

# IN CONVERSATION

## Sabeth Buchmann with Dani Gal

SABETH BUCHMANN To get straight into the complex subjects of your films, I was asking myself how to grasp their really extreme perspectives. Your trilogy deals with very different episodes of Jewish history and the diaspora and the Shoah respectively. Their programmatic common denominator lies in the concept of “multidirectional memory” — a crucial reference here is Michael Rothberg’s 2009 book — a research direction that is more present than ever due to the current debates about the re-framing of anti-Semitism and the Shoah. At a time when “decolonisation” is becoming a central component of historical and cultural research, as well as anthropology and ethnology, can it be said that your artistic interest is situated through an active participation in corresponding historiographical and epistemological shifts, which has helped determine their respective forms? For example: What could be the reason for the aerial perspective at the beginning of *Night and Fog* that is slightly *schreck* (frightening) or displaced, which gives the whole scene a literally meta-reflexive atmosphere?

DANI GAL *Night and Fog* opens with a long shot from the perspective of the prison guard, from the point of view of the perpetrator. Based on cinematic conventions, I wanted to establish a type of cinematic Shoah imagery right from the start. I wanted the viewer to experience immediate recognition but realise after a few seconds that it is actually not the Shoah because the uniforms do not match. These are Israeli police



Dani Gal, *Night and Fog*, 2011, film still, camera: Itay Marom

officers guarding the furnace burning Eichmann's body in a prison yard in Israel. The viewer watches one reality while associating it with another.

SB In order to prepare for our discussions, I went back to *Bilder trotz allem* (*Images in Spite of All*) by Georges Didi-Huberman. It is very interesting how he elaborates upon the conflict with his critics and with Claude Lanzmann. The question of whether it is possible to understand those images of concentration camps as "aesthetic gestures" or "Bildakte" (image acts), as images that are able to actually represent an action, is not resolved. While reading *Bilder trotz allem* and another text on the reception of the book, I came across a statement by Jean-Luc Godard where he says "there is a missing link in the representation"; this then made a click in my head, and I thought that it could be the question of perspective. What Didi-Huberman explains is the point of view of the Sonderkommandos (special commandos), the Jewish prisoners who were involved in the murderous machinery in the concentration camps, through a camera that was smuggled in and out of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

DG It reminds me of the French documentary *Sous le Manteau* (*Clandestinely*) from 1948 that contains footage shot by French prisoners of war in a camp in Austria during the Second World War. The prisoners installed a camera inside a Larousse dictionary and used film that was smuggled in with the food supply.

SB Didi-Huberman speculates about two images taken from a camera hidden at the bottom of a bucket. He speaks of the “terrible paradoxe de cette *chambre noire* [dark chamber]”.<sup>1</sup> I paraphrase: In order to use the camera, the photographer, a Greek-Jewish man named Alex, had to hide in the gas chamber — i.e., he had to hide in the dark, in obscurity, between these recordings. The art historian states that the photos document the daily work of the Sonderkommandos and the SS. He can only speculate how many other recordings were made with the camera. Alex did take more photographs: In front of the birch forest, where a group of undressed women are on their way to the gas chamber, he encounters some SS officers. Since the photos are shaky and out of position, Didi-Huberman speculates that Alex took them without looking, maybe even without stopping. But that is how he captures the perpetrators’ perspective. It seems clear that the camera was returned to another member of the Sonderkommando, David Szmulewski, who was observing the SS men from a roof. According to Didi-Huberman, the whole action lasted fifteen to twenty minutes. Szmulewski again hid the camera in the bucket and handed it over to Helena Datón, an employee of the SS canteen, who transported the film strip in a toothpaste tube out of Auschwitz-Birkenau, where it came into the hands of the Polish resistance in Kraków. One of the central theses is that the normality of everyday camp life reflects the perspective of the perpetrators, whose job was to dematerialise the bodies of their victims.

DG Lanzmann took an extreme position against evidence from the camps when he said, “If I had discovered a hypothetical silent film shot by an SS officer showing the deaths of 3,000 people in a gas chamber, not only would I not have included it in my film, I would have destroyed it”.<sup>2</sup>

SB Yes, exactly, for him the photos evidently have no legitimate existence.

DG For Godard, it is the missing image that he is looking for as a film maker; for Lanzmann, it is an image that can only exist in the head of the listener of the testimony, which is both the filmmaker and the viewer. The history of cinema is full of failed attempts at representing historical events.

SB Godard also addresses it as a fantasy. The perpetrators’ perspective on their daily routine of eliminating the battered bodies should not exist;

1 George Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Édition de Minuit, Paris, p. 22.

2 Claude Lanzmann, *The Patagonian Hare: A Memoir* [2009], trans. Frank Wynne, Atlantic Books, London, 2012, p. 898.

thus it positions the image beyond valid representation. The (re-)production and (re-)presentation of structurally impossible images by and of the victims is made impossible a second time.

DG This brings to mind Dori Laub's claim that the Shoah was an event without a witness because of the efforts to destroy the possibility of witnessing it from within or from without. When I interviewed Michael Goldman-Gilad during my research for *Night and Fog*, he told me that as a very young man, his job at Auschwitz was to scatter human ashes over the walking paths to prevent people from slipping on the ice during the winter. He said that when he looked at the mountain of ashes, he tried to understand how many people it summed up to. Later, he said the milk jug that contained Eichmann's ashes was less than half full. A human body is about four hundred grams of ashes. It is not much. It was Goldman-Gilad himself who scattered Eichmann's ashes into the Mediterranean Sea to eliminate any evidence of the body. That night can be seen as a symbolic act of Shoah enacted on one person in terms of the technical procedure. First of all, the state changed the law to introduce capital punishment, and following the trial, they acquired the technology of body burning. The burning of the body is forbidden in Judaism. Lastly, they eliminated the remnants of the body.

