

Who is speaking there?

– Some Greetings to the Other Side

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It is said that the essence of the attempts to link documentary filmmaking with contemporary politics in the 1960s and 1970s in France concur in one single scene: a scene filmed in front of the Usines Wonder in Paris in 1968 at the end of a strike. It is as well told that Jacques Willemont passed by the factory with the cameraman Pierre Bonneau coincidentally, having only 10 minutes of film left in the camera. With it they caught a moment where a woman refused to reenter the factory and take up her work. Her anger, her refusal, and her invoking voice get to the heart of what was tried and discussed at the time, and visualize what can be shown with a document. But at the centre of the disputes between the proponents of *cinéma vérité* and *cinéma direct* lie the question, which role filmmakers should take. Should one observe and document or provoke a situation, and produce a scene? Should the position of the filmmaker be visible? Should it reveal itself? Or should one try to let the situation speak by itself? Which possibilities exist to reflect these questions in the making? And how could one approach the complication of documenting and representing people involved or affected? Should one find new ways and forms of production, in which the material and the films themselves reflect on the fact that there are different voices that need to find their own form of representation?

The history of the approaches to confront and deal with these questions is long. And one could say that the most convincing experiments have solidified in times of political struggles. I remember Dziga Vertovⁱ. And I remember Boris Medvedkinⁱⁱ. But a specifically dense period around the controversy happened as well in the late 60s in France: the *États généraux du cinéma français*ⁱⁱⁱ was created. Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin formed *The Dziga Vertov Group*^{iv}. The *Ciné-tracts*^v, a format of politically engaged short films in which a larger group of filmmakers took part, was launched. Chris Marker founded *SLON*^{vi}, a production studio, and a filmmaking collective. The films produced by those groups made a variety of experiments visible that deal with questions of authorship. They make the relation between the two sides of the camera the subject of their films. Out of *SLON*'s production, stems maybe one of the most revealing outcomes of this period: *À bientôt, j'espère*. — Actually, I would have to say, stem an entire series of films: *À bientôt, j'espère - Classe du lutte - La charnière* and *Die Kamera in der Fabrik*.^{vii}

With *À bientôt j'espère*, Marker and several of his colleagues at *SLON* shot a film to support the big strike at the Rhodiacéta/Rhone-Poulenc factory in Besançon. In the film, Marker gives a voice to the workers; a sparse, purely informative commentary subordinates itself to what the strikers have to say. In the 16mm film *La Charnière* having recorded only the sound of the discussion just after the presentation of *À bientôt j'espère*, one voice criticizes the fact that the filmic gaze is “too romantic” and remained “situated outside the working class”^{viii}. A dozen workers therefore found a film collective themselves: the *Groupe Medvedkine*. In their first film, *La classe du lutte*, the group shows Suzanne Zedet, already filmed in *À bientôt j'espère* who joins the union and pursues the politicization of her colleagues. The film is a response as well as a continuation of the first film producing a teaching-piece on the contradictory relation between filming and being filmed. Yet another step in

the series of responses is the film *Die Kamera in der Fabrik*, in which German NDR producer Hans Brecht edited a version of the two films in 1970, re-narrating a commentary by Marker. In it, Marker explains: “At the time, the workers of Rhodiacéta saw my film for the first time, a discussion started. Some said this film could be a weapon, others commented that the most important thing in the film was missing: the political prospect. The workers were complaining that one could only see the odds and ends and the outcome – the strike – but not the overall context. One would not be able to see the things that had changed for the people. The process of the change of awareness would not be visible. And that would be a mistake.”^{ix}

The series of films build upon and comment on each other. Although rarely articulated by the films directly, the way the productions speak to each other allows one to figure the discussions and questions raised, such as: What is the relation between the form, the medium, and the political struggle? What is the larger context for making these films? How was it to stand, for the first time, on the box in front of the factory and raise one’s voice? How did this change one’s life? And – Who is speaking? The films together create a space; a territory in which a crossing of various voices and positions, as well as a search for a usage of the medium of film as a weapon and an enlightening tool appears. “The beginning was”, says Marker, “to learn to see. The group wanted to make a movie about the change of consciousness. They needed equipment and money. And then, one day, the group had its first editing table.”

