

ENTRETIEN SIGNAL: An Interview with filmmaker Sylvain George

In 2012, we met Sylvain George at the Flaherty Seminar and were moved by his radical cinema. Combining elements of street protest documentation, classical witness-bearing, and unique, jazz-influenced cutting, George stands apart from his contemporary practitioners of engaged cinema. What follows is an interview conducted over email. With thanks to Martin Sarve-Tarr for translation.

- Caitlin Horsmon and Jason Livingston, 2013

CH/JL: In interviews you've said that you find your filmmaking to be a more effective way of addressing social ills than your years doing social work. Can you tell us about your transition from social worker to filmmaker and how you find filmmaking to be an effective agent of social change?

SG: My words have been significantly altered in certain interviews, which has created a number of misinterpretations and falsehoods.

In truth, I decided to become a director and to make films when I was 18, towards the end of my adolescence. Without a doubt, [this was] because I perceived the necessary character, the need for filmmaking. [This was] because it consisted of a "means," in itself to channel a revolt, an energy, [and] a desire that otherwise would have been and would still be susceptible to turning on themselves. These means then, are used to *translate* themselves into a dialectic, a tension with the "world."

In fact, initially, [it] perhaps resides in the "business of living," to quote the expression of the poet Cesare Pavese,[1] or the question of how to construct and define a relation to oneself, to others, to the world and to the future. Constructing this connection, this relation to the world comes unquestionably from a need. This need is internal; and in this sense it is synonymous with freedom as Spinoza defines it: "That thing is said to be free, which exists solely from the necessity of its own

nature, and is determined to action by itself alone. A thing is said to be necessary or rather, constrained, if it is determined by another thing to exist and to act in a definite and determinate way.”[2] Necessity is opposed, then, to constraint, which is always external and synonymous with oppression and domination.

We can come out of this absolutely bled white [and] exhausted from adolescence, especially since this one in particular was very difficult, rebellious, and desperate, and unfolded in regions of social and political isolation and segregation... The beginning of adult life begs the question of one’s choices and can be put under the sign of a simple choice: to live or die. If one opts for the first, it is undoubtedly because of a vague feeling inside that asks to be *translated* and *defined* with strength and perseverance. A desire: for liberty, justice, pleasure, and happiness... And so it is of necessity that one can take refuge in films, philosophy, literature, politics, the theater... It consists in trying to find if not the answers, the means or “tools” to help raise or re-raise questions, to formulate and reformulate questions under numerous, diverse, and varied angles... —and notably, [to ask] questions that are too often distrusted or considered useless, but nonetheless remain fundamental because they unfold and resonate across all fields of existence: Why should we live? How should we live?

The fields of philosophy or the cinema are “pure means” (Benjamin), that allow us to read, decode, [and] critically understand the numerous levels of realities, superpositions, and levels of dominant and alternative discourse, whether emancipatory or normalized, stigmatized or not, that constitute our selves and our “world.” We tend to forget that our realities are in fact constructed. Policies, which themselves are based on philosophical presuppositions, model them and give them form. What we call “worldviews” (Weltanschauung), or their residues, traces, and remnants pass through us. Being able to decipher them invites us to define a way to face events and things that allows us to position ourselves in relation to them, to ourselves, and to put them into play, to push their boundaries. Waking up from the dreams of an era as if it were someone else’s dream is essential if we want to be able to act even a little bit freely.

A book, like a film, can serve as “spaces” that situate themselves between experience and experimentation, “places” [*lieux*] that belong “nowhere” or to “no one” as [Paul] Celan would say, that put into play the categories of identity and otherness, the processes of subjectivization and of de-subjectivization, [and] structures and determinisms of all kinds... To be on the edge, to hold oneself on the threshold, the firing lines, in a suspended state, between determination and indetermination, and [to do] all this in a continuous movement.

If the decision was made early to make films, then, it nonetheless took me many years, with long periods of wandering and numerous experiences (professional etc.), before being able to start making films.

