

« **Commemorating Past History or Documenting the Persistence of Struggles? Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet and Phil Watts as Archaeologists** » in Rajeshwari Vallury (ed.), *Theory, Aesthetics, and Politics in the Francophone World*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2019, 11-32.

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Commemorating Past History or Documenting the Persistence of Struggles? Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet and Phil Watts as Archaeologists

The more you commemorate, the less you think. This seems to be the sad rule of thumb conditioning French intellectual life at the beginning of the 21st century. Of course, not all commemorations are born equal. Some are particularly prone to numb any serious effort of critical thinking (the centennial of World War 1); others provide opportunities to gather (once again) around canonic authors (Rousseau-2012, Diderot-2013, Proust-2013); others help renew canon (Barthes-2015, Potocki-2015). Whether heartwarming or plain annoying, these centennial celebrations mostly comfort the business-as-usual of slumbering literary studies slowly but surely sinking into insignificance.

Literature, of course, is tradition. So is culture as a whole. They consist in a movement of carrying (*tradere*) the past into the present, in order to help communities orient themselves toward the future. Even in France, where literary history still reigns uncontested in academic circles, this tradition constantly trades in betrayals: no matter how “scientific”, erudite or disciplined a literary scholar claims to be, the work of *traductor* of the past into the present necessarily exposes the duplicity of the *traditor*. Even when describing and assessing the past as “objectively” as possible, we always address it from and to the present, with its concerns, its obsessions, its clichés. The commemoration of past events, authors, masterpieces provides a way to revisit values inherited in our traditions—usually in order to reassert their validity and to strengthen the communal bond they are meant to tie around our shared forms of life. What is so pathetic about the latest epidemics of centennial celebrations is not their socio-anthropological function, of course, which is merely tradition-in-action, but their intellectual context, their (a)political framing and their astonishing irrelevance.

I will briefly analyze these three shortcomings, before turning to the theoretical intuitions of Vilém Flusser, the cinematic work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, and the scholarly writings of Phil Watts, which provide an alternative form of documenting the past in order to empower our collective agency, to better face the present and address the challenges of the future.

Against the *devoir de mémoire*

The intellectual context of the recent centennial celebrations is still structured by the nefarious injunction of a *devoir de mémoire* (“a duty of remembrance”)¹. Its well-rehearsed chorus has haunted the French mediasphere for several decades now: our youth have lost all memory of the past; they are largely (if not completely) ignorant of the most important events

¹ For a pluralist discussion on the topic, see Myriam Bienenstock (ed.), *Le devoir de mémoire. Les lois mémorielles et l'histoire*, Paris : Éditions de l'éclat, 2014.

of the 20th century (namely Auschwitz and the Holocaust); in their historically dazed and confused minds, the Général de Gaulle might as well have been a contemporary of Vercingetorix; as a consequence of this apocalyptic de-historicization, their young brains collapse into existential apathy, turning away from politics, lured by the artificial thrills of videogames, or they fall prey to the symmetrical extremes of jihadism and neofascism, denounced as two sides of a single anti-Semitic coin (“islamo-fascism”). Faced with such a widespread and disconcerting ignorance of “the past”, we—intellectuals, educators, adults—must vigorously assert (and impose) a *devoir de mémoire*: it must be decreed that the youth will be conducted (or obliged) to remember “our” history, in order to be duly integrated within “our” culture.

This common narrative-cum-injunction seems as universally accepted among the French intelligentsia as it is fantastic, complacent and misleading. Even when it is based on (flimsy) empirical evidence comparing historical knowledge across generations, it is exploited in a deeply reactionary gesture, which drapes itself in supposedly undisputable moral and epistemic superiority. Of course, nobody (in their right mind) will pretend that the Nazi extermination camps should be forgotten, or treated as a mere “detail” of History—as Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the far-right movement Front National, episodically reasserts in order to enhance his media coverage (a predictable tactic which never fails). The contextual coordinates of this duty of remembrance, however, clearly display a number of cultural, political and social biases, which end up contaminating most centennial celebrations. A short list would include the following:

1. *The devoir de mémoire remains viscerally Eurocentric and nationalistic.* The dominant French conception of “History” and “Memory” remains mono-maniacally focused on the trauma of the two World Wars, with its invariable array of master-signifiers (Germany, *les tranchées*, Auschwitz, Vichy, the Resistance, etc.). Whether glorious (1789) or infamous (the “raffle du Vel d’hiv”), it is almost always French history made by (white) French people on (metropolitan) French territory which deserves to be remembered. Whenever organizations bring up shameful issues related to colonial history, one rarely fails to hear a voice denouncing the boogie-man of *repentance* to prevent too many (dark skin) corpses from being pulled out of the Nation’s closet.

2. This is due to the fact that *the devoir de mémoire defends the cause of an already-written official History, to be inculcated rather than debated.* True “researchers” are rarely welcome in commemorations: the celebrations call for us to become teachers or preachers, not doubters or questioners—ask the wrong questions and you’ll be disqualified as a dangerous “communitarianist”, a retarded “*Tiers-Mondiste*”, or a threatening “eco-fascist”.

3. *For the devoir de mémoire is designed to work as an instrument of cultural homogenization.* Behind the (correct) assertion that negating the reality of the Nazi extermination camps involves a dangerous and unacceptable manipulation of historical consciousness lurks the (manipulative) assertion that a population needs to share a common view and valuation of historical events in order to compose a stable society. The (often explicitly stated) goal is to transform every young person into a *bon Français (de souche)*, horrified by German crimes in Auschwitz rather than shamed by French massacres in Setif or Madagascar, proud to support republican democracy by understanding Rousseau’s *Social Contract* rather than wondering whether the mastery of radioactivity by Pierre and Marie Curie was such a blessing after all.

