developed, forming constellations – another recurrent motif – which gradually draw this blackboard on which they "write" the stories with which they weave a part of their own History. In the same way that, in *Foreign Office* and *The Tempest Society*, flat surfaces – black tables, a blackboard – formed the frame based on which the narrative could be seen and heard, composed as it was of images, photographs and fragments of films and stories developing a first person account. As was already the case with *The Mapping Journey Project*, where maps of the world were presented as a surface upon which is written, drawn and performed a counter-geography, produced by the resilient and persistent lives of those who have been forced to travel illegally. They would give rise to other maps, *The Constellations Series*, silkscreen prints, flat surfaces again, which suggest that

geography of utopia that Oscar Wilde dreamed of in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*: "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing."<sup>11</sup>

But is this the blackboard that Godard dreamed of with the Dziga Vertov group? Nothing more than a point of departure from which a pedagogy of the image and a cinema of poetry can meet, the cinema that Pier Paolo Pasolini wanted to see come into being: an artwork as free indirect discourse in which multiple equal voices mingle from their singular standpoint and start to speak for the absentees. A place where

counter-knowledge can be written, nomadic forms of knowledge, the knowledge of those relegated to the periphery. The knowledge that is declared not as such, but may turn out to be useful for those who wish to contest established knowledge. Just counter-narratives traced in the form of hypotheses which can only be posited and discussed provided that those who do not have the right to speak can grasp them so as to bring forth the still missing image. The image of a possible community to come into being, starting with one or two, because they are already standing together facing the flat surface.

1. Jointly produced by Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Luc Godard. In 1973, they created Sonimage, a video creation and production workshop, set up in Paris, and then transferred first to Grenoble, and then to Rolle, in Switzerland, in 1977. *Ici et ailleurs* was the first Sonimage production. The images of *Jusqu'à la victoire* found their place in a back-and-forth between "here" – a French middle-class apartment – and "elsewhere" – the Palestinian revolution. Learning to see *here*, to hear *elsewhere*, as Anne-Marie Miéville's voice puts it in the film.
2. "They – or other fedayeen like them – died in 1970, massacred by Hussein's troops. So making the film was, quite simply, translating the soundtrack, making sure you could hear what was being said in it, or rather: that people could listen to it. What was retained and kept can thus be freed and re-created, even if it's too late" (Serge Daney, "Le terrorisé (pédagogie godardienne)", in *La Rampe. Cahier critique 1970–1982*, Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma / Gallimard, 1983, p. 83).
3. Born in Dallas in 1936. Co-founder, with Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, in 1966. At that particular moment, Seale was being detained with most of the members of the New Haven chapter on a variety of charges. The charges were dropped in 1971 after a trial lasting several months. The campaign to free Bobby Seale and the members of the New Haven chapter attracted huge support and led to the student occupation of Yale. The May Day rally was held there in 1970, a gathering that brought together many activists and intellectuals, and tens of thousands of other participants. At it, Jean Genet read out one of his most significant essays on the Black Panther Party and the condition of black people in the United States. The essay was subsequently published as a pamphlet with a preface by Allen Ginsberg.
4. Godard returned on several occasions to the "blackboard" in various manifestos and interviews, and here in particular: "There are two kinds of militant films: what we call 'blackboard' films and 'Internationale' films, which is tantamount to singing the Internationale at a demo, and the other which enables a person and shows him how to apply in reality what he has just seen, or go and rewrite it on another blackboard so that other people can also apply it" (*Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma / Éditions de l'Étoile, 1985, p. 348).
5. *Godard in America*, with Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin and Andrew Sarris, 1970, 45 minutes.
6. The circumstances of Genet's second secret trip to the United States are well known. See *L'Ennemi déclaré. Textes et entretiens choisis 1970–1983*, Paris, Gallimard, 2010. Genet had already made a first illegal visit to the United States in 1968, to attend the Democratic convention in Chicago.
7. Jean Genet, *Un captif amoureux*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p. 503.
8. Born in 1949 in Beirut. A Palestinian diplomat, who was the PLO's representative in particular in Ireland, the Netherlands and France, as well as with the European Union. She also edited the *Revue d'études palestiniennes*. She was very close to Genet in the last fifteen years of his life.
9. Term borrowed from French film critic Serge Daney, who coined it but never offered a stable definition of it. A *passeur* is at once someone who helps others reach the other side of the river (from its old French meaning), and someone who passed on hidden knowledge like contraband (the basic definition of French "cinéphilie" tradition as inherited and now embodied by Daney).
10. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983), transl. H. Tomlinson and B. Habberjam, London/New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 13–14.
11. Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, 1891.