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— Meeting Point

#3

Dork Zabunyan
& Marie Voignier

Marie Voignier : The Suspended Gaze

For a number of years, Marie Voignier has been making films that explore our perception of past and contemporary history, while discreetly analyzing – without preaching to viewers – the ways in which visual and sound stereotypes come to envelop this. In her work, historical strata encounter layers of clichés that ultimately inhibit us from grasping the former’s complexity, the often-tormented link between these strata and our present day. It is with this in mind that the analysis of a touristic phenomenon collides with colonial remanences that continue to persist today. Voignier travels a great deal, on all continents (Europe in *Hinterland*, Africa in *L’hypothèse du Mokélé-Mbembé*, Asia in *Tourisme international*, and more), showing us countries that are un- or under-depicted in images, such as North Korea: here, the artist simultaneously deconstructs the propagandistic discourses of the Pyongyang regime, and our own perceptions, which hardly allow us to break with a hackneyed view of the North Korean people. Travels, the deconstruction of stereotypes, the examination of the circulation of images shaping our perception of a world that is itself in the making – all of these represent points of passage between Voignier’s work and that of Susan Meiselas, alongside the clear differences. These points set the tempo of this Meeting Point, recorded during the exhibition Susan Meiselas, “Mediations”. Here is a way to extend these “Mediations” or to preserve them dynamically in memory, for other travels, other wanderings through the disgruntled world of images and sounds that surround and even engulf us.

The Conversation



Dork Zabunyan: Hello Marie.

Marie Voignier: Hello.

Dork Zabunyan: Welcome to the third Meeting Point of the year. Let me briefly recall the concept: we continue on from an encounter held at the Jeu de Paume to converse around an exhibition – Susan Meiselas, *Mediations*, in this case – and broaden the scope of the discussion. This particular Meeting Point is a bit different in that it's an encounter not with Susan Meiselas, but with the artist Marie Voignier.

Marie, you make films, you exhibit your works. This encounter thus allows for something of a collision of perceptions: your own, and that of Susan Meiselas, which is currently on display in the Jeu de Paume's spaces. This exhibition is thus the starting point to focus in more closely on your work; because while it is extremely different from that of Meiselas, it seemed appropriate to take a step back to gain new perspective on her work, as well as your own.

I'd like to specify the three elements that facilitate this interplay, in my view.

The first is the idea of travel, because both Meiselas and yourself cover a rather vast geographical field: the United States, England, Nicaragua and Kurdistan for her – the Mediations exhibition illustrates it well – linked to her profession as a photo-reporter for the Magnum Agency, initially. You yourself have crisscrossed continents, made films in the former East Germany with Western DDR, for example, and more recently in North Korea with *Tourisme international*, as well as in Cameroun with *L'hypothèse du Mokélé-M'Bembé* in 2011. And if I understand correctly, you've just finished shooting a film in China?

Marie Voignier: It's underway. I haven't really gotten started yet.

Dork Zabunyan: The second point covers the array of themes dealt with. In particular, you address tourism, the question of the production of information (we'll get back to that), agricultural work, and the relationship to science. Some of these themes recur from one film to the next, in the same way that Meiselas's work isn't limited to images of war, but also addresses the question of cultural identity, the sex industry, and more.



Marie Voignier, *L'hypothèse du Mokélé-M'Bembé*, HD video, 78 min
Coproductio Capricci films / Espace Croisé, Roubaix © Marie Voignier

Lastly, a third common feature of your approaches and your work, which I find important, is that both of you cover a rather broad spectrum of media or materials that are not strictly photographic for Meiselas, or strictly film-based for you. As I mentioned, you have exhibitions, and Meiselas also participates in films, produces maps and publications that often precede her exhibitions. You also place importance on texts, books and archives that may be shown in your exhibitions.

The first point that could spark off our conversation is this relationship to travel. I'd firstly like to know your impressions of your visit to Meiselas's exhibition, seeing how her movements across spaces are carried out – because while sometimes she is requested to go to a certain destination, other times, she makes the decision to go herself.