4. The central feature of this duty of remembrance, however, is to be located in the fact that *the devoir de mémoire conveniently severs the past from its present implications*, which is a condition for its claim to universal validity. Commemorative history is bound to be consensual because it focuses on moments where the Good confronted the Evil: who in their right mind will defend the Nazis? Or Diderot’s persecutors? Or the critics of Proust’s style? In

order to “remember together” (*com-memorate*), we need to find common enemies—*them* then, clearly separated from *us* now. In most of their manifestations, the bicentennial celebrations of the French Revolution in 1989 obviously assumed that the late 20th-century participants were siding with the sans-culottes rather than with the aristocrats². Apart from (scandalous) exceptions like *Les Bienveillantes*³, the two world wars are relived through the perspective of the French victors than rather the defeated Germans, while literary history feels naturally strengthened by the fact that centennials focus our attention on an extremely narrow set of already-canonized writers. Questioning the processes by which events, authors, works or situations from the past still (directly or indirectly) relate to our present lives remains at the margin of centennial celebrations, because the very construction of such cross-temporal relations is bound to be controversial.

5. In its attempt to “instruct” the youth (i.e., to educate them by “constructing” a coherent view of History “inside” their minds), *the devoir de mémoire tends to posit struggles as inter-individual (and more often inter-national or inter-ethnic) rather than intra-individual*. We are called to side with the Good (Republican French) against the Evil (Germans) as if the actual conflicts did not split most of us from within—whether in terms of temporality (we may evolve, change, become), geopolitics (we may be affectively attached to different parts of the world), class (our material interests may be pull us between contradictory economic dynamics) or environmental politics (we may need resources whose extraction destroys our milieu). Even when historical situations are staged in the form of dilemmas, inviting the participants fictionally to project themselves within existential plots, the distancing effect of History tends to reduce a lived (and often irreducible) contradiction into a moral choice that will be (magically) “solved” by making “the right choice”. What is denied here is the “stickiness” inherent to historical existence, its “viscosity”—defined by Timothy Norton as that which cannot be thrown away, because there is no “away” from which we would be totally immune⁴. I am part of this conflicting world, and this being-part-of-a-conflicted-entity necessarily pulls my own individual being apart.

6. In its majoritarian uses, *the devoir de mémoire denies that, by positioning oneself in relation to a certain past, one necessarily positions oneself within present struggles*. Yesterdays’ conflicts rarely fail to endure into present-day struggles. History remains alive and vivacious—for better and for worse—through this survival and filiations of conflicts. In its goal of unanimousness, French republicanism tends to deny this continuity: the duty of remembrance hopes to use past conflicts in order to promote the integration of differences into an undividable and homogeneous nation. It is thus structurally incapable of accepting its own point of view as being situated and as taking sides within current struggles.

Centennial Idiocies

Understandably, by severing historical events and figures from their present consequences and ramifications, this show-business of unanimous memory often generates suspicion and rejection from the very (disenfranchised) youth to which it claims to be addressed. The paradigmatic example, of course, is provided by the mismanagement of our asymmetrical relation towards the destruction of the Jews in the 20th century and the oppression of the Palestinians in our present day. It is terribly sad and deeply tragic to see antisemitism fostered rather than contained by certain forms of memorialization of the

² For rich analyses of the complexity and multifariousness of the cultural uses of the French Revolution over the last thirty years, see Martial Poirson (ed.), *La Révolution française et le monde d'aujourd'hui – Mythologies contemporaines*, Paris : Classiques Garnier, 2014.

³ For a reflection on *Les Bienveillantes*, see Phil Watts, “Remnants of Tragedy”, *Yale French Studies*, 121, 2012.

⁴ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Holocaust—due precisely to this severance of the memorialized past from its conflictual continuity into the present. The complacency with which the French mediasphere revels in memorializing the horrendous suffering of the Jewish people during Nazi occupation is totally disconnected from the current (colonial) situation in the Middle East, and from its perception by large segments of the French population exposed to their daily ratio of discrimination and islamophobia. Why, one may legitimately ask, are we called upon, again and again, to cry elephants’ tears over a drama of unspeakable injustice that took place half a century ago, a drama over which our current agency is null, while another drama—of much lesser heinous proportions, of course—is taking place in our own time, over which we can hope to exert a certain influence, through our political representatives or our personal behavior? More to the point: how can we ignore the fact that the constant flow of *memorialia* victimizing the 20th-century figure of the Jews currently brings water to the mill of an extremist government and ideology which drape themselves in their past victimized status in order to legitimize and maintain unjustifiable forms of aggression, oppression and domination in the present?

More largely, but along the same lines, a good number of the centennial celebrations staged over the last three decades could be characterized by their *idiocy*—a word to be understood in its etymological meaning of “particular” (vs. “general”). In direct contradiction with the claim to universality so deeply engrained within the French republicanist tradition fueling all of these official celebrations, the framing of the objects of commemorialization tends to be extremely narrow—excluding the implications that could most vividly weave them into the present. Getting rid of the aristocratic order on the French metropolitan territory in 1789 was certainly a feat to celebrate, but how can one fail to see that the French (or German or American) “way of life” in 1989 is based on strikingly similar forms of aristocratic privileges at the planetary level, with today’s Third World in the position of yesterday’s Third Estate? Jean-Jacques Rousseau certainly was a major thinker and writer, whose astonishing lucidity continues to inspire us, but why is it that so few of the discourses generated by his bi-centennial reminded us of the central role played by religion in the latter part of the *Social Contract*, in direct contradiction to the fanatically secularist interpretation of his thought promoted by the dominant Republicanism⁵? Of course, it would be naïve to expect official celebrations to rock the conformist boat of dominant thinking. But then, it should come as no surprise to see centennial memorializations perceived by large segments of the population as a machine of indoctrination, promoting repression under the guise of memory, and slowly fueling a return of the repressed in the form of car-burning riots.