French society is, in fact, a very violent society, even if this violence is not always very visible, or when it is euphemized. The class war is extremely poignant [*prégnante*], and the sociological notion of the “network” in the 1980s to mask this war only added to its symbolic violence. Whether we like it or not, the cinema is an art in the hands of the bourgeois classes, and one needs a deep network, or at least a lot of financial support to even hope to realize one’s goals. This situation also applies to the French education system: only the elite have access to the top schools and to post-graduate degrees from Universities etc. For people like me who have to rely on their own means without the advantage of individual support, we are extremely angry, the road is necessarily longer. Over the course of the years, I have had numerous professional experiences, accumulated from the beginning through a number of very low-paid jobs (all of the possible and imaginable part-time jobs), or more rewarding experiences such as jobs in the social sector (two years working with ex-convicts, three years working with drug users...), all while reading heavily. And then I completed my studies to the highest level with five Master degrees, two in philosophy, and one in political science, Law and Politics, history, and cinema. In 2006, I was finally able to begin to solidify a cinematic project after all of these years.

My experience in the social sector, to return here for a minute, absolutely does not proceed from an occupation, and I never went to school specifically to work in the field. Through certain

connections, I had the opportunity at one point in my life to work in the field, which also allowed me to pay for my studies at the university. I was never under the illusion of working in the social sector, which in France is nothing more or less than an instrument for social and political regulation. [It is] a means for the state to prevent society from exploding [*exploser*]. Working in the social sector goes by really fast, you find yourself leading a schizophrenic existence, the feeling of always struggling against yourself, of being split in two. In all, the more you strive to do your job correctly and “to help” people in difficult situations, the more you feed a machine of control [*machine de contrôle*] whose goal by definition is to ensure that only the individuals in extremely precarious social situations get out of them. Despite this, the several years I spent in this field were very instructive, and they allowed me to work on my own story [*histoire*] (in the cities I lived in, I knew, children and adolescents who fell into drugs or ended up in prison etc.). As soon as my personal, social, and political situations were comfortable and stable enough to make films, I took it upon myself to realize my dream of making films in an extremely intense and focused way.

As I grew older, I began to make films that corresponded to the continual horizon of waiting that I felt as a young man. For example, I did not want to make linear films that would mold to Aristotelian poetics of a narration, peripatetic action, and catharsis, films that still include a beginning, a middle, and an end. I wanted to see films that take up the body of social and political problems that exist across French society [and its] contemporary worlds: films on immigration, the inner-city [*banlieue*], the lives of workers, the war on Algeria, the different sectors of power... Films that do not confine themselves to incessant variations on the drama of bourgeois life, but are at the height of key historical and political issues [*enjeux*]. Films that more fundamentally investigate our relationship to the world and to being, thereby bringing in a metaphysical dimension; and this is through a reflection, an investigation into the filmic medium, which is as thorough and innovative as possible.

I have always followed these ideas and aspirations. Little by little over the course of the years, I began to discover and still find films that come close to what I wanted to see and helped me draw near, try to translate what I wanted to express. In general, these are films that combine studies in the

filmic medium with assertive documentary, political, and poetic dimensions. These are the references you cite, the so-called avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, experimental cinema, the tradition of “city symphony films,” anarchist, or not (Savage, Vigo, Guerra Cavalcanti, Moholy-Nagy, Oliveira, Kaufman, Vertov, Ruttman, Lotar, Murnau, Dryer, Tarkosvsky...), political cinema, and recent work with certain films by Rossellini, Vautier, Rocha, Gleizer, the Gianikians... or even underground American films, newsreels.... Musically, my work is inspired by Free Jazz, punk, rap, contemporary classical music... In literature and philosophy, it would authors such as Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Campana, Celan, Mandelstam, Cendrars, Dylan Thomas, Dostoievsky, Lucrece, Spinoza, Benjamin, Warburg, Landauer, Rosensweig, Rancière, Abensour...