I'm also curious to know about your travel protocols when you're making a film, in terms of location scouting, shooting, and sometimes the return, when you go back to the country.

Marie Voignier: What struck me about Meiselas's work – Nicaragua comes to mind, first and foremost – is when she explains how she headed there having read an article in the press, and without knowing anything about the country, without much information, compared to other professional journalists who have methods and networks and head out with a certain baggage.

She headed out without this baggage, and I think that this is what imbues her work with such sensitivity, this position of fragility that she has from the get-go, upon arrival. She recounts her arrival, how she didn't know what to photograph or really even how to photograph, because she wasn't really trained as a photojournalist or journalist. She had taken another path, I don't exactly know how she ended up at the Magnum Agency, but at the time she was just beginning, she didn't consider herself to be a journalist, she didn't have the methods of the trade.

She was thus extremely fragile upon her arrival in Nicaragua, didn't know where to start, didn't have any specific contacts, and she undertook a sort of wandering that inevitably stimulated a perception, sparking encounters whose terms were doubtlessly different than those of journalists who have a preexisting network upon their arrival in a country.

I certainly relate a bit to this approach, because when I go somewhere, there's this idea of being displaced, uprooted and far from any points of reference.

It's really important for me not to arrive somewhere knowing exactly what film I'm going to make, not to arrive overly informed. I don't, by any means, embrace the idea of under-information, but rather, the idea that perception and research not be frozen by preconceptions under some cloak of knowledge, that things remain open.

For example, for *Tourisme international*, the film that I went to make in North Korea, in the highly specific context of propaganda/counterpropaganda of a history that diverges widely depending on the camp, I strove to read short books produced by North Korea on the country's history. I wanted to avoid rejecting from the get-go the propagandistic discourses whose staging I was going to attempt to film.

I opted to start there, which didn't stop me from subsequently rounding out my research with further reading, obviously. It struck me as important not to arrive overly loaded down with information, and not to make too many decisions beforehand. That allowed me to access a form of fragility and doubt, which interests me in the production of images.

Dork Zabunyan: Yes, that's extremely interesting. I hope we'll also get to the relationship to all the stereotypes that impact our perception, because your work really allows for the deconstruction of these stereotypes.



Marie Voignier, *Tourisme international*, 2014, HD video, 48 min

With support for the development of an artistic research - Ministry of Culture and Production Bonjour Cinéma and CAC Brétigny © Marie Voignier

It's true that the fact of arriving without any baggage creates a position of fragility, and at the same time, there are always images that serve as foils, emerging from "information systems", as they are sometimes called.

And here I draw the parallel with the work of Meiselas, who is deeply concerned with the circulation of her images and the way in which they may become forms of stereotypes. I wondered if before heading off, you undertook a sort of cartography of the ways in which our perception is shaped? Is this "ecology of perception", i.e. of an environment that guides and orients us, present from the get-go? Because you spoke about North Korea, and it's also true of other continents where you have traveled – I'm wondering about the relationship to these layers of dominant perceptions that have to be shaken off, and of which your films bear the trace. *Tourisme international* is rather interesting, in this sense. It's perhaps less a question of a baggage of knowledge that you brought up earlier than the relationship to...

Marie Voignier: To images?

Dork Zabunyan: Yes, to images.

Marie Voignier: Yes, because the question of comprehending information is the question of images. I'll bring up the text already quoted by Meiselas that goes something like this, I can't recall the exact terms: "When you arrive, the image has already been made, the image is already there." And in fact, this image must also be gotten rid of, and others sought out.

I was strongly confronted with this in *Tourism international*, because it addresses propaganda and thus, the production of images by a single factory, because the state alone provides images of the country, sets the scenery. You actually always see the same images, the same sites and perspectives that are filmed and photographed, including by tourists.

That was the great challenge, because the idea was by no means to make images that hadn't yet been made. I didn't at all go there in an attempt to shed light on or investigate life in North Korea, but to film this image factory.

I nevertheless ended up with the same images as everybody else, which paralyzed me for several months while I was editing, not knowing what to do with these images that are the same for everyone.