But what has changed?

Today, many things still resonate with this history. But the question of how one would be able to learn a technique, finance a camera and an editing table has fundamentally changed. In the early 2000s, the artist Raphael Grisey starts to work on a film about a friend of his mother: Bouba Touré. Touré came to Paris in the 1960s from Mali. For some years he worked for Renault and then became a projectionist at the cinema Entrepôt in Paris. Touré started to photograph in the immigrant housing blocks in the 60s, and has since then documented nearly every part of his life with his camera: the living and working conditions of migrants in France, the movement of the Sans-Papiers and the emergence of the cooperative Somankidi Coura in Mali, of which he was one of the co-founders in the 1970s. In a first version, shown among others at Oberwelt in Stuttgart, Germany, the 20-minute two-channel video installation by Grisey focuses on the cooperative. Somankidi Coura was founded along the river Senegal in Mali in 1976 by a group of migrants from West Africa who had worked in France at the time the struggle of the Sans-Papiers began. The cooperative started on the 60-hectar territories with only 14 men and two women. Today more than 200 persons live in the cooperative. At the beginning, land was worked collectively; while later parcels of land were given to individuals or small groups. In the version of the film from 2008, it seems that the doings of the cooperative keep on expanding – from the work on the fields, to the construction of a water system, to the selling of products at the nearest big city. Not present in the film is that the cooperative also founded URCAK (Union Régionale des Coopératives Agricoles de Kayes).

For Grisey, it is not only Touré’s life in Paris, but as well the broader aspects and perspectives of the politics of migration that make him travel to Mali several times. After various versions of the film^x, a work ever expanding, Touré gives him a present: a videotape. It is one of the first videos Touré has ever made. He has rarely used a

video camera before, but he can put the technical medium immediately in action. The site where the video takes place is his home: a two-room apartment with hundreds of photographs, posters, and keepsakes on the walls. On the floor, piles of documents, photographs, and stacks of negatives in paper envelopes appear. Touré films along the walls and narrates: *"My dearest photos are displayed. All the photographs you are watching are photographs from my life. Photographs that I took for myself or for others."* The thirty-minute video, shot in two takes, is led by the images on the wall. Touré links many political struggles of the last 50 years with his life, showing and speaking about them: Amilcar Cabral, *"the great African hero killed by Portuguese imperialisms"* – the cooperative Somankidi Coura – a photograph from friends of the cooperative with the main tool, the daba – *"the image of Africa created by Europe"* – a painting of Touré with his mother – *"the importance of recording one's life and activity"* – a poster showing Chirac with one of *"our dictators, the ex president of Togo"* saying *Non à la guerre en Irak, Oui à la dictature au Togo* – a poster of the film *Soweto*, of the films *L'argent*, *Les nuits de la pleine Lune*, *La vie est un roman* and *Zan Boko* – about Modibo Keita and Sékou Touré – a poster of Thomas Sankara, *"killed because he wanted to create another relation between France and Africa"* – a piece of cloth picturing Nelson Mandela and questions addressed at him – images of demonstrations in Paris – political posters, *"which speak, which say something"* and letters from the family asking for money.

Grisey adds to this present given to him only one thing: a title –
Bouba Touré, 58 rue Trousseau, Paris, France

The rhythm, the relation between image and voice, the story continuously influenced by one or the other, the relation of an image memory and a personal history, do not allow for much interference, re-editing or comment. Grisey has to somehow leave the piece almost as it is. He only makes two cuts. Touré's narration has its own rhythm. After some time he enters a condition of speech that reminds me of a dance – in repeating certain lines, he catches breath and makes up his thoughts:

It is because the African consciousness falls asleep again. It is because the African consciousness falls asleep again. It is because the African consciousness falls asleep again.

