

# Performing Postcolonial Memory: Visual Practices and the Archive

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paper

*Territories* is the title of a film made in 1984 by Isaac Julien, one of the leading artists to emerge from the mid-80s collectives of black British filmmakers based in London. The film begins with the word 'Territories', marked out in yellow on a black background. As if seen through prison bars, the outline of each letter in the word contains images of the Afro-British experience in the 80s. Then, the camera zooms into the word showing images of ruins, archival footage on Notting Hill Carnivals in the 70s, and police violence, while we hear a male and a female voice-over: «We are struggling to begin a story».

*Territories'* incipit brings to light how the unfolding of spatial and historical movement across continents and times is inscribed in contemporary memoryscapes, bodies, and lives by questioning and disrupting the established cultural and historical intelligibility of such racialised space. To begin a story does not simply entail the disclosure of something untold but requires a new language. This point raises one of the main research questions addressed by the BABE Research Project, in its attempt to investigate the ways in which questions of memory and representations of history are embedded in various forms of visual practices: cartographic mapping, moving image-making, art production and exhibition. In these pages I will point out several directions of research connected to this perspective by looking in particular to contemporary art practices addressing, challenging or working through the idea of 'archive'. By discussing multiple lines of engagements with the aesthetical, historical, and political implications of the visual archive I will try to highlight one site of potential conversations across fields of knowledge put forward by the Project.

## 1. Migrations and memory

To consider the contiguous archives of historical research and artistic works allows us to investigate various forms of connections between space/place and memory, starting from the fact that archives may be considered, or have traditionally been considered, a practice rooted in the intimate relationship of place and memory, as depositories where the past is located in material and spatial traces. However, the priority given to fixed locations within spatially bounded communities, is also what marks the role of memory as a «handmaiden of nationalist zeal», as Jeffrey Olick has put it (2003: 1). Recently Julia Creet has remarked that the focus on fixed locations and original events in memory studies has shaped a position according to which «time is the only movement which memory tolerates». In this framing the migrant, beyond conditions of physical exile, «has also been expelled from the land of memory itself» or confined to specific social spaces and discourses as an embodiment of forms of counter-memory. By remarking that «memory is where we have arrived rather than where we have left», Creet invites us, on the contrary, to consider dislocation as an intrinsic feature of memory itself since the «movement is what produces memory» (Creet and Kitzmann, 2011: 5-9).

Besides allowing us to see how migrations can contribute to our understanding of memory, and how migration itself is remembered and integrated into narratives about the past in different national contexts, this perspective also raises the question of the migrations of memory if even within archives «without momentum memory dies» (ibid.: 295). By this term I refer to different dislocations of visual narratives from archives to galleries, from private spaces to public spaces, from ethnographic practices to cinemas, just to name a few. The particular mode of transposing an image from one semantic field to another points to the intersection between ways of remembering and figures of language that manifests itself into temporality. As in the moment of viewing the archival image is re-read in a triangular relationship, it includes both viewer subjectivity and the people and the pasts it documents: How images become reframed and relocated by being placed in an archive and catalogued in a particular way or showed in a gallery or a cinema theatre.

Furthermore, visibility manifests itself as a crucial field of enquiry through its place within the genealogy of modernity. As Nicholas Mirzoeff has pointed out «*Visibility* is an old word for an old project. It is not a trendy theory-word meaning the totality of all visual images and devices, but it is in fact an early nineteenth-century term, meaning the visualization of history». Global empires and modern regimes of visibility were mutually implicated, and in important ways even constitutive of each other. Through techniques of classification, separation and aestheticization visibility sutured authority to power, making it self-evident (Mirzoeff, 2011: 2). From the very beginning photography, moving images, and aerial cartography had a multiplicity of applications. Due to their evidentiary value they were used in medicine, in law, across all the natural and human sciences, as well as in governmental practices of urban planning and military control. The optical and visual technologies, practices and discourses linked to modern visibility are closely connected to the importance of space as a feature of modernity. Yet, as product of nineteenth-century industrial civilization in Europe the principles of photo-mechanical reproducibility were not just deployed as forms of colonial rule but were themselves shaped by the empire-building (Martin and Ramaswamy, 2014). To explore image-making technologies and vision-oriented subjectivity as constituted through movements across geopolitical boundaries opens up new understandings of them as fields of anticolonial appropriations and postcolonial contestations.