To resolve this crisis, I decided to turn to sound, producing a form of commentary on the images using a voiceover, and redoing the film's sound that way. For me, this was a way of taking back a form of control over the images that I had hardly made, and that were hardly my own.

Dork Zabunyan: That also allows us to shift the discussion to a question I asked myself while visiting the Meiselas exhibition: what might so-called “political” art be, or photography that seeks to free perception? I always try to address this question from the point of view of the construction of memory, or of what remains of traces from the past that coexist with a present.

This is also characteristic of your work, and here I’m thinking of *Hinterland*, in which a military base is transformed into a tourism and amusement complex, and which pertains to this question of the construction of memory.



Marie Voignier, *Hinterland*, 2009, HDV video, 49 min.
Production Capricci films, co-production CAC Brétigny © Marie Voignier

I also have in mind the quote by photographer Gisèle Freund, who asserted in the 1970s that memory is constructed largely through static images – photographic images, for her – rather than through moving images, more strongly associated with an elusive, fleeting flow in which images are not differentiated.

I was struck by Freund's declaration, and I don't think she said that to defend the photographers' trade; it's a theory in which she strongly believed, and it's paradoxical at a time in which there is such a surge of moving images. What stays with us from images of events in which we are not necessarily involved as actors or witnesses? For her, the static image is what lingers.

And it's true that in the exhibition, we discussed the iconic status gained by certain images, like Molotov Man – the photograph that Meiselas made during the Nicaraguan Revolution. In recalling the uprising that rocked that country in the late 1970s, this image comes to mind more quickly than other reportages from the time, or other moving images on display in the exhibition.

I wanted to know your opinion on this theory, particularly because your films feature a great many static shots, as though they allow for this entanglement of present and past to be grasped not more easily, but more powerfully. Might you say that the fixity of the image allows viewers to construct memory more easily, to borrow Gisèle Freund's theory, than if there was camera movement, or the editing was jerky?

Marie Voignier: I wholly buy into this theory that memory is best able to latch onto a static image, and the same goes for memory of films. It seems to me that when you think of a shot from a film, what jumps to mind is a still image, a face. You might also recall a movement, but it's less common. Actually, what's interesting in the example you give of Molotov Man – of the man throwing a Molotov cocktail – is that the image has also doubtlessly become iconic because it represents the idea of an action.

It goes beyond the fixity of the image, as behind this static image there is an action, a revolution underway. And a revolution is also a literal physical movement, as well as a movement toward something.

And what really struck me in the work at the heart of the exhibition, and which gives it the title *Mediations*, is precisely the way in which Susan Meiselas doesn't content herself with static images outside of their context, and how she revisits them in different ways.

In particular, there are the three bands, featuring images she made that were notably used by the American press, as well as abroad, on top; the images from a 1981 book entitled *Nicaragua*, in the center; and images that weren't selected for the publication, that are missing or couldn't be included, on the bottom.

In 1981, this project thus already included three layers, and she revisited it in 1985 in the film *Voyages*, with Marc Karlin, and then in the 1991 film *Pictures from a Revolution*, and later in *Reframing History*.

She could very well have contented herself with this set of images, and perhaps with an edition of images that traveled the world, but she is continually in a form of dissatisfaction concerning the position of images in building the memory of this event – and her images have held a prominent position in the memory of the events in Nicaragua.

This point of fixity of the image, around which she continually moves, and which she revisits in non-linear fashion, interests me a great deal.

And these constant returns are also extremely close to the work of memory, which functions in layers rather than in chronological order, and which is quite imperceptible.

Dork Zabunyan: Well then, perhaps one final question, which springs from the end of the exhibition, and which I wanted to ask you because it also concerns your work in film.

It's true that photojournalism is currently undergoing a crisis, in particular, relating to the possibility of retouching images, transforming them from the inside with digital tools. These transformations have made way for an array of so-called conspiracy theories. The expression "fake news" that has emerged from this crisis – used in French as well – has become dominant. I find it a bit sad that the word "fake" has such pejorative connotations, as it can also have a highly positive function.