The origin story of the furnace that was used to burn Eichmann's body has a few different versions. One version claims that the furnace came from the Israeli cement factory Neshet, which means eagle, or *Adler* in German. Another went so far as to claim that the furnace came from Germany. For the film, I chose the version about a thirteen-year-old kid who worked at an oven factory in Israel. He was instructed to build the furnace and was told that it was for burning fish bones. This factory was owned by Amichai Paglin, a former member of the Irgun, who was known for his involvement in numerous terror attacks against the British Mandate. In 1972, Paglin was also involved in illegal weapon smuggling together with a far-right Jewish organisation in an attempt to commit a terror attack in Libya as revenge for the massacre during the Summer Olympics in Munich. There is a small museum for the Irgun, the Zionist paramilitary organisation named after Paglin. The museum is built on top of the destruction of Menashiya, which was a Palestinian neighbourhood in Jaffa before 1948.

SB Your remarks already reveal the core of your project and of your working method: A combination of different perspectives, which, among other things, consists of a reversal of the perpetrator-victim relationship. Following Michael Rothberg, multidirectional memory challenges the competition that can exist between memories in regards to which ones are

chronicled for the foundational constitution of a national identity or of a social group. This brings up certain questions: How can we integrate the perspectives of the others into our own perception and awareness? How can we relate to the memories of the others? And how far can we also reconsider the Shoah into the history of colonisation? I would argue that to say there is a legacy of oppression going further back in history is never meant to relativise the specificity of the Shoah, but instead, a decolonial reading can help to contextualise it.

DG The argument against relativising the Shoah has that competitive element. In essence, it is a claim for the worst and greatest catastrophe and as a result suggests that all other state violence is tolerable. This status has given the State of Israel justification for the ongoing violence and dispossession of Palestinians. There is a brutal and cynical instrumentalisation of the Shoah and its memory. Heterogeneity always existed among people, but when the nation state imposes a homogenous identity, some narratives are suppressed in favour of others. This is why multidirectional memory is very important as a political idea. It proposes taking the historical narrative away from power, from the nation state and from representation that serves a national agenda.

SB From a left-wing German perspective, it is difficult for me to relativise the Shoah. Although I wouldn't want to grant the Germans the privilege of being unique in their acts of genocide, the acknowledgement of state-organised industrial murder does play an important role in how I think about Germany's historical commitment to the victims of Nazi terror.

DG Each historical trauma is unique and needs to be acknowledged as specific to the people who suffered or are suffering from it. It is not about comparison; it is about acceptance. The perpetrators are not free from trauma either and I believe that this needs to be acknowledged too. There is no moral dimension to trauma. If German soldiers suffered from trauma as a result of the Second World War, it is a real trauma, it is a trauma that exists in the German society, which is different from the trauma that exists in the Israeli society, and different from the trauma that exist in the Palestinian society. And Palestinians still suffer from ongoing state violence and dispossession as we speak.

SB I understand your plea for a multi-perspective approach in view of recent historical research and the reflection on nationalist instrumentalisation of the Shoah for nationalist purposes. Referring to what we said before about Godard's fantasy: Do your cinematic means meet this

approach in allowing us, the viewers, to inhabit previously unperceived perspectives?

DG I try to destabilise the binarism between victims and perpetrators to allow a discussion about previously unperceived perspectives. For example, the real prison where Eichmann was held and executed and the film location used for the prison scenes in *Night and Fog* are both Tegart forts. These compounds are named after Charles Tegart, who was a British colonial police officer in India who specialised in counterinsurgency against indigenous people. Following the 1936 Arab Revolt against British colonial rule in Palestine following the establishment of an open immigration policy for Jewish people, Tegart was sent to Palestine to contain the uprising. He recommended building these militarised police forts to protect the counterinsurgents. After 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel, these forts became police stations and prisons, some of which are operational to this day.

SB In other words, you relate the location of your case study — the traceless removal of Eichmann's ashes — to the historical context of colonialism and its consequences for the Palestinians. Does this also imply a re-historicisation of Shoah memory?

DG By pointing at the architectural locations of the original prison and the film location of it, I contextualise the Eichmann affair within the context of colonialism to show that the two histories, the aftermath of the Shoah and its consequences for the Palestinians, are interwoven in a way that cannot be undone. This point also comes forward at the end of *Night and Fog* when the police boat — on its way back from scattering Eichmann's ashes — crosses two Palestinian fishermen from Jaffa who are going out to sea. The fishermen look at them, questioning suspiciously their activities at sea. At this moment, the two histories look each other straight in the eyes, as the Israeli poet Avot Yeshurun eloquently put it.

SB The architecture is of significant importance also for the Eichmann trial, which is mentioned in the opening slide of your film. In her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt describes the courtroom as a theatre, which resonates in the set design of *Night and Fog*. Here, it creates an alienation effect reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht, who reminds us that representation always implies fiction. Following Arendt, the historical witnesses, who were also the victims testifying in court, also represented the audience in a trial that David Ben-Gurion, the Israeli prime minister at the time, wished to work like a spectacle. Since your concept opts for multidirectional memory and

empathy on the part of the audience, does it have the potential to cause more distance from the historical processing of the Nazi crimes?

DG The courtroom that was used for the Eichmann trial was in fact a theatre and still functions as one; the theatricality was there from the start. This brings to mind Arendt's concept of the actor/spectator: the clash between the reflective judgment of the actor and the philosophical judgment of the spectator. In the trilogy, I constantly move between immersive cinematic techniques to a more theatrical setting, and even documentary techniques at times, so that the viewer shifts from being pulled into the film to being pushed out to a critical position, thus moving between being an actor and a spectator. When you say that my methodology could cause more distance from the historical processing of Nazi crimes, do you mean the possibility for redemption?