At the crossroads between these two movements, the migrations of memory and the memory of migrations, dwells the growing fascination for visual archives by artists. Commenting on the questions underpinning his film *The nine muses*, John Akompfrah has said «I am obsessed with archival material: those ghostly traces of lived moments, those pariah images and sounds that now occupy a unique space somewhere between history and myth» (2011). Among the many artists who have engaged with both the space of the archive and the nature of archiving, Keith Piper in his *Ghosting the Archive*, has made visible the tension between private collections and public archive and reworked the relationship between images, captions and classifications, as historically shaped by notions of racial categorisation and grouping (Piper, 2005).

Most of these works may be read in the light of what the art critic and historian Hal Foster has labelled «an archival impulse» at work

internationally in contemporary art in the 90s, witnessed by an urge to collect, select, arrange and exhibit bodies of (either found or produced) material, and to develop practices that challenge and play with the documents and traces of the past. While this ‘impulse’ often takes the form of a «reworked archive», according to Foster, its distinctive character consists in turnings «excavation sites» into «construction sites» by proposing «new orders of affective association, however partial and provisional» (Foster, 2004: 21-22). Since the end of the twentieth century the number of exhibitions and critical works raising the question has increased on both sides of the Atlantic: from the exhibition *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art* (Germany and United States, 1998 and 1999) to the volume edited by Rebecca Comay, *Lost in the Archives*; from the book following the project exhibition *Interarchive. Archival Practices and Sites in the Contemporary Art Field* to the exhibition at The International Center of Photography in New York, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. Along with exhibitions and curatorial works, the ‘archival turn’ in contemporary art has been shaped by the growing numbers of programs for artists in residence promoted by archives, museums, libraries inviting artists to reimagine their collections and broaden their public reach since at least the mid-1990s<sup>1</sup>. Such contexts represent a very relevant field of research to understand the multiple and shifting meanings attached to the term ‘public’ in connection with archives.

The extensive body of debates and works around the ‘archival form’ does not simply intersect with the challenge to the national structure of the archive posed by migrations and diasporas, but has wider geographical and temporal roots within the unceasing questioning of the archive as an epistemic space by postcolonial theorists (Stoler, 2010) as well as within the fragmentary archival stories of post-independence contexts. While the first can be traced back to the very early debates raised by the Subaltern Studies’ investigations in the politics of Indian nationalist historiography (Shetty and Bellamy, 2000), the second has emerged with particular relevance in the African context where post-independence archives have been dispersed both within and beyond the continent. The fragmentary nature of African archives

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Piper *Ghosting the Archive*, mentioned before, was a project created as part of a residency undertaken in the Archival Spaces of Birmingham City Central Library in 2005. Similar Programs for artists in residence can be located across Europe from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London to the Casa de Valásquez in Madrid, the Biblioteque Municipale de Nice, the Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon.

brought by political unrest and violence, wars and losses has engendered specific practices and techniques of collecting by individuals, institutions, and collective entities. Such practices have solicited an examination on how these dispersed collections have contributed to identity formations on the continent and in the diaspora. Just to mention one example one can remember the Project “Refiguring the Archive” in 1998 in South Africa which included *Holdings: Refiguring the Archive*. This exhibition curated by Jane Taylor featured work by contemporary South African artists exploring the activities of documentation as processes of interpretation, problematizing in particular the ways in which the post-apartheid transformation of South African archives failed to shatter the positivist assumptions of the apartheid era. Different kinds of collaboration and models of practice, including institutional and individual partnerships with artists, thus embody interpretations of the archival discourse as well as its practice, in the moment when these are reconfigured within processes of historical reconstruction and imagining.