I am crying. I am crying. I am crying. I am crying.

*Africa will wake one day and will say stop! Africa will wake one day and will say stop!
Africa will wake one day and will say stop! Africa will wake one day and will say stop!*

I am triste. I am triste. I am triste. I am triste. I am triste.

The clock must ring. The clock must ring. The clock must ring. The clock must ring.

Yes. The battle. Yes. The battle. Yes. The battle. Yes. The battle.

Life is a battle. Life is a battle. Life is a battle.

In a version edited in 2008, Grisey expands the material with newly filmed scenes from the cooperative in Mali as well as older ones from Touré's life in France. Now, the video installation has expanded to a length of 78-minutes, and besides the showing of the life in Somankidi Coura, he adds a scene of a deserted colonial village in Mali and observations of Touré's political life in Paris: his job as a projectionist, his work as a photographer and his engagement in the immigrant community visualized by him giving a slide lecture about the cooperative in an immigrant housing block in Paris. Sometimes the two channels expand the field of vision of the same scene happening twice, sometimes it cuts together diverse narrations in the same space; sometimes it produces a collision between diverse activities and spaces: On the right projection, for example, Touré leaves his house in Paris, while on the left projection we see images of him arriving at the cooperative in Mali.

Greetings to the other side

The series of films and documents around Rhodiacéta originated as a continuous comment on each other, picking up questions that were raised by the one before. Everything at stake was put on display – questioned and expanded in different versions time and again. Together, next to each other or one after the other, they create a space that unfolds the discourse around the role of the author, the rules of how to shoot a documentary, the situation of showing films, the changing roles of positions and activities. Everything seems to have been questioned and invented anew. In *A bientôt j'espère* appears a scene where a worker arriving in the middle of an interview situation greets not only his friends around the table, but also the cameraman. Within the common rules of documentary filmmaking, the scene would have to be cut out. But SLON leaves it, and thus it becomes a commentary, which addresses not only the person behind the camera, but also us as viewers of the film, reminding us that we might as well be part of what is taking place.

A comparable scene comes up as well in Grisey's 2008 version of the film on the cooperative. It shows him standing together with Touré in front of a termitarium somewhere on the soil of the cooperative close to a banana plantation. Grisey had intended to destroy it whereas Touré prevents him from doing so, arguing that they should "*do everything to conserve nature and keep as many termitariums as possible.*" He tells Grisey to "*just film them and explain:*

'With this soil they build...' You don't have to destroy them. Is that clear?!' In the scene Touré instructs not only Grisey how to handle termitariums, but also how to film.

Touré's own video, which is created in an entirely different political atmosphere than the SLON films, does not only pick up the subject of Grisey's work, but first of all makes a gift for him. Grisey is allowed to do with it whatever he wants to. Looking at the two videos, it seems that, most of all, the struggle to expand on given notions and rules within a production of film or art are missing. It feels like the experiments set in motion by the struggles nearly forty years ago, are today easily adoptable. And Grisey does not keep the gift for himself; he shows Touré's video in the same exhibition as his two channel video installation. The two videos, shown in two separate rooms of an exhibition space, both somehow reflect on a different aspect, but communicate through what one could call a political struggle set in motion by a friendship.

Within one of the biggest, most challenging questions of contemporary French politics – the question of immigration, and the struggles around former and present colonization politics – exist many forms of address, many of which never pose the question of who is actually speaking. Grisey and Touré seem very aware of this issue, addressing it in a wonderful way by creating a territory between two distinct voices and opening a space where they start to communicate with each other. The thing that is left for us with their production today is that we might only have to find a good place for them to dwell. Time and again.