The idiocy of recent centennials not only appears in the narrowness of the particularist views framing the objects of celebration, cutting them off of their most vivid and problematic implications. It also appears in the very choice of what is to be celebrated. The turn of the 19th to the 20th century was full of techno-scientific discoveries, inventions and early commercial developments which could have provided a good opportunity critically to reflect upon what has led our Western modernity to ravage our only livable planet. It was also full of inventive forms of resistance and alternative lifestyles which our 21st century could find deeply inspiring⁶. Obsessed by their narrow definition of “culture” (always to be conjugated in the singular) and by their republicanist ideal (inherently blind to modernity’s shortcomings), the centennialist idiocy is bound to rest (in peace) on a **denial** of the ecopolitical issues most crucial to our collective survival.

⁵ On this question, see Yoshiho Iida, *La “religion civile” chez Rousseau comme art de faire penser*, PhD dissertation, University of Grenoble-Alpes, defended October 2015. More generally, see the dossier “Décoloniser la laïcité” in *Multitudes* 59, Summer 2015, in particular Sandra Laugier and Albert Ogien, “Une République du XXI^e siècle”, p. 94-103.

⁶ See Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L’événement anthropocène*, Paris: Seuil, 2013.

But the most striking idiocy of the massive memory-machine set in place around the *devoir de mémoire* and its various centennial celebrations is due to its blind spots in terms of media theory. The very premise of the whole construction (claiming that the youth have lost all memory of the past) is deceptively self-evident. Of course, one can wish for larger segments of the youth population to acquire a better knowledge of past history—and one should certainly act upon it by improving education and developing critical analyses of our current media culture. But this will remain wishful thinking as long as one does not understand the tremendous implications of the long-term and large-scale transformations occurring in our “universe of technical images”. It is by no means surprising that the most important theorist of this transformation, Vilém Flusser (1920-1991), remains a virtually unknown figure in France, in spite of the fact that he lived in the country during the latter part of his life and that a number of his writings have been published and translated for more than a decade⁷.

What Vilém Flusser, as well as other major (German) post-McLuhan thinkers excluded from the French debates, like Friedrich Kittler or Siegfried Zielinski, help us see (and face) is that, from the middle of the 19th century and with a dramatic acceleration over the past 20 years, the dominance of a certain media configuration, based on alphabetical writing and linear causal thinking, is being challenged and overpowered by another media configuration, in which the automatic recording of sound and images, joined with the automatic processing of digitalized data, tend to reshape our experience of time and space in a way that necessarily affect our very conception of memory. While the *devoir de mémoire* presents itself as a counter-poison to the consequences of this evolution—claiming that our youth must be inculcated basic reference points in history *because* the digital culture of the Internet and videogames tends to flatten and ultimately erase historical temporality—its general lack of conceptualization of the ways in which media “fold time, space and agency”⁸ leads most of its advocates to misidentify the problems and their possible solutions.

Back to Kindergarten?

When Vilém Flusser announced the advent of a “post-historical age” during the 1980s, his voice got lost in the debate surrounding Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history”, Daniel Bell’s “post-industrial society” and Jean-François Lyotard’s “postmodern condition”. It is only after the development and commercialization of the Internet, in the first decade of our millennium, that the originality and fecundity of his insights truly appeared. According to him, “post-history” is brought about by the fact that “writing”, defined by its linear concatenation of alphabetical letters allowing both to represent the concatenation of causal relations and to recombine them on paper and in the actual world, is being overcome by the dominance of “technical images”, i.e., images generated by apparatuses in which programs operate automatically, independently from the intervention of human subjectivities (even if, of course, human actions were originally responsible for the instructions assembled in the program). The ubiquitous digitalization of our modes of perceiving, imagining, thinking and communicating induces “a new experience of time and space [which] must obliterate everything that came before: all experiences that cannot yet be aligned under the old concepts of ‘omnipresence’ and ‘simultaneity’” are under threat:

⁷ The English reader is still better equipped to read Flusser since his most important writings have been recently translated and published by the University of Minnesota Press. A good entry into his work is provided by *Into the Universe of Technical Images* [1985], Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. See also the site of the Flusser Archive for more information: <http://www.flusser-archive.org/>.

⁸ Jussi Parikka, “Media Ecologies and Imaginary Media: Transversal Expansions, Contractions, and Foldings”, *The Fibreculture Journal*, n° 17 (2011), p. 35.