SB No, I don't want to speak of redemption. But what does it mean to enter, as a consequence, into a relationship of empathy with the perpetrator?

DG The game of changing perspectives is about the attempt to liberate the viewer from dichotomies and look at the behaviour of humans under extreme conditions, or at least to suggest such extreme perspectives. I think forgiveness is another very important perspective.

SB That's the radical key point in your work, also in your second film, *As from Afar*, in which you construct an encounter between Albert Speer and Simon Wiesenthal: A dialogue between perpetrator and victim, or between several respective groups of victims. It is a form of bringing each specific memory into interrelated interaction.

DG The case of Wiesenthal is interesting in the context of addressing the possibility of forgiveness. By dedicating his life to bringing Nazi criminals to justice, he got very close to them until he crossed the assumed ethical boundary between victims and perpetrators by having a close relationship with Speer.

SB Is your staging of their encounter once again an interpretation in the spirit of Rothberg?

DG I read Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* after I made the films, but it is indeed a very useful concept with which to address their relationship, as I mentioned earlier. At the time of making *As from Afar* and *Night and Fog*, my motivation was rooted in an attempt to represent the aftermath of the Shoah and its memory in a more complex way than the cinematic rep-

resentation I was exposed to. One of the concepts that I had at the back of my mind was Primo Levi's "gray zone", where he describes the collapse of a clear dichotomy between good and evil in the reality of the concentration camps. Especially in *As from Afar*, I try to question the nature of such representations and the forces behind them, national or economic.

SB And is this also the reason why you choose Ludwig Wittgenstein from *The Brown Book* that features in *As from Afar*? I ask because the text seems to be the key to the process as well as to the content of the film, which complicates, of course, memory as a site of certainty.

DG I used parts of his text as a voice-over, which functions as the narrator for the film. The voice also gives the text a philosophical meta-layer. The questions proposed by Wittgenstein articulate the essence of the trilogy. It asks how one can represent the past and how this representation is perceived by others. Are these images of a memory or of a dream? This is a question that is closely related to the essay by Noit Banai about hallucinatory cinema and the kind of images received by viewers in relation to their expectations while watching the films. Wittgenstein proposes the following exercise:

Consider this example: What is the difference between a memory image, an image that comes with expectation, and say, an image of a daydream. You may be inclined to answer, "There is an intrinsic difference between the images". — Did you notice that difference, or did only you say there was one because you thought there must be one? [...] I will examine one particular case, that of a feeling which I shall roughly describe by saying it is the feeling of 'long, long ago'. These words and the tone in which they are said are a gesture of pastness. But I will specify the experience which I mean still further by saying that it is corresponding to a certain tune (Davids Bündler Tänze — "Wie aus weiter Ferne"). I'm imagining this tune played with the right expression and thus recorded, say, for a gramophone. Then this is the most elaborate and exact expression of a feeling of pastness which I can imagine.<sup>3</sup>

The gesture of pastness is not only the words chosen but also the way they are said, or in the case of a film, the manner in which the subject matter is depicted, including all of the formal decisions I made as a director.

3 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations"*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1965, p. 182–84.



Dani Gal, *As from Afar*, 2013, film still, camera: Emre Erkmen

When recording the soundtrack for the film, I asked the pianist to play the piece by Robert Schumann four times, to play it differently each time. And each time, to try and transfer this feeling of pastness.

SB Wittgenstein's concept of repetition implies the idea of working through the pastness; as such, it reminds us of a psychoanalytical topic, but Wittgenstein differentiates between the feeling of pastness and the expression of the feeling of pastness. What exactly does this difference mean for you?

DG For me, in the context of the film this part of Wittgenstein's text relates to working with actors. Actors move between the feeling and the expression of the feeling. There are different techniques of acting. Some actors really try to feel as if the situation is real in order to express, and others express through a rational analysis of the situation of the character in a scene.

SB It occurred to me that there is a conceptual gap between the way they act and what they say — a gap that never closes. Seeing the film through Wittgenstein's differentiation between the feeling of pastness and the expression of the feeling of pastness, the question arises whether this gap also applies to the perception of the individual figures as both concrete actors and allegorical representations of historical contexts.

How does this relate, for example, to the stage designer Herr Kuck, who interacts with Wiesenthal and Speer at the beginning of *As from Afar*?

DG Herr Kuck can see the entire event from above. He is the narrator. This is related to the idea of alternating between being inside a model and looking at a model from above, or from afar. The film ends when he is putting the final touches on a model of Haus Wittgenstein, right after Speer and Wiesenthal have been walking around, lost inside the real house in Vienna. Earlier in the film, we also see the two protagonists from inside of Herr Kuck's CCTV monitor. He has an ominous presence.

SB Is the storyteller the one who imagines the story that is being told? In other words, is he the immanent narrator who transforms history or the representation of history into a more or less subjective narration?

DG Maybe the answer for this unfolds in the first scene when Herr Kuck tells Speer that he did not build the model of the Mauthausen concentration camp from blueprints but based on his own memory. But we are never told when and in what capacity he was there, possibly as a prisoner.

SB Later on, Wiesenthal and Speer are walking around on an outdoor film studio sound stage, so a conceivable reading is that the film is experienced through Herr Kuck's perspective.

DG The establishing shot of *As from Afar* adopts the point of view of a train that is entering a concentration camp on a winter night. I based it on the iconic shot from Lanzmann's film *Shoah*, the point of view of a train entering Auschwitz-Birkenau. I realised that it has become an image that falsely represents the victim's point of view, although none of the victims could have had this point of view because they were in cattle cars with little or no view.