These elements each engage a profound movement that is radical and critical towards accepted and dominant realities, a work on representations, on presenting singular and minor realities... The cinema as an art and a philosophy, these are the means to enter into *relation* with the world, to discover, know, decrypt realities and to transform them. Or, more specifically to cause a rupture in your relation to the world. To suspend it. To cause a spatial and temporal caesura in which things make themselves seen in their deepest tenor, and if this happens, they can even be transformed by their very *cinematographic presentation*.

In other words, the cinema as a praxis artistically brings into play the “images of thoughts” that are able to be read and translated into appropriated forms by their own means. In this way, the cinema is prophetic, in the way it works on different temporal and spatial fabrics, bringing to light occult or minor realities and “truths” that nonetheless exist; and that come into view through the use of filmic techniques and montage, etc. For a camera to capture the secret signs that emit the forgotten, conquered, silent history or nature—that is to say also its own self—it is another way to hold oneself before the image, before time.

CH/JL: How did you become interested in the immigrant community in Calais?

SG: I try to understand, realize and attest to the issues that I consider among the most crucial in our

time. Questions relating to immigration and the images of the foreigner, the immigrant, the migrant, the undocumented worker (*sans-papiers*) are the perfect indicators to measure and question the state of our democracies, the construction of public policies, the development of the systems [*dispositifs*] to implement them. These are questions that cross our contemporary worlds, extremely visible in the public space, instrumentalized by different political parties, and that all concern each and every one of us. Because every person is *intimately* affected by this question in one, two, three or four generations; because immigration policies are first and foremost public policies that are uniquely *experimental* as they are tested across apparatuses that often then apply to society as a whole...

Calais is a transit zone for migrants who hope to end up in England by so-called “illegal” routes and means, because these populations come from regions and countries that are discriminated against by Europe and who face extreme difficulty in obtaining visas.

Calais is an “emblematic” city where European immigration policies are clearly visible in their crudeness, triviality. In this city, which is saturated with the police and security presence [*l'appareil*], these people live in the streets, in squats, and in the nearby forests called the “jungle;” they are constantly harassed, profiled and arrested, beaten by the police. Calais has become a vast gray area, an vague space between the exception and the rule. The law is suspended. Individuals are deprived of their most fundamental rights. This space of exception reveals the heart of public policies fabricated by the contemporary police state: the state of exception.

I thought it was pertinent to begin my work on European immigration policies in this well known transit zone in France before pursuing my exploration of the above-mentioned policies as they apply in the other countries—*May they rest in revolt (Figures of wars I)* and its “prolongment,” the second film that I made about this city *The Outbursts (My mouth, my revolt, my name)* is by and large the first opus in a trilogy I have been working on since my filmic beginnings, and which I hope to finish soon.

[Calais] is also a city that has been the site of numerous representations in the media, whether documentary or fictional. Representations that do not suit me. Either because they identify with the dominant powers or because they privilege the “spectacular,” or even because they adopt a

sentimental, humanitarian, or miserabilist approach to the realities, portraying the migrants not as political subjects, but as victims. I radically reject all of these forms of overreaching positions.

The intolerable realities that exist in Calais stem directly from political decisions, from public policies, and not from fate or destiny.

Going to Calais for me consists at once in a work of dismantling certain representations, and as much as possible, in producing awareness and knowledge through a careful presentation. This is cannot be dissociated from taking ethical, aesthetic, and political positions.

CH/JL: Are there genres of social protest films? How do you feel about what has come to be known colloquially as “protest porn?”

SG: Much like libel, pamphlets, and caricature, etc., in literature or in the history of art, the cinema has a repertoire of forms out of which the political *address* makes itself visible in an extremely obvious way. It could be the burlesque, of course, but more directly, it could also be forms that for a longtime have been considered minor [*minoritaire*] or marginal and that have become today cinematic forms in and of themselves. I want to talk here about newsreels (Robert Kramer...), film-tracts [*ciné-tracts*] (by the Medvikine Group and Dziga Vertov’s group), Italian *ciné-giornali* (cinema journalism)... or even certain amateur videos, sometimes poorly-made, with shaky images, filmed on cellphones, posted online, that show a desire to attest to or bear witness to certain realities that have been hushed or glossed over by the mass media, or by the dominant cinematographic system (because the “crisis of political representation” can be seen in the political parties, but doubles as well in the crisis of symbolic representation in art and the cinema...). What I find extremely interesting in these “minor” cinematographic forms, these brief, often undervalued forms, is far from being propaganda or dogmatic films, in addressing current events [*actualités*] that are neglected by the dominant media, they meditate on the “present” [*l’actuel*], which means to say a certain state of the world, the immediate. And in so doing, in dialectical fashion, [they address] the “unpresent” (*l’inactuel*), which is to say the long term, history. Much like a number of the “major forms” in the