Images produced with digital codes are present everywhere at the same time (even on opposite ends of the earth). They can always be called into the present, even in an unthinkable distant future. Concepts of “present”, “future”, “past”, and especially “distance” and “proximity” (i.e., “spacing”) take on new meanings. [...] *Future* and *possibility* become synonymous, *time* becomes synonymous with “becoming more likely”, and *present* becomes the realization of possibilities in form of images. *Future* turns into multidimensional compartments of possibilities that unravel outward toward the impossible and inward toward an image realized in the present. *Space* is just the topology of these compartments. Digital codes are a method of making these compartmentalized possibilities into images. Linear, historical, alphabetical thinking is incompetent for such a critique and must be eliminated.⁹

Rather than blaming the youth for their flailing memory, rather than forcing upon them obsolete categories of time, space and agency out of sync with our universe of technical images, Flusser invites us to try and experiment the new forms of agencies in which younger minds find themselves immersed:

We have to go back to kindergarten. We have to get back to the level of those who have not yet learned to read and write. In this kindergarten, we will have to play infantile games with computers, plotters, and similar gadgets. [...] Young children who share the nursery with us will surpass us in the ease with which they handle the dumb and refined stuff. We try to conceal this reversal of generational hierarchy with terminological gymnastics. [...] We don't have sufficient distance from contemporary crudity, barbarism, and decadence to be able to recognize seeds of splendor, however clearly we may sense them. It is not a principle of hope that propels us back to kindergarten but rather a principle of desperation, namely, the common persuasion: we can't go on like this.¹⁰

This new media configuration which has gradually imposed itself over the past 150 years, with a dramatic acceleration over the last two decades (after Flusser's death), “demands that we rethink the function of memory”: we must learn “the importance of forgetting”¹¹ as much as we must acquire the useful skills of remembering. Even if, as we will see very soon, the reference to “post-history” is misleading and rather unfortunate, it accurately describes a situation in which “we will have to learn to rethink our entire history, backward and forward”, within a form of consciousness which is no longer dominantly historical. Flusser illustrates this “dizzying assignment” by inviting us to “put ourselves in the position of a future reader”:

Let's assume that the world's literature has already been digitally recoded, stored in artificial memories, and its original alphabetic form erased. The future reader sits in front of the screen to call up the stored information. This is no longer a passive taking in (pecking) of information fragments along a prewritten line. This is more like an active accessing of the cross-connections among the available elements of information. It is the reader himself who actually produces the intended information from the stored information elements. [...] According to our current ways of reading and thinking, “Aristotle” would, for example, come before “Newton”. To the future reader, “Aristotle” and “Newton” are simultaneously accessible, both coded digitally. [...] The reader will be able to manipulate the two overlapping systems so that an intermediary stage emerges in which Aristotle's system could arise from Newton's as well as Newton's from Aristotle's. [...] But the history that comes from such a reading is precisely not what we meant by

⁹ Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future ?* [1987], Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 150.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157-158.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

“history”. Historical consciousness—this awareness of being immersed in a dramatic and irreversible flow of time—has vanished from the future reader. He is above it, able to access his own flow of time. He doesn’t read along a line but rather spins his own nets.¹²

Thanks to Flusser’s insights, we are now in a position to see more clearly the shortcomings—but also the possible promises—of centennial commemorations. They can be pointless, ridiculous, or even counterproductive, if their main purpose and design aim at force-feeding to the newer generations a nationalistic historical consciousness bound to attach us to a rigidified and obsolete vision of the past. They can also become, however, a trampoline for thought, insofar as they provide opportunities to establish unsuspected cross-connections between the Aristotles and Newtons from the past, thus shedding new lights on the current issues of our own age. In other words: centennial commemorations can be lifted above their native idiocy of merely celebrating *his*-story—to be understood here as a tale rehearsed by and for the great white French male, proud of the eternal validity of *his* universal values—insofar as they invite all of us to re-invent *our*-story, in light of our new common circumstances and differential aspirations. This task, however, is less accurately described as “post-historical” than as always-historically-in-the-making. For the alternative to history may not so much be found in post-history as in archaeology.

Archaeology vs. History

Vilém Flusser’s sharp intelligence and wit led him to fully acknowledge the paradoxical and self-defeating nature of his book-long essay which attempted “to write past writing: it is to be erased after use”. His trial was bound to “fail because it carr[ied] its own linear, goal-oriented structure into the digital, covering the digital up”¹³. By writing about “post-history”, Flusser remained tied to a linear thinking that considered what comes after as following and replacing what was there beforehand: the *post-* is supposed to abolish the here-to-fore dominant state of things (history, modernity, industrial age, etc.), which itself was supposed to have abolished the *pre*-existing situation (pre-historical, -modern, -industrial). Thus conceived in terms of phases, stages or ages, the success of the late-comer rests on a relation of succession, in which the advent of the new implies the disappearance of the old. Paradoxically, this historical (i.e., linear) vision of history rests on a negation of history: if the old had really disappeared, there would be nothing for historians to study.

François Hartog pursues Flusser’s insight when he describes our current (i.e., post-1989) “regime of historicity” as “presentist”¹⁴. While other cultures have oriented themselves in relation to a mythological past or in relation to projects for the future, the three last decades seem absorbed in a circular self-reference to the present. The commemorative fever itself appears as an over-reactive symptom of this presentism: it is not merely “the youth”, but our whole culture which desperately needs to find its marks in the past, in order to feel a little less insecure about the present (probably because the future looks so worrying). The very notion of a *duty* of remembrance is unthinkable within societies organized around references to the past: the past *is* everywhere, as a ground which surfaces through the most ordinary forms of behavior. It is only because this ground is no longer felt under our feet and within our minds—Vilém Flusser entitled his autobiographical writings *Bodenlos* (“groundless”)—that some of us feel the need to re-mind us of past references in the form of an injunction to remember.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 153-154.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁴ François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity. Presentism and Experiences of Time* [2003], New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

Historicism, which is generally assumed to be an antidote to the presentism of the younger generations, should thus rather be seen as the flipside of the same coin. A more relevant alternative to this “presentist historicism” is provided by what could be termed an “archaeological curiosity”. Knut Ebeling’s masterful study has extracted a specifically archaeological approach which has run parallel to the development of the historical consciousness throughout modernity, from Immanuel Kant to Friedrich Kittler, via Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben¹⁵. In a useful (although obviously reductive) oversimplification, historical consciousness can be described as analyzing time into successive phases, waves, stages, periods, each new arrival replacing the previous occupant. As Flusser often points out, this is due to the intimate link between historical consciousness and causal relations: by definition, a cause comes before its effect, this effect modifies the world, introduces a rupture, and generates a new state of things, which takes the place of the old one. This linear thinking, which forces the huge meshwork of reality to go through the tiny holes of duly identified (hence isolated) causal relations, constitutes the admirable strength of the historical consciousness developed through the apparatuses of “writing”, understood here literally as consisting in a one-dimensional string of characters mimicking, on the bi-dimensional surface of the paper, the concatenation of causes organizing our tri-dimensional world.