SB Isn't it the point of view of the perpetrators? You visually quote this so-called icon of horror that is already inscribed into the collective memory.

DG It could be the point of view of the perpetrators but this is challenged in *Shoah* when Lanzmann interviews the driver of the train line to Treblinka, who says that he didn't pull the wagons — he pushed them from the rear, so this point of view is probably not even of the driver. It is a fabrication that has become iconic in its representation of entering the horror. You can find many similar images on the internet in relation to concentration camp history. And it is this cinematic construction of re-

membrane that gave me the idea of using the Mauthausen model to serve as a prop in my film. The sculpture resembles a miniature model of the gates to Mauthausen, but when you look closer you can see that it is only a miniature film set for a night scene. There is a miniature camera on the train tracks like in the production shot of Alain Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*). Again, I ask the viewers to move between being above and being inside. When I installed the film with the sculpture, I always made sure that the visitors would see the model immediately after they came out of the screening room. This way they find themselves moving from the position of looking over the protagonists who are looking over the model from afar, to inhabiting the point of view of the protagonists in my film.

SB That is a very interesting point. The trilogy is grounded within the procedures and mechanisms of cinematic memory that frame historical narration as something you cannot decouple from imagination and projection, working at the same time as objective frames.

DG I am interested in how cinema is shaping our memories of historical events, events that we mainly remember through a cinematic construction. Most people who would watch a film that depicts a historical event never lived the event, but even those who did may have not experienced it this way. It is again the movement between above and within. When thinking critically about a film that depicts a historical event, like the Shoah, the authenticity question often comes up: How true is the film to the historical reality? I would like to ask the opposite: How true is the event to us? Because I only experienced it through representations, and representations are always subjective and therefore false. The process of making a film based on historical events is, in and of itself, a process of distortion.

SB Does this resonate in the dialectic between the inside and outside view that your film performs by letting us watch the scene from above, from outside, from inside? Perception simultaneously becomes subject to a labyrinthine dissociation, which begins the moment the two men enter Haus Wittgenstein. Their movements struck me as allegorical of a disorientation of time and space.

DG They are trapped, and they don't know how to get out.

SB I found that the way the windows are filmed is spooky. They increase the feeling of disorientation and evoke the impression of being locked up, as if the outside were a phantasm and the two protagonists were imprisoned.



Dani Gal, *As from Afar*, 2013, film still, camera: Emre Erkmen

DG I placed them in the house and filmed them as they get lost in it as if they are trapped in the labyrinth of language, which reflects directly back to the complexities of their dialogue. It is also a continued play with Wittgenstein's architectural metaphors of language. But Wittgenstein can also be very hermetic and sometimes not understandable at all.

SB It is interesting that you say that. Wittgenstein is considered one of the protagonists of logical positivism, whose analytical philosophy of language was essential for the attempt of early linguistic conceptual art to establish a new, transparent ontology of art beyond the formalistic concepts of painting and sculpture.

DG The last part of the voice-over is also from Wittgenstein's text: "I am inclined to suggest to you to put the expression of our experience in place of the experience."<sup>4</sup> It functions as a comment about the acting since actors do not possess the experience, although they can express it.

SB The performance itself transforms the way memory is experienced...

4 Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, p. 184.



Dani Gal, *As from Afar*, 2013, film still, camera: Emre Erkmen

DG Wittgenstein continues: “‘But these two aren’t the same’. This is certainly true, at least in the sense in which it is true to say that a railway and a railway accident aren’t the same thing.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, they are not the same, so why does he ask this question? In the context of the film, it throws the viewer back to the beginning, to the point of view from the train and the discussion from the first scene about the railway tracks that were added because the model is a commission for a Hollywood film and therefore needs railway tracks in order to become a credible representation of a concentration camp. Mauthausen did not have a railway.

SB That is an interesting point. I see a strange analogy between the railway tracks and the window designs of Haus Wittgenstein that connects the fictional visit of Speer und Wiesenthal with their walk along the rails.

DG The walks in the streets were filmed on the soundstage of the Bavaria film studios. It is a fake German city made only of façades. I wanted to show that it is a fake city. It is almost as if they are walking through a dead European city, to give the feeling of emptied houses — the void after a genocide. And of course, I also wanted to have them walk inside of a model. During the first scene at the model builder’s atelier, Speer

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein, p. 184.

tells an anecdote, which is historically true, that he once built a 1:1 façade for Hermann Wilhelm Göring's future palace, a building in Berlin that was never built. While he tells the story, the viewer can see him through the back side of the Mauthausen model, which reveals itself to be only a façade.

SB There is also the visual quotation of *The Night Porter* by Liliana Cavani, a film depicting the sadomasochistic relationship between a former concentration camp victim and a former Nazi perpetrator. Is this reference a commentary on the nature of the relationship or interactions between Wiesenthal and Speer?

DG I was thinking of *The Night Porter* for several reasons. The sadomasochistic love affair between the SS officer and the Jewish female prisoner started in Mauthausen; the two characters meet years later in Vienna. Wiesenthal was a prisoner in Mauthausen and Speer allegedly initiated the construction of the camp; Wiesenthal also meets Speer in Vienna. The dynamic between my protagonists has a psychological dimension with certain sadomasochistic aspects. The victim and the perpetrator are both attracted to each other in order to redeem themselves, but at the same time, they take advantage of each other for their own interests and suspect one another. While reading the letters exchanged between Wiesenthal and Speer, I understood that there are multiple reasons why the two became close friends, but it is not clear to me how genuine this friendship was.

SB The two men even speak about Hitler's infernal hatred towards Jewish people and link it to an encounter with a Jewish sex worker from whom he got syphilis.