## 2. Performing Archives

Since the mid-80s, in Europe the use of found footage and archival materials has been one of the most distinctive features of the works emerging from black British filmmakers’ collectives as Sankofa and the Black Audio Video Collective. As an aesthetical and political practice grounded in the deconstruction of colonial and postcolonial historiography, they were crucial in forging a new cinematic language, avoiding the pitfalls of the social realist trend (that characterized the so-called race-relations film), in order to recast the relation of black cultures to modernity and these cultures as products of diasporic history . More recently, the connection between diasporic memory, archival form, and visual language has been deployed to explore the erasure of colonial memory haunting contemporary Europe.

One work that has recently attracted much critical interest is *Vita Nova* (2009) by the Belgian artist Vincent Meessen. The structure of the film is built around the *Paris-Match* magazine cover from 1955 depicting a colonial military cadet saluting the French flag during a military parade at the Palais des Sports in Paris to celebrate France’s colonial empire. A picture that is known widely because of the famous Roland Barthes text *Mythologies* from 1957, where he used it to deconstruct the mechanisms of political imagery.



Around this image *Vita nova* intersects and sets into motion multiple stories. The film here brings together the phantoms from the colonial past both looking back – to the context where the image was shoot and archived – and looking forward – to its circulation and meaning-making trajectories. The first line is moved by the search to discover the identity of the unknown child saluting on the magazine's cover. The second one revolves around the connection between the picture and Roland Barthes' biography.

One of the doubtless most moving moments is when Issa Kaboré, a former comrade of the child, in Ouagadougou gives a name to the unknown child: Diouf Birane, a Senegalese who later become a doctor and died in the 80s. Fifty years later, Issa Kaboré then also recognizes himself in one of the pictures published inside the magazine issue. This scene is intersected with shots of Burkinabé audiences watching *La force noire* in an outdoor cinema that Meessen reconstructed at the former Ouagadougou cadets' barracks. This 2007 film by Eric Deroo about the participation of *Tirailleurs sénégalais* in France's wars features footage drawn from the archives of the French Ministry of Defense. Archival materials are here used to frame a performative documentary where, as remarked by Demos, «Rather than reconstructing past events retrospectively, then, Meessen's work provokes new and future events prospectively» (Demos, 2013). The unfolding of multiple temporalities produced by the filmic montage connects different people, geographies, and legacies in their relation to the French colonial past. It does not only involve French colonial parades and their legacies in contemporary Ivory Coast, but includes other less obvious connections. Le Palais des Sports de Paris was, in fact, a renaming of the *Vélodrome d'Hiver*, one of the most painful sites of French twentieth-century history linked to the mass arrest of Jewish citizens in Paris on the 16th and 17th of July 1942, who were then deported to the Drancy internment camp nearby, and finally shipped to Auschwitz.

The second line follows the hidden connections between the picture and Barthes's biography. Meessen focuses on the paradox residing in the mythical destiny of this image, which was, in fact, not

reproduced in *Mythologies* and was published only in the late 90s in the Phaidon bestseller on conceptual art, where it primarily served the purpose of canonising the influence of Barthian semiology on conceptual practices. The anticolonial critique of the French imperial myth has progressively become secondary. It has been surpassed by the mythical value of its deconstructions. Once again, this particular image has been confiscated and has relocated the critique to a superior mythical level. Its absence is, moreover, connected to the ‘secret’ of Barthes’s personal history: His grandfather Gustave Binger was the first governor of the Ivory Coast, thus implicating Barthes in the very narrative he wished to critique.

Drawing on a variety of media and archival material, as well as his own footage, Meessen goes far beyond an archaeological excavation by re-narrativizing the documents in a setting in which they are let to act as proper agents rather than just dead traces. The experimental historiographical methodology performed by *Vita Nova* is not aimed at offering a corrective or more truthful account of the past, but rather to forge new transformative connections, piecing together fragments and timeframes dislocated and chronologically disconnected. It is from this process that Meessen creates a parallel and new character (*Vita Nova*) and with him, a new narrative. Roland Barthes, revisited by the phantom of post-colonialism, is resurrected in a black body and voice performed by Burkinabé actor and theatre director Etienne Minoungou.