cinema, they can also become one of these cinematic places [*lieux*] where its spatial and temporal, aesthetic and political, and past and present dimensions all telescope. This space brings to light facts, gestures, and events that couldn't be prescribed, that are crushed by the official history—this official history, which is always written by the victors (Walter Benjamin); and this is because of a decision, the definition of an ethical, aesthetic, and political posture. If it is not a question of worldviews (*Weltanschauung*), then it is at least a question of the relations that we hope to build between beings and things.

CH/JL: In many of your films there is a good deal of text on screen in the form of signs at protests. What is the significance of the signs, do the signs function as documents or something more?

SG: Yes, absolutely. At first, the texts that appear on placards and protest posters seem to be documents. They are political documents, but also aesthetic because one never functions without the other. In society, there is always a “way” to present things, just as every individual in society is also an “aesthetic” individual, in the ways that one can present oneself (as we dress, move, act, speak etc.). From there, it seemed interesting to me to show what these [signs] can tell us about an era, from a political and aesthetic perspective. When I film and work, I place myself in a sort of “a-temporality;” or more precisely in a sort of sphere or temporal in-between and dialectic: between the most immediate present, the most raw and trivial, and the longest and most distant time. A dialectic of the near and the far. I always see things as if I were coming from an extremely far-off time; and I act as though I needed to bring back the things I film into a time just as far-off. And yet, to do this, I need to be as close as possible to things... My posture is probably not as distanced as that of a historian [or a] materialist.

That is why the texts or filmed posters also participate in the rereading and re-actualization that I try to bring out in allegory. They function like texts that traditionally accompany allegories except that in my films, these texts emanate from the start from the sphere itself of action...

CH/JL: Your most recent work is shot in black and white. Can you talk about why black and white

is the appropriate choice for the topic?

SG: This technique—and the camera, which is a technical tool—can, it seems to me, allow us to explore, to develop the potentialities and virtualities that are contained in nature, in humankind—this is also a very Benjaminian idea, which he develops in his famous text on the work of art. In that case then, it consists in playing with all of the resources that the chosen medium can offer—the cinema in this case—to actualize the aforementioned virtualities. The potential and power of the cinema are therefore rarely used for their own ends in themselves (an image for an image, an effect for an effect...), in contrast to practices described earlier that open the aesthetic representation of the real, and the aesthetization of politics. This of course relates more to filmed and encountered situations and subjects, the ways one perceives a context, an atmosphere, a sentiment or sentiments, that one can *feel* [*ressentir*] an aesthetic as it finds a way to define itself (which returns us to the very etymology of the word aesthetic: *aesthesis*), that one can find it judicious to use certain “techniques” or a particular “effect:” plays on the speed of film, slow motion, accelerations, superimpositions, freeze frames, etc.

For example, the use of black and white allows me to examine and investigate the notions of the document, the archive, the remnant...; to establish historical and critical distance from the presented events that resemble the extreme contemporary, from the most immediate present [*actualité*]. A dialectic of closeness and distance builds itself and puts itself into place. The more one distances things, the more they become close. It is then, also a game, a sort of “diversion” [*détournement*] with the most immediate images and representations produced by the media on the subjects that I film: the events that are filmed and seem distant did in fact take place today, and I propose an opposing reading to the one that the dominant media can convey.