DG It is one of the questions that Wiesenthal asks Speer in the first letter. It is really bizarre but also typical of an eccentric, rough and very direct character like Wiesenthal. It is a strange question because it sounds as if he diminishes the magnitude of the crime of the Shoah and society's acceptance of the genocide, as if Hitler hated Jewish people for such a personal, immature reason.

SB Your decision to locate the encounter in Vienna seems also crucial. After the war, Wiesenthal was not a well-respected person in Austria, a country that denied responsibility for its involvement in Nazi crimes. This becomes thematised in your film when we read from the newspaper clipping in the hands of the Wiesenthal character that Mauthausen was Speer's idea. In fact, this was only discovered some decades after the war because Speer had long maintained the lie that he knew nothing about

the concentration camps — and German historiography helped him. In your fictionalised narrative, Speer clearly seeks to be perceived as the Nazi who is willing to confess his crimes, but he is being performed exactly as the professional liar Wiesenthal suspects him to be and does not reveal what he knows. This creates a strong tension between the unspoken and the sayable, a tension that is found in the latently sadomasochistic relationship between the two.

DG From the letters, it would appear as if Wiesenthal wanted to believe that Speer was sincere in his regrets and was looking for forgiveness. It is a very interesting quest to forgive your perpetrator.

SB At the same time, one has the impression that the two men are avoiding a shared truth: Processing and reconditioning after the war manifests in a hopeless labyrinth of allusions and displacements. How is forgiveness possible under this condition? And is this your perspective on the actionable condition of forgiveness?

DG We will never know their true motivations, but I do believe that part of it was a genuine quest for forgiveness. Even if it seems hopeless, for me it is more interesting to look at this case study as a way to contemplate the present and the future through the past. It is not only about forgiving the other but also forgiving the self, whether it is Speer committing crimes against humanity or Wiesenthal suffering from survivor's guilt. Of course, there is also a lot of self-interest involved. The two protagonists try to use each other for their own legacies. This comes up in the café scene. They are both old and think about how they will be remembered. Wiesenthal offers to help with the difficult parts in Speer's book draft. From his side, Speer offers to talk positively about Wiesenthal to his publisher. They help each other in a way that crosses normative boundaries of victim-perpetrator.

SB I read this scene as an expression of co-dependence. Speer literally washes his hands, adorned with the innocence of a person who takes credit for the admission of guilt, and in Wiesenthal's case, the viewer can see that he struggles to survive in his own memories. For me, the inevitable failure of their conversation is the most provoking challenge for the idea of forgiveness.

DG I think that the act of conversation, especially the act of listening, is integral to the process of reconciliation itself.

SB Aren't they abusing each other, too? But more crucially, truth, in addition to lies and repression, malingers between them and in the way they talk to each other. Does this ethics of mutual and conflictual affection underlying your cinematic concept as such also apply to the relationship between the film and the viewer?

DG It has to do with this idea of “unsettling empathy” coined by the historian Dominick LaCapra.<sup>6</sup> LaCapra rejects and warns against full identification with the victim: If the historian completely identifies with the victim, there is a loss of critical distance, which can also lead to condescension. He also rejects and warns against full objectivity through maintenance of objective critical distance: the bystander position. He proposes a space between these two approaches and explains it as a way “to work out some very delicate, at times tense, relationship between empathy and critical distance”.<sup>7</sup> This delicate relationship is something that I am trying to achieve when working with actors and directing a scene but also in the relationship to the audience. I want the audience to move between empathy and critical distance.

SB Why do only men appear as key figures within your multifaceted reflections on possible shifts in perpetrator-victim relationships?

DG All three films feature male protagonists; however, I do not show admiration for them. They are not protagonists in the classical way of “heroes” and the resulting identification experienced by viewers. Maintaining this distance allows for a critical view on the power structures of the male protagonists writing history and how they are represented in cinema. There is also an element of collapse in the world of these protagonists. In *Night and Fog*, Michael Goldman-Gilad says that while he was investigating Eichmann's case, he felt as if he was going through the horror of the camps all over again. Later, when he carries the milk jug that functions as an urn, the silence between the police officers reveals their inability to work through their own emotions. In *As from Afar*, the characters are trapped inside of Haus Wittgenstein before ending up caught inside of a miniature model of the building. And in *White City*, when Arthur Ruppin walks in the city that suddenly becomes an Arab village, it is not clear if it is all in his head. This is after he meets with an Aryan race researcher and finds out that they agree with each other on many levels.

SB Haus Wittgenstein, finished in December 1928, is modernist in the sense that it is made of stone, glass and metal. We already spoke about

6 See Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2014.

7 LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, p. 147.

how your camera transforms its industrial appearance into a prison, which could also be associated with the architecture of concentration camps. The whiteness of Haus Wittgenstein's design corresponds in an uncanny way with the Weißenhofsiedlung (Weissenhof Estate) in Stuttgart, which becomes the setting for your reflection on historical racial theory. Whiteness serves as an obvious reference to the nickname of Tel Aviv, which you use as the title of the third film in your trilogy. The colour white shows manifold and entangled meanings and relations. I read in it a resonance of critical whiteness in the field of postcolonial theories.

DG Yes, I take the word "white" from the realm of architecture to the discourse of race. For the Nazis, the "white city" belonged to something that is not white in a racial sense but to the architecture in the Levant, which they saw as primitive. The Weißenhofsiedlung was also built around the same time as Haus Wittgestein, in 1927, and they published a postcard to advertise it. Later the Nazis took the same postcard and photo-montaged camels, Bedouins, and Arab merchants to mock it as architecture that belongs to the Levant and not to Germany. The caption says "1940 Stuttgart. Weissenhofsiedlung, Araberdorf" (Arab village). The earliest postmark I found dates to 1932. It is a projection into the future, as if they wanted to say that Germany will be taken over by Arabs eight years later. It is similar to the rhetoric of the AfD (Alternative for Germany) and PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident) following the refugee crisis in 2015.