The archaeological approach complements this historical consciousness by reminding us of the multi-layered constitution of our social and natural space and time. Instead of successive waves or stages replacing each other, it invites us to uncover the multiplicity of superposed strata which always co-exist, co-act and co-evolve within our minds as well as under our feet. This *uncovering* is quite different from the *recovering* which animates the *devoir de mémoire*. It is less a matter of duty than of curiosity: it thrives on desire and hope, more than on fear and guilt. It does not call for our memory to rescue a past history threatened to disappear by the passage of time; it trusts our intelligence to find out what still animates our present lives under the surface of our always superficial consciousness of ourselves and of our surroundings. The past would not “die” (wither away) if we stopped paying dutiful attention to it—unfortunately, no matter how strongly we often wish it would simply go away! Its traumas and promises would still haunt our perceptions of the present: it does not cease to be because of being outdated. It never fully disappears, it just gets covered up by other more recent layers of appearances, while often continuing to affect us through them. Like nuclear waste, it may no longer be of any use to us, but it often refuses to go away: it remains radioactive, pushing and seeping through the more superficial and more visible layers of our daily environments, contaminating them whether we know it or not.

Documenting the Persistence of Struggles and Lives

In order to flesh out what I have so far expressed in the dry abstraction of theory, I will now turn to the work of filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet which provides remarkable examples of an archaeological gaze very different from the dominant trend of centennial commemorations. A good number of their films could be chosen for this purpose: *Too Early/Too Late* (1980), in its first part, shows panoramic views of the Northern French

¹⁵ Knut Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien 1. Theorien der materiellen Kultur von Kant bis Kittler*, Berlin: Kadmos Kulturverlag, 2012. Over the last two decades, major publications in “media archaeology” have considerably renewed our thinking on these issues—see for instance Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* [1986], Stanford University Press, 1999; Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media* [2002], Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006; Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante. Histoire de l’art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, Minuit, 2002 ; Erkki Huhtamo et Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, Implications*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011; Jussi Parikka, *What Is Media Archaeology?*, Cambridge, Polity, 2012; Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

countryside, while a voice-over reads texts by Friedrich Engels quantifying the poverty and mortality rates of the peasant population at the end of the 18th century, while its second part alternates pans and travelings showing Egyptian landscapes, with readings from Mahmoud Hussein's *Class Conflict in Egypt 1945-1970*. A series of Italian projects, including *Operai, contadini* (*Workers, Peasants*, 2000) and *Umiliati* (*Humiliated*, 2002), stage non-professional Italian actors in the Tuscan forest to have them recite texts by Elio Vittorini's *Women of Messina* (1949), describing conflicts within and around utopian rural communities in the aftermath of World War II.

In each case, as well as in many of their other post-1980 films, under-celebrated social struggles from the past, as documented by literary writers, are revisited with an apparently minimal, but meticulously crafted staging which allow them, at the same time, to appear in their distant historical strangeness, to catch something unique specific to the instant of the shooting, and eerily to resonate with current socio-political situations. While the text themselves are extracted from a distant past (usually prior to 1950), and while their literality is scrupulously respected, Jean-Marie Straub trains his mostly amateur actors to recite them in an extremely disciplined, yet amazingly intense phrasing, which reveals many layers internal to the textual substrate itself. Yesterday's struggles and yesterday's literature are incarnated in the present by the very challenging and somewhat athletic declamations captured live by the camera in direct-sound and unedited takes. As Straub writes, their cinema relies "on those things that are not 'reproducible', on the incarnation of [the authors'] words in each character, on the instant, the noise, the wind, and, most of all, on the effort made by the actors, on the risk they run, like tightrope walkers, during the live captation of long and difficult texts recorded in real time, in perfect sync with the image"¹⁶.

This ascetic discipline aims at putting the spectators in the best conditions to perform the type of interpretative hacking Vilém Flusser assigned to "the future reader", operating beyond the limits inherent to the "historical consciousness", an "active accessing of the cross-connections among the available elements of information". Between the Sicily of the 1940s described by Vittorini, the Tuscany of the early 2000 where the films were rehearsed and shot, and the Parisian cinemas where I watched some of them with Phil Watts around 2006, the spectators are invited "to manipulate [several] overlapping systems so that an intermediary stage emerges", in which struggles and lives from the past inject renewed meanings into struggles and lives of today.

What Jacques Rancière has described as an ecological turn of Straub and Huillet at the time of *Too Early/Too Late*¹⁷ is precisely designed to boost an attention ecology conducive to the activity envisaged by Flusser for the future reader in a universe of technical images:

until now [1980], none of our films had provided a space as "open" as this one, as free, so that the spectators themselves (and the two of us as first spectators) must take it on themselves to construct links, associations, relations, learn to decipher, to establish cross-connections, to 'interpret' reality, or rather realities!¹⁸

As Robert Bonamy eloquently pointed out, Straub and Huillet's films are devoted to a certain form of repetition, documenting "the persistence of cross-temporal forces"¹⁹ which continue to animate struggles across different periods—moved by an intermittent but ever-reappearing resistance against capitalist exploitation and political oppression.