Black and white is also used in a metaphorical way. Different types of black and white are present in the film, thereby allowing me to create displacements, to construct metaphors. For example, in certain sequences that are overexposed, the whites are burned out and the blacks are very sharp. This recalls the numerous testimonies given by migrants where over and over again, they indicate

that they feel like survivors, and that they were likewise burned, charred, consumed from the inside. We of course also think of the scene “burning fingers,” which clearly shows the fact that the migrants being marked “with branding irons” by contemporary immigration policies is not a simple image or metaphor.

Sound, like music, is never used for illustrative or didactic ends. The absence or presence of sound, the play on volumes is only used to underscore, accentuate, lightly punctuate, bring to light and to foreground elements, whether hidden or not, in a scene.

The plays on the film speed, the use of slow motion and freeze frames etc., are justified for different reasons: the slow motion can serve to show certain things that are fleeting, extremely fast, or can even express an atmosphere, a feeling, an emotion, to unearth a underground level of reality, or a buried layer of reality.

All of these elements articulate themselves in the construction of the films as a whole. In all, the films are composed of autonomous sequences, fragments that, like other monads, refer, correspond [*correspondre*] (in the Baudelairian sense of the term), to each other and telescope onto one another, thereby creating numerous plays on temporality and spatiality.

For example, in *May They Rest in Revolt*, which was filmed over the course of three years, the cycle of the seasons is perceptible even though it was not worked on chronologically. The same goes for certain situations that can be treated in a chronological way or not, without needing time and “narrative” to respond to a homogenous, linear, and empty conception of time. Creating this correspondence, a poetic and dialectical tension between situations, events, people, or even “motifs” responds in philosophical terms to the construction of a history, a philosophy, an anti-dialectical history. It opposes a view of a philosophy of history that still dominates today, one that is linear, marked by the myth of progress, and tends to exclude eras and problems in a permanent process of overcoming. In political terms, it consists in coming to face with, opposing these grey areas, these spaces or interstices such as Calais that are situated between the exception and the rule, or beyond

the scope of the law, or when the law is suspended, when individuals are dispossessed and stripped of their most fundamental rights. And in a dialectical reversal, this creates the “true” states of exception. Space-times where beings and things are fully restored to what they were, what they are, what they will be, what they can be or could have been. This question of redemption was redefined in the twentieth century not as a religious category, but as a political and aesthetic one (Rosenzweig, Benjamin). This film, a poetic and political “documentary” situates itself at the intersection of numerous cinematic paths (in sum: avant-garde and experimental films from the twentieth century, the tradition of so-called city films, whether symphonic or not, ethnological and anthropological films (Flaherty, Rouch), “classical” cinema (Dreyer, Murnau..), modern (neo-realism, Pasolini...), and so-called “intervention” cinema, literary and philosophical (Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Dostoyevsky, Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Rancière, Abensour...). I also try to perform a rereading, a re-actualization of the allegory: neither baroque nor modern, but what I would call “contemporary.” With important nuances that need to be defined, the film could also function as an elegy (and the use of black and white can also recall this aesthetic and poetic register), but also somewhat in the register of the pamphlet. [This is] because there are confirmed positions that return in part to the rules of the genre. But [this is] also because one of the motifs of fire, [which is] developed in certain sequences and images of the film and in the poetic text and end credits, returns directly back to the etymology of the word “pamphlet:” *pamphlectos*—which Sophocles used, moreover, in certain of his texts—signifies “burn everything” (*pan*: all and *phlego*: burn). The metaphor of incendiary writing for a pamphlet text comes from this. In the same way, one could then say in metaphorical terms that *May They Rest in Revolt* is a *filmic incendiary poem*.

CH/JL: Another frequent sound element in your movies is voiceover over black. Why separate the sound from images? What is the effect? Conversely there are moments of text on screen that seem to serve as interruptions to the story and have very specific graphic design. How do you think about text as a graphic element in your movies?

SG: Images, sounds, texts... For from being the main orthodoxy [*doxa*], of the dominant cinematic grammar, the medium of film possesses resources and potentialities that can give rise to numerous

combinations [and] aesthetic constructions... Separating the sound from the image, introducing voices or texts over a black screen creating pauses on images etc., allows one accentuate this or that source of information, to create discontinuities, ruptures, caesura, to create new rhythms, to break with a certain conception of the film as a total and organic form, [to break] from time or history as a linear and teleological thread.