SB Or think of Thilo Sarrazin. Until his exclusion in July 2020, he was a member of the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) and published his book, *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (*Germany Abolishes Itself*) in 2010, which is three years before the AfD was founded. Sarrazin's discriminatory pamphlet agitates in an Islamophobic manner against Turkish and Arab citizens, claiming that they reproduce far faster than the German population and would already dominate German society. His racist right-wing rhetoric is doubtlessly an expression of white supremacy. Of course, we have to be careful not to assume any linear logics here; nevertheless, your film reminds the viewer of the lack of demarcation between leading Bauhaus architects like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius and the Nazi regime. Le Corbusier was also not innocent in this regard. Before we speak about the specific relationship between Arthur Ruppin and Hans F. K. Günther, I would like to ask you about your perspective on the role of modern architecture for and within modern eugenics.

DG The architecture historian Fabiola López-Durán pointed out the connection between eugenics and architecture in modernity, especially



Dani Gal, *White City*, 2018, film still, camera: Itay Marom

in South America. She writes about the way ideas of eugenics affected concepts of architecture in the early twentieth century, the idea of shaping the new human and engineering society through the body and accommodating the body and society in architecture. The houses in the Weißenhofsiedlung are very small inside in comparison to buildings built today but also in comparison to old German homes. There is a strong feeling that the interior is reduced to the minimum size with maximum functionality.

SB The eugenically imagined space deals with the removal of all supposedly superfluous decorations, the non-functional aspects of daily life and social communication. Remarkably, the encounter between the two protagonists in *White City*, both eugenicists, also speaks its own language.

DG Before Ruppin leaves Günther's office in the film's main scene, they briefly talk about two interlinked and significant events that happened at the time in relation to Germany, the Jewish world and Palestine. The first is the anti-Nazi boycott, which was started in May 1933 by the newly founded American League for the Defence of Jewish Rights. The second is the Haavara (transfer) Agreement. In August 1933 — the same month Ruppin visited Günther — the Nazi government and the Jewish Agency signed an agreement that enabled to about 60,000 German Jews to flee Nazi prosecution by emigrating to Palestine and move some of their as-

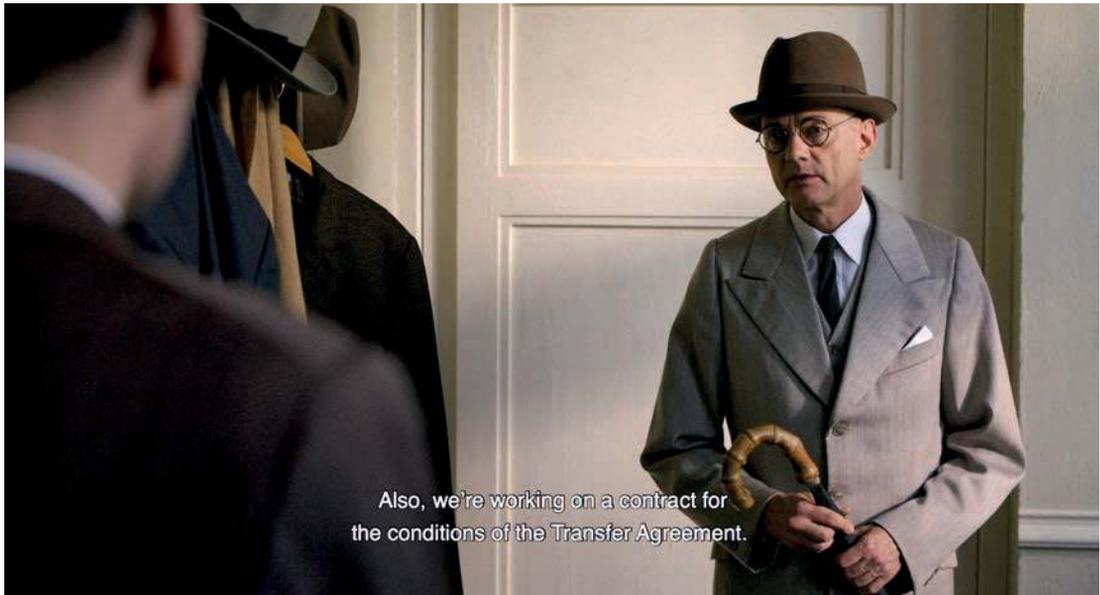


Dani Gal, *White City*, 2018, film still, camera: Itay Marom

sets in a form of exported German manufactured goods. The agreement served both the Zionist leaders in Germany and the new Nazi government who tried to get rid of the Jewish population before the Endlösung (Final Solution) existed as a policy. It also negated the efficacy of the anti-Nazi boycott, which started one month after the anti-Jewish boycott.

SB What is Ruppin's special importance, and what is his relationship to architecture?

DG Ruppin was a German-Jewish sociologist and one of the founding fathers of Zionism. He opened the Palästina-Amt (Jewish Agency for Palestine) in Jaffa at the beginning of the twentieth century and started to buy land, plan the first settlements and engineer the first pioneer groups. Ruppin also brought Richard Kauffmann to Palestine. Kaufmann was a German-Jewish architect who introduced modernist architecture to Palestine, and he is perhaps the main architect to popularise the style now associated with the idea of Israeli architecture. Another simulation of the connection between ideology and architecture happens through the set design of the two encounters — Ruppin measuring a young Jewish man and Ruppin visiting Günther — both scenes take place in the same room. We constructed the sets so that they mirror each other with a change of light and slightly different props. It is meant to function as a *déjà vu* when the same room appears ten minutes later in the film edit.