¹⁶ Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, *Écrits*, Paris: Independencia éditions, 2012, p. 67. My translations.

¹⁷ See Philippe Lafosse, *L'étrange cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Toulouse : éditions Ombres, 2007, p. 146-147.

¹⁸ Straub and Huillet, *Écrits*, op. cit., p. 109.

¹⁹ Robert Bonamy, *Le fond cinématographique*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013, p. 135. My translations.

Europa 1906 / 1951/2005 / 2006 / 2015

A most striking and uniquely rich example of this persistence of struggles—rooted in recent and vivid layers of our past which the usual references to the *devoir de mémoire* tends precisely to obfuscate—is provided by the *ciné-tract* entitled *Europa 2005-27 octobre*²⁰, released one year after the uprisings which shook the French *banlieues* (disenfranchised neighborhoods) in November 2005, leading the government to call for the state of emergency in order to repress and control the car-burning riots and other forms of contestation perpetrated by youth of mostly North African origins, frustrated to suffer from ethnic discrimination, high unemployment rates and daily police harassment. The uprisings were triggered by the death of two young boys, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré (respectively 17 and 15 years old), in an electric transformer building in Clichy-sous-Bois, where the police had chased and cornered them, resulting in their deadly electrocution.

This 10-minute film strikes and puzzles by its simplicity: a slow panoramic camera move shows a street, which happens to be the one where Zyed and Bouna died, first in towards the right, with birds in the soundtrack, then, after a cut which displaces the camera 50 meters backward in the same street, towards the left, this time with the insistent barking of a dog. The same sequence is repeated five times, presenting five different takes, which vary only slightly in terms of sunlight, cloudy skies and street noises. A number identifies the different takes, from 1 to 5, on a black screen, with the title repeated between each one. At the beginning of the right pan, a tag warns people to “stop” and “not risk their life” by getting too near to the electrical transformer; at the end of the left pan, two lines of text are superimposed on the image of the street: GAZ CHAMBER. ELECTRIC CHAIR. No other explanation is provided to the spectators, who may wonder what hit them if they do not remember (the circumstances of) the death of Zyed and Bouna.



The filmmakers hoped—in vain—that theaters would show *Europa 2015* as a short before the feature film, in the *banlieues* and elsewhere, to mark the first anniversary of the events. It is thus indeed a work of commemoration. Far from a *duty* of remembrance, however, this *ciné-tract* puts the spectators in a situation where they experience the *need* to remember something, dating back from only 12 months before, in order to make sense of the puzzle presently offered to their senses and intelligence. This work of remembrance and observation, intimately linked to each other, calls them to cross-connect many strata belonging to many heterogeneous registers of our various pasts. Some will notice the seasonal discrepancy between the date provided (October 27) and the lush pink flowering of the trees, indicating that the film was shot many months after the fact (whatever that “fact” may be).

²⁰ The film can be viewed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGU06JQ92lc> (consulted August 1, 2015).

The five repetitions of these very similar sequences provide enough time internally to connect the choking final reference to the electric chair with initial the death warning, and with the numerous electrical wires and pylons visible on the horizon.

To those blessed with some knowledge in film history, the title will recall *Europa 51* by Roberto Rossellini. In his thorough study of the *ciné-tract* (another fold in time, since this form is imported from the militant filmmakers of the late 1960s), Robert Bonamy analyses the rich and complex play of resonance between the two films. Straub and Huillet were commissioned to make this short by the Italian channel RAI TRE in order to celebrate the centennial of Rossellini's birth in 1906. *Europa 51* told the story of a bourgeois woman who lost her child Michele, who committed suicide, suffering from a lack of attention on the part of his parents; *Europa 2005* documents the place in which French society, through its police and its inattention to social inequalities and ethnic discrimination, suicided two of its teenagers. The turning point for the mother played by Ingrid Bergman comes when she discovers the work conditions imposed to her husband's employees in the oppressive environment of the industrial factory, with loud sirens rapidly driving her mad; the turning point for Straub and Huillet's camera is provided by the view of the industrial building housing the deadly electrical power, with a dog painfully barking in each consecutive take. The rise in social awareness by the bourgeois wife only leads her to be incarcerated by her family in a mental asylum; after a few weeks of uprising, severely repressed and crushed by the state of emergency, the discriminated youth went back to their ghetto, temporarily normalized, without much improvement in their prospect for the future²¹.

By focusing the spectators' attention on a particular site of Clichy-sous-Bois, on its (deadly) industrial buildings, its (cruelly ironic) tags, its (yet unburnt) cars, its (still magnificent) flowering trees and its (annoyingly insistent) barking dogs, *Europa 2005* modestly invites us to think, instead of ceremoniously urging us to learn. The last frame of each sequence, however, works as a more disturbing and more violent provocation: what can this apparently innocent street possibly have to do with the gas chambers and the electric chair? The second reference can be easily connected to the death of the teenagers, condemned to electrocution by an injustice system which treats them as scum—*racaille* was the word infamously used by then Minister of Interior Nicolas Sarkozy, throwing gasoline on the first days of the uprising. While France has abolished the death penalty in 1981, the electric chair suggests a parallel between the fate of Maghrebian populations in the French *banlieues* and the fate of African-Americans in US inner cities, both massively incarcerated and exceptionally executed, after having been systematically discriminated against.