I think notably of what Deleuze said in *The Time-Image* on the "powers of the false", which he defines in highly practical, concrete terms from the point of view of filmmakers, as everything that disturbs the somewhat entrenched oppositions between fiction and documentary. This separation may be dealt with differently from one case to the next, as each filmmaker will approach it in their own way.

Jacques Rancière also comes to mind, in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, where he asserts that fiction is necessary for reflecting on reality. Here too, it is a question of an approach for moving beyond this distinction between documentary, placed in the category of reality, and a form of fiction, viewed as a form of derealization.

And that's what strikes me in your films – as I've already said – because in them you see a form of undecidability. You don't really know where you are, who the people are being questioned, or what you're hearing. The viewer is in a wholly positive form of disorientation, which forces them to make an effort to understand what it is they are seeing.

Here, in my view, there is true tension around this idea of falsehood: on the one hand, fake news and its devastating effects, as seen in the United States, now being dealt with in the field of photojournalism; and,

on the other, all of the inventions blurring the boundaries of established categories, including documentary and fiction, and to which your work attests, I think.

I'd like to know your point of view, in relation to the exhibition perhaps, but also more broadly speaking, pertaining to the situation in which we now find ourselves, as prisoners of sorts of this term, at the cost of setting aside exactly those "powers of the false" that I spoke of just before.

Marie Voignier: I am by no means a specialist, but what is problematic in the question of fake news is more the question of truth, or of what is presented as a quest for truth. That is very different from a form of actually accepting gray areas, undecidability, accepting what you don't yet know or know well, what you can't fully grasp, and which is indeed the space occupied by viewers in certain films of mine. And it's also my own space, because the further I progress with a film, the less I am able to decide on anything at all, and the more I come up with questions that are hard to answer. The idea is thus to give shape to this space of questionings.

Fake news, on the other hand, can't tolerate indecision, and conspiracy theories emerge from this same intolerance of the void of non-explanation, gray areas. They are attempts to seek out truths, guilty parties and heroes.

The problem therefore appears to lie more in a form of absolute truth.

And falsehood has never been the problem, so long as it presents itself for what it is.

Dork Zabunyan: Well then, many thanks to you, Marie. The time flew by.

Let me mention that an exhibition of your work and the work of Bie Michels, entitled “Dialoguing Gazes”, has just opened at Argos in Brussels, and is on through July 15, 2018. You’ll also be presenting your work in your gallery, the Galerie Marcelle Alix. Is there an exhibition on?

Marie Voignier: No, there was one recently, so something will open down the line.

Dork Zabunyan: Okay then, thank you very much, once again, for participating in this Meeting Point.

Marie Voignier: Thank you, Dork.



Marie Voignier, *Tourisme International*, 2014, HD video, 48 min With support for the development of an artistic research - Ministry of Culture and Production Bonjour Cinéma and CAC Brétigny © Marie Voignier



Friday, May 18, 2018. Dork Zabunyan talks with Marie Voignier at Jeu de Paume, Paris, a few days before the end of "Mediations", the retrospective devoted to the American photographer Susan Meiselas (b. 1948, Baltimore)

Marie Voignier is a French artist. She spent a few years in Berlin after graduating from science's university, then joined the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Lyon and filmed her first video-films. She directed *Le Bruit du Canon* (Prix du Court métrage – Cinéma du Réel, Paris, 2007), *Hinterland* (Prix des médiathèques FID Marseille, 2009) and *Hearing the shape of a drum* (Berlin Biennale 2010). In 2011, she shot her first long feature: *The Mokélé-Membe Hypothesis*, and then *Tourisme international* in 2014.

Dork Zabunyan is Professor in Film Studies at Paris 8 University. His main publications include *Foucault va au cinéma* (Bayard 2011), *Les Cinémas de Gilles Deleuze* (Bayard 2011), *Passages de l'histoire* (Le Gac Press, 2013), and most recently *L'insistance des luttes* (De l'incidence éditeur, 2016). He contributes to *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, *Trafic*, *Critique* and *artpress*.

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