A different focus in dealing with archival material is offered by *Pays Barbare* (2013) by Yervant Gianikian e Angela Ricci Lucchi recently presented at the Locarno Film Festival. The film is centred around the connection between the infamous sequence of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci’s murder in Piazza Loreto and the fascist colonial history in Libya and Ethiopia, mixing images from official archives, with private collections. This material then includes a correspondence from the twenties of a soldier and his fiancé in Italy who worked in a weapons factory, weapons destined to be sent to Libya, and finally, a photographic album belonging to a specialized worker of Caproni, a factory producing planes.

The film forms part of their research on the upheavals of colonialism and war, stretching over decades: from their first movie *Dal Polo*

*all'Equatore* (1986) to the video installation *La marcia dell'uomo* (2001). As in previous works, their strategy – aimed relentlessly at re-generating archival and found footage – operates with a complex re-editing of fixed and moving images through what they call the analytical camera. This camera is a device built according to handicraft methods and they use it to re-shoot films that can no longer be viewed or whose material is slowly deteriorating (Lumley, 2011).

Images are recovered and put back into motion through various techniques: decelerating and altering the film's speed, re-photographing it, reframing or colouring a shot, enlarging a detail, or adding a



soundtrack. The constant reframing of the shot starts from the image's materiality and its immediate documentary universe, thus giving shape to an unusual and often disorienting visual relationship. Their craft method of working on the images frame by frame, as well as their wandering through formal and informal archives, has pushed many

critics to label them as “images’ archaeologists” – a definition that they have, however, often refuted: «For us the past does not exist, nor does nostalgia, only the present does» emphasizing that «what we see in the frame is what we see today» (Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, 2012) By reclaiming their interpretative work on the images, they make clear that the point of the critical operation proposed does not lie in restoring the past or recovering forgotten artefacts but, rather, in bringing to light the multiple temporalities inhabiting the images they produce. Paradoxically it is only alteration which renders visible how individual memory and historical memory are embedded in the cinematic support memory; how the frame continues to carry in itself the marks of its own history, enmeshed with embodied and sensuous interactions. This is pursued through different strategies: by focusing on the chemical deteriorations of the material visible in the still image, on the traces left by the owner who viewed the same sequence over and over again. In other cases their interventions shatter the ideological framing of the images by catching, for example, an African woman looking back into the camera and questioning the viewer. In this sense, *Pays Barbare* by framing visibility suggests that memory is exactly the image of the

presence of that absence. It is ultimately the double movement that breaks the conventional understanding of the images of Piazza Loreto in 1945 by introducing a racialised space which moves its relation beyond a provincial European conflict and its aftermath, looking back at the colonial violence and towards the present: «The barbarian country in question did not remain deeply confined to history, but rather it continues to loom ominously on the current European landscape, going by the names of Ceuta, Melilla and Lampedusa».

What connects *Vita Nova* (2009) and *Pays Barbare* (2013) is a complex and multifaceted engagement with, and re-figuring of, the colonial visual archive, so that the past, present, and future coalesce in critical configurations. This perspective opens up a cross-disciplinary approach to memory that considers the ways in which it has in present-day art become both a historical concern and an artistic and theoretical issue. By engaging with the role played by optical and visual technologies, these works highlight the colonial heritage of its languages and aesthetics as image-consuming and image-collecting regimes.



While the artists' concern with archival work can be traced back to previous periods, what seems to mark its distinctive character now is a shift that emphasizes performativity over representation, process over product. By insisting on strategies of intervention rather than strategies of representation these works draw attention to memory acts as performative cultural practices. It is exactly the anachronism of the vision that enables the visible appearance of the invisible. By installing intervals and silences that are able to uproot and disrupt previous linear historical intelligibility, it gives new life to the images, opening them to new and unforeseeable interpretations. This turn is witnessed by works engaging, perhaps more literally, the artist as archivist. Indeed, a different connection between diaspora and archival work emerges from Emily Jacir's *Material for a film* which is an open project started in 2004 dealing with the figure of the Palestinian intellectual Wael Zuaiter living in Rome and assassinated in 1972. The title explicitly quotes a chapter from the book *Per un palestinese: dediche a piu voci a Wael Zuaiter* (Venn-Brown, 1979) dealing with interviews collected by Italian film-makers Elio Petri and Ugo Pirro for a film on