Dani Gal, *White City*, 2018, film still, camera: Itay Marom

SB This mirror effect is reminiscent of the relationship between Wiesenthal and Speer in *As from Afar*. I would like to ask you whether and how you think about the comparison of Günther and Ruppin in relation to your idea of multidirectional memory, empathy and forgiveness? What does the realisation of the eugenic implications of Zionism mean for the victims of the Nazis? I remember your reference to Primo Levi's thought that Nazi ideology was infiltrating the entire spiritual climate.

DG You mean that Nazi ideology corrupted its victims too? Ruppin had these ideas before the Jewish people became the victims of the Nazis. I think that it had more to do with nationalism, with the fact that the nation state cannot tolerate the other, the foreigner, while simultaneously needing the other in order to define its borders — all borders, not only the geographical ones. The Nazis took this idea to the maximum, to the extreme. Ideas of eugenics and bio-nationalism were popular at the time.

SB Absolutely, no doubt about that. The Nazis loved Günther for his idea of a biological nationalism. What makes your film so revealing is the realisation that they adopt ideas of a Zionist and thus cannot claim originality. Nonetheless, the analogy shudders.

DG Everything that Ruppin says in the film is taken from his own writings. Ideas about creating racial hierarchies within the Jewish people —



Set photography, *As from Afar*, 2013, photo: Dani Gal

hierarchies with direct applications during the creation of Israeli society — were ideas that mirror nineteenth-century colonialist exploitation based on categories of racial superiority. For Ruppin, the European Jews were at the top of the hierarchy. For example, the Yemenite Jews were black, and he promoted their immigration as land workers, although back in Yemen they worked as jewellers. The Ethiopian Jews were not even considered Jewish in his view. These hierarchies continue to have implications for Israeli society to this day.

SB The idea of a biologically coherent population as a basis for a nation state is, as Benedict Anderson would say, an “imagined political community”, based on local language communities and universalist concepts of the state as well as on racist hierarchies, which are all respectively discriminatory mechanisms of in- and exclusion. *White City* puts these mechanisms in an explicit colonialist perspective vis-à-vis the constitution of Israel.

DG Let’s think about the amount of destruction that was done in the Nakba with the elimination of over four hundred localities and urban areas, the expulsion of over 700,000 Palestinians, massacres and looting. It is the complete elimination of a culture in the name of progress and the modernist project.

SB Of course, this is a crucial historical issue. At the same time, modernism was rejected by the Nazis as an expression of degeneration. As you have mentioned earlier, they sought to destroy the Weißenhofsiedlung because of its resemblance to an “Arab” village.

DG The Nazis even built a few Germanic style houses in response. When you visit the area, there are a few houses nearby that look almost ridiculously Germanic.

SB This eclecticism also sheds a significant light on the relationship between Ruppin and Günther: As if they were combining their ideas that deal with the superiority of their own and the inferiority of the “other” — an aspect that is informed by their encounter and interaction. Is this an interpretation your film suggests?

DG At the time, Günther was the leading figure in the field of race research. For Ruppin, it was almost a side occupation. I wanted to emphasise this dynamic between the two when Ruppin is looking up to a younger scientist and asks for his approval. Again, the idea of the mirror is both formally and conceptually performed in the film. In the first scene, Ruppin is conducting a eugenic test on a young Jewish man...

SB Who is played by a Palestinian actor...

DG Yes, by Yousef Sweid, who is Palestinian-Israeli. In mainstream American cinema and television, Israelis often play Arabs, usually terrorists. We rarely see the opposite. I knew Yousef from before and talked to him about it. As an indigenous person, the feeling of being a foreigner in his own country was very familiar. This worked well with the phrase repeated by his character and by Ruppin: “Alles ist Fremd” (Everything is foreign). I also wanted to play with the self-referential idea that the foreigner, Ruppin, is trying to convince the indigenous man to emigrate to his own land and the latter is not interested.

SB His character also questions Ruppin’s idealist pioneering spirit when he mentions that many people committed suicide.

DG In Israeli schools, we are taught that the first waves of emigration pioneers participated in a positive time of nation building. It was actually very hard and some did not survive this period with the harsh climate and rugged terrain. It was also very hard to be accepted to these groups.

SB Then there is the actual *Spiegelreflexkamera* (mirror reflex camera), which actualises the mirror effect running through *White City* as a structural medium and procedure.

DG In addition to the camera, the scene with the young Jewish man ends when he leaves and we see him through the mirror. When Günther enters the room we also see him through the mirror. In addition, there is the eyeball imagery and the reduction of people to the biological, which amplifies this visual thematic.

SB The collection of eyes reminds me of *Der Sandmann*, a romantic literary narrative by E. T. A. Hoffmann from 1816 that refers to the tension between pre-modern alchemy and modern optical technology. The narrative style is characterised by advanced and uncanny perspectivism. In my opinion, this moment also appears in your film. I see a parallel to the extreme perspectives reminiscent of Bauhaus photography, which are burned into the cultural memory and in which the so-called Arab village is captured in your film.

DG Just to add to what you are saying, there is also the first Daimler commercial I re-enacted in the film, where we see a model getting out of a car with Le Corbusier's house in the background. Daimler-Benz AG was established in Stuttgart in 1926, a year before the construction of the Weißenhofsiedlung. Using the new architecture for a branding campaign was a way to relate their car to progress.

SB The young modern woman representing attributes of the upper bourgeois class is a classical symbol of the Weimarer Republik. We see her prototype in your film both as an emancipated, mobile subject and as advertising object for an upscale lifestyle. The myth of Bauhaus as a democratic aesthetic for the masses was already over by this point. Your film is characterised by a stark contrast between the image of luminous, commercial, feminised modernity and the obscure chamber à la Dr Frankenstein in which the two men meet.