²¹ For more precise and more subtle parallels, see Robert Bonamy, *Le fond cinématographique*, op. cit., p. 139-154.



5



EUROPA 2005

27 octobre

At first, however, the reference to the gas chamber seems quite disproportionate to the (accidental?) death of (only?) two children. Here again, Robert Bonamy's analysis helps us dig a certain archaeological ground that provides a new meaning, in this context, to the figure of the Nazi death camps. Behind a rather superficial connection with the teargas used around a mosque and against the demonstrators in Clichy-sous-Bois just a few hours after the electrocution of the teenagers, beside another echo with Rossellini, whose *Voyage en Italie* was still haunted by the archeological digging up of corpses, the reference to Nazi Germany and the period of World War II purposefully introduces a violent clash—frequent in Jean-Marie Straub's public appearances—in the face of the dominant uses of the *devoir de mémoire*. What is shown by the pans in these repetitive sequences looks indeed somewhat like a camp, with its high walls surmounted by barbed wires²². On this side of the wall, the trees are flowering, but the other side looks less welcoming and much less auspicious—our first image was a death warning. As I watch this ciné-tract again in the summer of 2015, when France prepares itself (not) to celebrate the 10 years of the *banlieues* uprising of 2005, it is hard not to hear the words of the current Prime Minister Manuel Valls acknowledging the “apartheid” and “ghetto” status to which certain segments of the French population are condemned. His main response, in the form of (yet more) neoliberal economic reforms, is indeed a modern equivalent to *Arbeit macht frei*: the youth are called upon to work hard and find a job (in a context of jobless “recovery”) as the only way to break free from their current misery.

More provocatively yet, the reference to the gas chambers at the (five-time repeated) end of *Europa 2005* questions our problematic positioning towards the geopolitical implications of our national inheritance of colonial oppression and post(?)-colonial discriminations. The point, here again, is not to “compare” the size, scope and cruelty of punctual episodes of police brutality biased against certain ethnic groups in 2015 France with the systematized murder of other ethnic groups in the Europe of the 1940s. It is to ask what are the scandalous forms of injustice which plague our own age, and which may fall into our own responsibility and agency. We unfortunately cannot go back in time to open the doors of the Nazi death camps. But we can raise our voices and actions in order to help ghettoized population, in Clichy-sous-Bois, in US jails or on the Gaza strip, as well as in downtown Paris or Manhattan, to overcome the discrimination and oppression to which they are currently subjected. What if, *mutatis mutandis*, our *banlieues* were our contemporary *Lagers*? What if our duty was less to remember Nazi crimes of half a century ago than to alleviate today's discriminations, inherited from the still radioactive stratum of our colonial past, barely hidden under the surface of our supposedly post-colonial European societies?

Nicolas Brulhart perfectly encapsulated the way *Europa 2005*—designed to celebrate the centennial of Rossellini's birth and the first anniversary of the Zyed and Bouna's death—

²² Robert Bonamy, *Le fond cinématographique*, op. cit., p. 152-153.

illustrates an archaeological mobilization of the spectators' intelligence and memory quite distinct from the majoritarian commemorative celebrations:

The movie's main merit rests on its functioning as a catalyst for an oppositional memory which turns upside down the associative principle of traditional cinema. The film sets in motion a certain work of thought, rather than blocking it by providing an image which would attempt to reproduce the past. It invites the recollection of an open constellation of heterogeneous objects and events, all absent, but all recoverable through an effort of attention. The very form of the film is in solidarity with the disappeared. It does not play the game of commemoration, or it merely sketches an impossible commemoration for the event alluded to as a hollow shell.²³

Recomposed Filiations

Voluntarily removed from our rapidly evolving digital culture, but thanks to a profound and meticulous reflection on the "technical images" theorized by Vilém Flusser, the films directed by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet help us display the contrast between the majoritarian trends of *historical commemoration*, based on the narration of a linear succession of facts following the thread of causal concatenations, and the minoritarian practice of *archaeological documentation*, based on the excavation of some of the co-existing strata still co-active (*coagenda*: "cogent") in the daily reproduction of our own present reality²⁴.

Instead of re-narrating already well-documented episodes and monuments from the past, the archaeological approach attempts to make perceptible and intelligible things, events and people excluded from the hegemonic master-narratives. Instead of enforcing a linear view of temporality, it elicits cross-connections between a plurality of superposed strata, all the more interesting if they happen to communicate through disturbing ways. Instead of calling for the living to remember the dead, it considers all of us as living dead, partly zombies, partly haunted by revenants. Instead of expecting well-constituted, responsible subjects to pay attention to powerless victims of past traumas, it invites our individual and collective bodies ever to re-constitute themselves, to re-member their inescapably disjointed, torn-apart and scattered mental limbs. For this work of re-membrance is animated by a need to orient ourselves within the potentially land-mined and radioactive common grounds we share with our fellow humans, rather than by a duty toward any particular figure from the past.

These two different trends of centennial filiations could also be contrasted through an opposition between "traditional" family values, where the structure, hierarchy and foundation of filiation is merely to be inherited, acknowledged and carried on toward the future, and "recomposed" families, where the collective entity has to be re-membered on a case by case basis—keeping in mind, of course, that one can no more "freely" choose the ground on which one stands than the parents by whom one was conceived or raised. One can divorce from a begrudging spouse, one may migrate to a different country, with much difficulty in both cases; but one is bound to live with the ghosts of our family members as well as with the various forms of radioactive waste buried under our feet by centuries of often oppressive, violent and reckless human activity.