To synthesize, these voices or texts that appear or not over black images can have different meanings, different statuses:

They can act as a caesura, a suspension of time and action;

They can act as a caesura of the time of the film and its projection;

They can refer to missing images: either because one shouldn't take images or [shouldn't] film at a precise moment during events. Or because they refer to images that are not addressed by the dominant media; or even [because they refer] to events that are poorly treated by the media (misinformation, manipulation);

Black images can also intervene much like punctuation in a scene or an event;

Black images are also "affective" and sensorial images.

CH/JL: Your films are filled with a huge variety of writing. In *The Impossible* for example we have Rimbaud, Hocquenghem, Dostoyevsky, Louis-Auguste Blanqui, Benjamin and more. Where do the connections come between these texts in your filmmaking? What are the connections for you between these texts and activism in general?

SG: In *The Impossible—Pieces of Fury* for the most part (since my other films include fewer or no texts or citations at all), the texts are used in part as documents that serve the same purpose as the filmed realities, or the musical soundtrack. In this film, which looks at social movements, "insurrectional" forms, it seemed interesting to me to create dialectical passages [*passerelles*] with texts that date from other eras, but nonetheless resonate with our contemporary moment. It is a way to reactivate the subversive character of texts that are sometimes canonized, and in the same way, to break with a

conception of history that often wants to set [*forlore*] each era against all the others. The texts or quotes intervene, then, like a caesura in a fabric [*trame*] of space, time, and action that a still dominant conception of history considers linear.

[I mean] caesura in the Holderlinian or Baudelairian sense of the term: an interruption of time and action in the film; and by this, an interruption in the flow of time, an interruption in the course of history. The caesura allows one to create a spatial and temporal, and affective “suspension” in which/during which beings and things resonate, enter into correspondence (*entrent en correspondent*), and reconfigure themselves. It creates a sudden and brusque halt, a telescoping, a new constellation in which beings and things reconstitute themselves in all of their integrity, reconfigure themselves.

The caesura, as a power, participates fully in this political and aesthetic experience that creates the cinematic apparatus, and that work to open one another to each other, to the infinite discovery of worlds that are as multiple as they are singular.

CH/JL: Your films have a strong musical component. Can you talk about how you select songs for your films?

SG: My films are very musical in their structures, much like compositions in the way they are made, very free-jazz, or punk. No matter what they are, I like that the things I try to suggest and construct elude the categories one could assign them, whether [they are] overturned or subverted. Shooting a film, much like montage, is open to improvisation, to the sudden appearance of an event, to disruptions.

Like texts or quotes, the musical choices are understood above all as documents. They enter into a dialectical relation and dialogue with the images, the subjects, and the filmed events; they allow one to work on other types of relations in time and space, in the past and present, and to create ruptures, discontinuities, correspondences... In contrast to mainstream cinema or to the grammar of classical cinema, music is never used for illustrative purposes.

It seemed interesting to experiment with original modes of projection that can extend films in different directions than “classical” screenings. Therefore: cinema-concerts with the musicians Archie Shepp, William Parker, Okkyung Lee, John Butcher, John Edwards, Eduardo Raon, Diabolo...

Working and trying to invent new cinematographic, artistic, and political forms is a way to work on new forms of life, and in turn, new conditions and possibilities for existence.

Much like submerged or [*Engloutis*] unknown continents, these possibilities for existence can be discovered and rediscovered.

These *impossible* possibilities for existence, as Rimbaud would say, continually escape totalitarian reductions of multiple worlds to a single one, and incessantly open themselves to the indeterminacy of beings and things. The *cinema* as a play on worlds.

[1] Cesare Pavese, *Il mestiere di vivere: Diario 1935–1950* (Turin: Einaudi, 1952).

[2] As translated by Samuel Shirley in Michael L. Morgan, ed. Benedictine Spinoza, *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 217.