DG Yes, Gothic horror movies: the slices of brain tissue, the eye balls... verses a bright sunny day.

SB The basics of modernity — invention, progress and enlightenment — seem already contaminated and connected to the dark, proto-fascistic posture of modern times. Does this apprehension correspond to the concerns of *White City*, and perhaps also to the first two films in your trilogy?

DG I use horror film tropes throughout the trilogy. In *As from Afar*, I plant objects in the model builder's studio: a raven, a piece of a skull, a jaw made of plaster, little Nazi sculptures, a gun. We already mentioned the pieces of brain tissue, the artificial eyes and other images of death in *White City*. When Günther explains his skull chart, he also accidentally brushes his cigarette against it. In *Night and Fog*, there is the foreboding presence of a milk jug full of human ashes.

SB I am thinking right now about Sylvie Lindeperg's book "*Nuit et brouillard*": *Un film dans l'histoire* ("*Night and Fog*": *A Film in History*) published in 2011 about Alain Resnais's film from 1956, especially the chapters in which she writes about the role of Olga Wormser, the historian whose research was so important for the French film director. Since the Nazis had considerable success in erasing and destroying all signs of death they left behind, every object and document found after the war became intensely meaningful for the reconstruction of what had happened. I am thinking of it because this could be a meaningful layer to ponder upon: What objects do we have that are able to really speak in relation to such a gigantic machinery of death?

DG Your question brings us back to the beginning of the interview about my film *Night and Fog*, which I named after Alain Resnais's film. We talked about Godard's statement of a missing link in the representation and Lanzmann's statement about wanting to destroy any possible evidence. This makes me think of the Israeli government's decision to get rid any trace of Adolf Eichmann so there will be no memorial or place of remembrance for him. But Eichmann is everything but forgotten. One does not need a physical trace or a monument to remember. Growing up in Jerusalem, I lived around many physical traces of Palestinian houses and villages, yet, I never questioned the historical background of these building until I was older. It was not part of my cultural memory because the state didn't want it to be.

SB This thought could be related to Georges Bataille's critique of modern culture, which includes its dark side, its negativity, and which represents the opposite of the exclusion of death from modern ideas of life as embodied in the vitalism of the life reform movement, not least in the context of Bauhaus. With Michel Foucault we could read this as a manifestation of modern biopower, which of course also relates to modern eugenics. These contexts confront us with the violent and deadly exclusion of death in the name of life based on ideas of healthy, strong and hygienic bodies — "illness" and "dirt" had to be eliminated. Does it make sense to you to relate the imagery and narratives of your films to such topics?



Dani Gal, *White City*, 2018, film still, camera: Itay Marom

DG The films are trying to provoke a discussion about forgiveness and it is necessary to arrive at an understanding of forgiveness through multidirectional memory. Humans are capable of extreme violence under certain political conditions and understanding this is a step toward responsibility and away from guilt.

SB Every crime in the name of a nation state or in the name of an ideology is to be seen in its specific condition, which does not mean that it is not based on overarching developments and structures. One last question regarding the relationship between the specific role of cinematic memory for your approach of forgiveness in the “real” world...

DG Cinematic memory is always a representation of the event. The boundaries between what we understand the event to be and the representation of it by other means — artistic or documentary — is completely blurred.

SB There is a pedagogical moment in all of your films, a certain way of teaching us about history. Thinking of Resnais’s *Nuit et brouillard*, my question is whether you, as an artist, understand film as a privileged medium of education, of learning or relearning?

DG What do you mean by relearning? Or do you mean unlearning?

SB This was the name of the programme that the allies imposed on the Germans and Austrians after the Second World War in order to educate them in democratic educational work. The field of culture — literature, film, visual arts and music — played an important role for the programme. I don't suggest that your trilogy directly refers to this historical project. Nevertheless, the style and atmosphere of your films reminds me of a certain West German television aesthetic that is shaped by the idea of mass education.

DG I use classic cinema and television tropes in the way of shooting, dramatisation and creating atmospheres. By doing this, the scenes look familiar to the viewer in the sense that you mentioned, yet because the syntax is different, the familiar becomes unfamiliar. In *White City*, through showing the postcards at the beginning and reconstructing them cinematically at the end of the film, I tried to concentrate the entire Palestinian/Israeli/German historical complexity into one image. The “white city” mutates from the untouched postcard of the modern architecture, through the orientalist mockery created by the Nazis, which ironically resembled the reality of pre-1948 Palestine, before bridging into contemporary German Islamophobia, then posing as the naive construction of the “white city” in Israel that was created at the expense of the expulsion of Palestinians and the destruction of their cities and villages.

SB The picture is obviously very topical if we consider today's forms of Islamophobia. It also reminds me of Beatriz Colomina's book *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, in which the architectural theorist examines the dialectics of architecture, postcards and film strips. As such the scene appears as a complex thought-picture, to speak with Walter Benjamin — a montage of fragmented or asynchronous memory that overlaps with the present.

DG One of these moments happens in *Night and Fog*, when Goldman-Gilad describes how he went home, took his car, drove to the prison, and while walking along the prison walls, he is reminded of Auschwitz, but this time, Goldman-Gilad says, it was “His [Eichmann's] Auschwitz”. This aural retelling is overlayed with the scene of the boat carrying Eichmann's ashes taking off into the sea.

SB During the course of my research on your trilogy, I found texts recounting the delegitimisation of testimonies delivered by the victims of the Shoah. Judges claimed they were too influenced by their affects as a result of their experiences. As much as your films focus on the ethical motive of forgiveness, as much they confront us with personal memories

that illustrate the difficulties and hurdles of this claim, your aesthetic and narrative treatments of perpetrator-victim relationships do not allow a solution to this problem but give us the opportunity to address it.