Zuaiter never realized. For this project, she began researching and collecting publications and magazines from the 1960s like *La Rivoluzione Palestinese* and also conducted interviews with people who were part of Zuaiter's life in Italy between 1964 and 1972. This research led her to the Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico (AAMOD) in Rome, where the exploration on Palestinian memory converged with the visual material from the 1960s and 1970s on the history of Italian workers, immigrants, and their struggles as part of a project *What is left of the left in Italy?* envisaged in 2010-2011 for "The Creative Time Global Residency Program" based in New York.<sup>2</sup>

Here, she discovered the reels of unedited materials shot for the documentary *Tel al Zaatar* (1977), directed by Mustafa Abu Ali, Pino Adriano and Jean Chamoun, that had remained untouched in the AAMOD warehouse for the last 36 years. This film was the sole Palestinian and Italian co-production to be made, a collaboration between the Palestinian Cinema Institution and Unitelefilm. The relevance of the film lies both in its subject—the massacre of Palestinians and Lebanese on August 12th 1976 at Tel al Zaatar, a UN-administered refugee camp in northeast Beirut—and in the figure of its director. Mustafa Abu Ali was one of the main forces behind the Palestine Film Unit (PFU), active between 1968 and 1982, whose archives disappeared in 1984 in Beirut.

In her exploration of activists' and filmmakers' networks working in Rome in the 70s to produce documentaries about the Palestinian liberation struggle, Jacir focuses on the connection between their involvement with the Palestinian movement and their work on Italian immigration. Two of the directors she examines here are: Luigi Perelli, the director of *Al-Fatah Palestina* (1970), a film produced by Unitelefilm (the production company of the Italian Communist Party) shortly before directed *Emigrazione '68: Italia oltre confine* (1968), which documented the conditions of Italian emigrants in Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and Holland; and Monica Maurer who worked with the PFU to make several films on the Palestinians in Lebanon during the period of *Tel al-Zaatar* (*Children of Palestine*, 1979; *The Fifth War*, co-directed with Samir Nimer, 1980; *Born out of Death*, 1981) began her work in Germany with films

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<sup>2</sup> The original project is accessible at <http://creativetime.org/projects/global-residency-2011/emily-jacir/>

about Italian immigrants, the struggle of Italian workers at the BMW plant in Munich as well as the occupation of the Ford factory in Cologne in August 1973 (Jacir, 2013).

Emily Jacir's work is deeply rooted in her own experiences of moving through spaces and traveling from one place to another as a Palestinian exile. Born in Bethlehem in 1970, she has spent her childhood in Saudi Arabia and attended high school in Italy. Enforced movements as well as the impossibility to move have been the prevalent subjects of her previous works, focused on issues of memory and loss. Here, her multiple engagements with past and present mobilities bring to light a multilayered story connecting labour and forced diasporas and activists' networks of transnational solidarity.

### **3. Directions of research and methodological questions**

The examples mentioned show a wide range of different conceptualizations of the 'archive': archive as a set of discourses (Meessen), as inscribed within the materiality of the image (Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi), as buried connections (Jacir). These explorations lead not only to new kinds of visual practices but also to new ways of thinking about the archive. In this sense, they resonate with previous debates on memory and denial of traumatic histories within visual discourses. In the field of audiovisual documentaries, it is difficult not to consider the importance of Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1986), both for its narration of the Holocaust's past by means of personal testimonies and for calling attention to the absence of archive in the reconstruction of certain traumatic past events.

The redefinition of traditional spatio-temporal understandings of memory and the blurring of the boundaries between art and historical/archival procedures also entail new methodological approaches.