²³ Nicolas Brulhart, « *Europa 2005-27 Octobre*, ou la répétition dans le *ciné-tract* de Jean-Marie Straub », *Décadrages*, 18, 2011, p. 125. My translation.

²⁴ In this paragraph, I closely follow the list of features provided by Knut Ebeling in his *Wild Archaeologies* (op. cit.). On the question of the documentary, see Benoît Turquety, *Danièle Huillet et Jean-Marie Straub, « objectivistes » en cinéma*, Lausanne: L'âge d'homme, 2009 ; Pierre-Damien Huyghe, *Le cinéma avant après*, Saint Vincent de Mercuze: De l'incidence éditeurs, 2012 ; Jacopo Rasmi, « L'archipel du nouveau documentaire italien : l'exemple de Michelangelo Frammartino », *Multitudes*, 61, Winter 2015 ; and Yves Citton, « Documenter les contre-fictions », *Multitudes*, 61, Winter 2015.

While the cinema of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet provides a prime artistic example to illustrate this work of documentation and remembrance of our present struggles and lives inescapably rooted in the past, the scholarly writings of Phil Watts could provide an equally fine model of recomposed filiations. His first published book on the *Allegories of the Purges* dug into the always muddy conundrum of the literary writer's responsibility toward the socio-historical implications of his ideological and stylistic choices²⁵. The archaeological challenge consisted in documenting the various dimensions of the problem, presenting the contextual evidence while letting the readers do the meaningful cross-connections and face their own responsibility in judging (or not) the accused and the prosecutors of the Collaborators' trials. In his almost fully written but unpublished book project on the classicist sublayer of many 20th-century writers (like Sartre, Eluard and Ponge), Phil Watts performed a typically archeological gesture by showing that classics and modern could often co-exist as two strata within the same individual, rather than follow each other in a linear history of succession. In his posthumous essay on Roland Barthes' cinema, published in French in sync with the centennial celebrations of the critic's birth in 1915, Phil Watts addressed numerous issues of media archaeology, re-membering the *disjecta membra* of a strong and remarkably persistent (if ambivalent) urge, throughout Barthes' career, to analyze film as a challenge to (structuralist) theory²⁶. From the *Mythologies* to the *Camera Lucida* published the year of his death (1980), Barthes' reflections on cinema did not so much go through contradictory phases—demystifying the movies in the 1950s, subjecting them to rigid structuralist analyses in the 1960s, reinvesting them with subjective desire in the post-structuralist decade of the 1970s—as they persisted in re-exploring, unfolding and deepening the same basic intuitions and hope about a filmic sensuality perceived as a promise of democratic equality. Far from being organized in a linear succession of stages, the deep time of Roland Barthes' cinema is already Rancierian and Deleuzian as early as 1955—and it is more vivid today than ever before, 35 years after Barthes' tragically early death.

From 2010 on, Phil and I launched a book project devoted to a common reflection on the mode of existence of cinematic images at the beginning of the third millennium. Under Phil's impulse, the project rapidly focused on the work of Straub and Huillet, which I had seen in the 1980s while missing out on the more interesting projects they developed after their ecological turn. During a semester as an invited professor at NYU in the Spring of 2011, I met with Phil as often as his duties as chair of the French Department at Columbia University allowed. We watched and discussed their films with much admiration, love and intensity. In the following summer, as we were walking together behind the Place de Clichy to catch a movie at the Cinéma des cinéastes, Phil suddenly stopped to look more carefully within a bar on rue Ganneron: he had recognized Jean-Marie Straub. We sat down, drank and chatted with him for an hour or so, received with a warm, curious and generous welcome, even if both of us were total strangers to him. We promised to stay in touch and plan for a formal interview, as soon as Phil could return to Paris. Neither the interview nor the book were meant to be. Phil was struck by cancer in the Spring of 2013 and passed away on July 20 of that same year.

No duty of remembrance is due to Phil's memory. While his cruel death has tragically interrupted his interactions with us, he is still alive in us, in the lasting effect his past presence continues to have on our present lives. Phil belongs to the intellectual ground on which I stand, day in and day out. He lives each time I watch, enjoy, reflect or write about a film by Straub and Huillet, since it is thanks to his influence that I rediscovered and appreciate their

²⁵ Philip Watts, *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to the Postwar Trials of Writers and Intellectuals in France*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999.

²⁶ Philip Watts, *Barthes and Cinema*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. French edition: *Le cinéma de Roland Barthes*, suivi d'un entretien avec Jacques Rancière, trad. de Sophie Queuniet, Saint Vincent de Mercuze: De l'incidence éditeurs, 2015.

work. His many friends, his devoted students silently commemorate his generosity on a daily basis, by being better persons, more sensitive and more intelligent, than they would have been without having met him. We are his brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, each time we compose parts of our lives in filiation with the encounters we were fortunate enough to have with him. We can cry and mourn his departure—our loss, so cruel!—but not his disappearance, since he remains active in the multiple strata of influence inscribed at the core of our personality.

It is this collective remembrance of our scattered beings, it is this constant recomposing of filiations within a cultural family always already there and always to sort out for the future, it is this tradition always in the making through our present struggles against injustice, it is the documentation of such persistent struggles which keep us alive through each other, beyond the fragility of our individual fates:

On Flusser's gravestone in the New Jewish Cemetery in Prague, a verse from Hosea (14:10), printed together with a short Portuguese text, reads "*Eu morro, tu morres, não morreremos*" (I will die, you will die, we will not die), implying that although we live alone, we survive together in the conversations of those still alive²⁷.

²⁷ Anke Finger, Rainer Guldin and Gustavo Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser. An Introduction*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 85.