

Madeleine Bernstorff

Let a Hundred Living Archives Bloom!

Are there inviting, friendly (film) archives? Accessibility is being demanded from archives with increased vigor in the face of the seemingly infinite access suggested by the Internet. It is not always so easy to distinguish between conservative, conservational approaches to preservation, the neo-liberal economy's exploitation of rights and resources and more favorable impulses linked to making connections and communal sharing. Moreover, the politically acknowledged practice being undertaken by public archives seeking to open up their contents is also subject to economic constraints, just as the specters of exclusive knowledge or fetishistic restoration still occasionally flit about in institutional garb.

After carrying out comprehensive research with my colleagues Brigitta Kuster and Sebastian Bodirsky in two central archives in the Maghreb¹, I am particularly interested in how a "decolonialization of hegemonic knowledge" might be set in motion as a cinematic anti-canon in transitory visual usage. It was no great coincidence we ended up at the archive of the Arsenal cinema both before and after our trips, where films relating to the focus of our interest had been collected in ways that continually surprised us. Several films have only survived here. As such, the only print of filmmaker Annie Tresgot's film *LES PASSAGERS* (1971), which she herself had long been in search of, can be found there, as can a rare print of Assia Djebar's film *LA ZERDA ET LES CHANTS DE L'OUBLIE* (1978), which makes decolonializing use of archive images in the Maghreb.

The Living Archive project does indeed act like one big, encouraging invitation to carry out recollections from a multitude of perspectives and to activate these treasures in skillful, specific fashion as part of what will hopefully be an ongoing

¹ At the CCM Rabat for the film series "Small Paths, Linked Stories" with Brigitta Kuster as part of the "In the Desert of Modernity" project (Marion von Osten, Serhat Karakayali, Tom Avermaete) at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin 2008, as well as in Algiers with Sebastian Bodirsky and Brigitta Kuster for the film series "Ohne Genehmigung. Die Filme von René Vautier. Cinéma militant, Internationalismus, anti-koloniale Kämpfe" (Without Permission. The Films of René Vautier. Cinéma militant, Internationalism, Anti-colonial Battles) at the Zeughauskino in Berlin in 2012. See www.ohnegenehmigung.com for more information. We also carried out research at the Archives Albert Kahn/Archives de la Planète, Boulogne-Billancourt.

movement. Links and interconnections materialize, whose oppositional power also references what, if anything, can and could be said at any particular place. What are the impulses behind these recollections? Why don't we like the sort of country-specific film history of grand forms and canonized moments in the slightest? And how can we mentally visualize the gaps in the archive? The archives are to be seen within the context of post-colonialist interdependences and as both an expression of the cultural effects of colonial traumatization and a possible store of memories of anti-colonial resistance that points to the future in the face of continuing structural restraints. "What "we" are interested in is a film historical legacy that is split and fractured between colonialism and anti-colonialism as well as between neo- and post-colonialism: there is of course no system according to which particular films have "survived" in a particular place. And what does even mean for a film to 'survive'?"²

Our research was not easy. The sort of resistance shown by analogue archives, running the gamut from vinegar syndrome and oft-inscrutable administrative entry rituals, most certainly represents a challenge. Both times – in the archive of the Centre Cinématographique Marocain (CCM) in Rabat, originally founded under colonial rule, and the Cinémathèque algérienne in Algiers, which was created shortly after Algeria became independent and was for long time a film culture center for the entire continent, the films we wanted to see were screened for us in a large auditorium in luxurious conditions. And following our visit, we were allowed to borrow the film prints we selected for free, which was the only thing that made it possible for complex, diachronic narrations drawing on examples of Moroccan and Algerian film history and linked to the legacy of Western film to be visualized at the film screenings in Berlin.

Two colleagues of mine are currently working with the archives in Algiers and the consequences of the city's dramatic political history: film scholar and researcher Viktoria Metschl's doctoral project at the University of Vienna draws both on various theoretical positions on archives and practical research carried out on

² Brigitta Kuster, April 2013

location via interviews to explore Algeria's widely scattered film legacy as an "example of a decentralized archival order or lack thereof". Her research is based on the demand for a "right to know", a right for collective remembrance, as well as on an in-depth examination of questions relating to the witness function of images and the ethics of the image with respect to archive material, also within the context of coming to terms with previous violence suffered. She is setting out on a search for the various negatives of Algerian films scattered across Europe.

Art historian and film scholar Yasmina Dekkar has been carrying out research since 2009 on the history of the Cinémathèque algérienne in Algiers for her PhD project in Postcolonial Studies at Goldsmiths. The Cinémathèque was founded in 1964 and re-opened in 2011 after a 3-year renovation program. For over 40 years, it was a prominent place for open debate and criticism on both aesthetic and social and political themes and was regarded as a central meeting point between Maghreb and African filmmaking and cinema from the rest of world. The civil war years between 1992 and 2002 had a devastating effect on the institution, as well as on cultural life in Algeria general. Yet the Cinémathèque algérienne and its 13 repertory cinemas across the country continued to show films despite this. Yasmina Dekkar examines both this story as well as that of *Insurrectionelle* by Farouk Beloufa, which was heavily cut by censors and only received one single screening at the Cinémathèque in 1973 before being banned. Both researchers will give an account of their research. "In a Maghreb that had been subdued and totally reduced to silence, we were overrun by photographers and filmmakers wanting to take our picture. The 'Zerda' is this morbid "festival" which pretended to be capable of grasping us. Despite their images, outside of the images and the gazes which killed us, we dared to allow other images to be resurrected, shreds of a despised everyday life" is how Assia Djebar describes her film *LA ZERDA ET LES CHANTS DE L'OUBLIE*. In the same context, a new video by artist Benjamin Tiven entitled *A third version of the imaginary* (Kenya/USA 2013) expands upon the question of the archive as a precarious subject of remembrance. We follow a librarian through the tightly stacked shelves of Kenyan radio and TV station KBC in Nairobi and hear a conversation about the (linguistic) problem that arises with regard to the concept of the "image" in Swahili. "In Swahili, drawing is "kochura", photograph "picha", cinema "sinema", and video

“video”. But there’s no standard word for “image”, the image is an imported concept... In Swahili, the image doesn’t exist without its medium. Perhaps with the word *Taswira* gets closest to the concept of the “image”, which can refer to the ability to see, but also to the sort of shimmering miracle which you see but do not believe in. *Taswira* can also be a visual thought process shared by a group. The word is often used to describe the staging of a drama, how it is understood by the audience: the collective feelings for a place or character evoked by the power of the narration. *Taswira* is an image whose technological medium is the mind or the psyche.”³ How do you make a film about a visual archive without images? How can you tell, present or even become involved in a visual story that is invisible?

³ Quoted from the text which artist Benjamin Tiven developed for his video based on comprehensive discussions with KBC archivist Magambo Mwenda.