By displacing archival objects from implicit or explicit archives to galleries and cinemas, these works engage the viewers in a complex and multilayered relationship with spaces, places, and temporalities that are

encoded in the practices that surround their production and reception. These include, among others, the physical spaces in which they are shown which hint to shifting experiences of viewing and reception processes. How do we (and audiences) make sense of and draw conclusions about the past when it is represented in contemporary art practice or embodied by artistic performance? What differentiates this experience from those experienced in cinema theatres? New questions on the modes of exhibition and consumption of fixed and moving-images arise not only in relation to specific media of representation but also in relation to the space of galleries, considered as an architectural space that organizes the spectator's mobility and stillness and also performs new positionings of the viewers, transforming both the space and the time of spectatorship. Many scholars have stressed that video installations in galleries force the viewer away from a more fixed position (the static position in which he/she watches the film as it unfolds over time), to a more complex one connected to viewer mobilities and physical displacement in space (Cowie, 2009). Moreover, the images' displacement is not simply something occurring 'from' but above all 'to' and this implies a relationship to historicity that takes into account the productivity of the past in the present, of a desire issuing from another time, yet placing a demand on the present. In this perspective, the connection between bodies and visual space offers new ways to map the performativity of memory. While the concept of performativity has represented a key concern of cultural studies in recent years, this approach has not yet been fully explored by memory studies, in particular as concerns the new insights offered into the processual, intersubjective, and medial dimensions of memory.

The second field of inquiry concerns the transversal positionalities and the particular field of connections outlined by these visual works. They contribute to the shattering of the idea that transcultural memories are just memories of 'migrants' focusing rather on the trajectories through which such memories are forged in, transcending national and continental boundaries. This perspective disentangles the link between biography and artistic work from notions of origin, authenticity and representativeness, connecting postcolonial positionalities with multiple spatial and historical movements, spanning from the contemporary Palestinian diaspora to previous international forms of solidarity and trajectories of inter-European migrations (Jacir), from the paradox of European anticolonialism to the memory of the

Shoah (Meessen), as well as the connection between antifascism and anticolonialism (Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi). Past and present-day movements across the Mediterranean can open up new ways of exploring public articulations of trauma that produce a set of conversations on how to speak of these pasts in order to generate different postcolonial futures. In this perspective, cultural memory is understood as a complex attitude toward the past that forces the viewer to contend with the ambiguity that arises from multiple histories. It suggests a coming to terms with the past that always happens in comparative contexts and via the circulation of memories linked to what only seemingly are separated histories and national or ethnic constituencies (Rothberg, 2009).

Finally, the accentuated self-reflexivity performed by these works poses further methodological questions concerning, in particular, the repositioning of historians and cultural historians vis-à-vis these art materials. They do not simply push historians and archivists to turn a critical gaze on their own disciplines, to reflect both on questions familiar to them, such as the politics of memory, but furthermore on issues debated to a lesser degree, such as the power of evocation that archives do exert and their emotional underpinnings. Rather than being used to prove, to witness, or to inform, archival documents performed in contemporary art reveal the capability of touching, troubling, of moving, and inviting to explore the sensual properties of the archive and also demonstrate their potentially generative role in constructing new understandings. In this regard, however, these visual works cannot be simply considered as sources, since they are themselves works of theory – many explicitly so. As Laura Marks has pointed out in her approach to intercultural cinema, «they are not waiting to have theory 'done to' them; they are not illustrations of theory but theoretical essays in their own right» (Marks, 2000: xiv). By developing sophisticated arguments how visual art can represent archives/memory and why it should do so, they stir up new forms of engagement as a dynamic and interactive process. In other words, the subjectivising strength of these visual works in reconfiguring the past invites us to enter into a methodological conversation. Maybe one with fewer guarantees, yet a conversation that traverses within and across disciplines to provide readings of the visual archives, where the point is not so much to think *of* art but to think *with* art. To enter this dialogue, however, requires facing the question of the relationship between the politics of archiving and the aesthetics of

memory. In other words, to engage these works not simply on the shared ground of representations of history and memory, but as well to engage with the specific languages they deploy, as forms of cultural reflections which cannot be easily confined to a distinct art genre but, rather, require to be considered as specific epistemological strategies.

Via the space-time nexus, this methodological move connects the reflection on the archival form with other parts of the Babe Research Project, here in particular the critique of the map linked to the inscription of subjectivities within diasporic memories. Potentially this may open up an exploration on interdisciplinary encounters that could bring us back to the juxtaposition of the archive with the map – as performed by Aby Warburg in his unfinished project *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a source of inspiration.

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