Epilog

While Touré prepares to leave his house, Grisey films him from inside the apartment. Touré puts on his coat, takes the key, and opens the door; he leaves, closes the door, and locks it from outside. The camera, now locked inside, continues to film and records the slowly fading sound of the footsteps.

ⁱ Dziga Vertov (1896-1954), Russian filmmaker

ⁱⁱ Alexander Iwanowitsch Medvedkin (1900-1989), Russian filmmaker

ⁱⁱⁱ The *États généraux du cinéma français* ('Estates General of the French Cinema') locked into step with the demands of protesting students and workers for three weeks in May and June 1968, seeking to promote 'the revolution in the cinema' by developing ambitious plans for the drastic form of the French film industry and backing the efforts of radical students and workers to make their own films.

^{iv} The *Dziga Vertov Group* was formed in 1968 by politically active filmmakers including Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin. It is said that their films were defined primarily for Brechtian forms, Marxist ideology, and a lack of personal authorship. The group, named after 1920s-'30s Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, was dissolved soon after the completion of 1972's *Letter to Jane*. Some critics observed that Godard and Gorin actively encouraged the equation between the *Dziga-Vertov Group* and political activity in France through numerous pronouncements and interviews, none of which show much solidarity with, or indeed mention of, other political film-collectives. Indeed, of all intellectuals and film technicians, the *Dziga-Vertov Group* members never made any attempt to open up their internal process to workers and non-film-makers, which set up the basic contradiction that eventually split the Group: they were intellectuals making films that praised workers and criticized intellectuals, but which were seen by and large by intellectuals, not workers.

^v The *Ciné-Tracts* (1968) project was undertaken by a number of French directors as a means of taking direct revolutionary action during and after the events of May 1968. Each of the *Ciné-Tracts* consists of 100 feet of 16mm black and white silent film shot at 24 FPS, equalling a projection-time of 2 minutes and 50 seconds. The films were made available for purchase at the production cost, which at the time was fifty francs. Roughly 200 films were produced.

^{vi} *SLON* (*Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles* / 'Society for Launching new Works') was founded in 1967. *SLON*'s principle of working collectively outside the organizational hierarchies of the film industry would soon connect with the project of democratizing access to the tools of filmmaking, so that dissenting groups could express and communicate their own values and ideas, rather than being spoken for by media professionals. (see: Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker-Memories of the Future*, Reaktion Books, 2005, p.110f)

^{vii} *À bientôt j'espère*, D: Chris Marker, F 1968
Classe de lutte, D: Groupe Medvedkine, F 1969

^{viii} In the DVD box *Les groupes Medvedkines* published by the éditions Montparnasse in 2006, one can see the whole productions of the *Medvedkin groups* and listen as well at *La charnière*. Some more comments to the film were : — (...) *I think that the director is incompetent. (...) And I think rather, I say it roughly as well, that there is simply an exploitation of the Rhodia workers by people who supposedly struggle against capitalism!* — (...) *there is no moment in the film, I think, where a worker raised the problem of disciplin inside the factory that makes one a victim. — (...) and the work of women doesn't appear in your film. This is also maybe a gap. — (...) and also our solutions, because we have still some solutions, here, they are not tackled at all. — (...) for the first time, or one of the few times, the workers appeared on the screen. Even if there are uncompleted aspects— which seem missing for us— it asks the problems, it will bring inevitably someone to get hold of what is missing and explain it. (...) I personally think, I say it frankly, Chris is a romantic. He saw the workers' unions organization with romantism.*

^{ix} Chris Marker, quote from: *Die Kamera in der Fabrik*, off –voice

^x Versions of the double video installation *Cooperative* by Grisey: *Coopérative* (2007), 20min; *Rendez-Vous*, Les subsistances, Lyon, France, 2007; *Karambolage*, Oberwelt, Stuttgart, Germany, 2008. *Coopérative* (2008), 78 min; contemporary art center of Chelles Les Églises 2008.