

A Con-
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about
Unmade
Film

This conversation between Uriel Orlow and Andrea Thal took place during the preparations for the exhibition *The Production Office* and was continued in December 2013 for this edition of the publication.

Andrea Thal and Uriel Orlow A Conversation about Unmade Film

Translation: Fiona Elliott

Andrea Thal: I would like to start our conversation by considering the form and the title of your body of work Unmade Film and how these relate to the contents. Over the last few years you have created works in the form of assemblages comprising diverse media and formats, which are configured differently, depending on the context and the exhibition situation – we’ve already talked about that on another occasion.¹ In the case of Unmade Film, this fragmentation and the implicit refusal to settle for a finished, fixed form has given the work its title. “Unmade” points both to the idea of a film that was planned but never made and to a film that once existed but has now been dismantled again. In that sense, the title also touches on aspects of temporality, in that it transposes us into a time both before and after the making of the “film”, in such a way that these two conditions both connect and remain in a state of abeyance. Unmade Film also addresses again questions and issues surrounding the politics of history and memory in connection with the Holocaust and, as such, the history of your own family, which already played a central part in your

earliest artistic works. This return to your family's own history in Unmade Film is characterised by the superimposition of multiple traumas and injuries resulting from the catastrophic impact of the Shoah and the Nakba. However, this simultaneous presence is extremely fragile, not only because the horror and the incomprehensibility of those events are all but impossible to pin down but also because they are suppressed, and the connection between the two is highly problematic in many respects. I would be interested to know how your personal experience plays into the complexity (in terms of both time and the politics of memory) of society's "blind spots" concerning those events and how these relate to the form and concept of an "unmade film" and to the limits of representability?

Uriel Orlow: Already in these earlier works, which were concerned with the Holocaust, I was struggling with the impossibility of representation and memory. The unsaid and unsayable, and the absence of memory in my family were just as deep-rooted within me as the fragments of this dark pre-history that I did pick up as a child. Trauma arises from the paradox that it is not over and keeps coming back – like a symptom or an affliction – precisely because it resists memory and, as such, any form of processing. As someone born after the event, I am transgenerationally "haunted" by its implications.² In these works, I didn't want to focus on the past as such or to specifically address my own family history – it seemed inappropriate to simply attempt to bridge the temporal and representational gap. I began to think about history in spatial (rather than chronological) terms and concentrated on evidence that can still be located at specific sites. These places, for instance a synagogue in Poznan that was turned into a swimming pool by the Nazis in 1942 and became the core of my video 1942 (Poznan), are exactly the kind of "blind spots" you mentioned. The violence is at

1 Uriel Orlow, *Time is a Place* (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2012).

2 See Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *L'Ecorce et le Noyau* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978; 2nd edition 1987, Edition de poche, Champs/Flammarion, 1996).

3 See Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

4 See Idith Zertal (note 3).

the heart of these places and they bear witness to it without representing it. So I was not trying to represent that past but rather the questions it poses for us, and approach the ethics and the politics of memory in the present. I felt it was important not only to engage with these questions with reference to my own identity but also to situate them in a wider context. In later works, I looked at other historically charged places to which I had no personal connection and started to examine my own position in relation to them (as an outsider, albeit an outsider who is implicated in a much wider historical configuration). Unmade Film unites these two positions because, although there is a personal connection, this work also required me to address a history that is not my own.

Some years ago, when I became aware of the connection between the Israeli mental health centre Kfar Sha'ul and the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin, which was depopulated in a massacre committed by Zionist militias in 1948, I felt personally affected. During family holidays in Israel as a child and a teenager, I had often visited my great-aunt in that same clinic. She had survived Auschwitz and emigrated to Palestine, where she suffered a nervous breakdown in the early 1950s. Eventually, she was admitted to Kfar Sha'ul, where she died more than thirty years later. The listless patients sitting around the grounds of Kfar Sha'ul and its desolate atmosphere left a deep impression on me. Although Holocaust survivors had found refuge in Israel and in this hospital, it was, at the same time, as though they had been put away and completely forgotten by society at large (while the Holocaust played, and still plays, a central part in the national discourse).³ I felt incredulous, distressed, and angry at the realisation that precisely this refuge had been constructed amongst the ruins of a Palestinian village that was ethnically cleansed just a few years earlier; angry also at the silence surrounding these circumstances to this day (there's no commemorative plaque, for instance). This willful ignorance is not just about suppressing history, it also involves the physical covering up of one trauma with another. What does it mean when one trauma conceals another, in other words, when one trauma's immanent incapacity for remembrance becomes the obstruction of memory for another? These questions are also bound up in the politics of memory and the position and role the Holocaust plays in the national discourse within Israel (and elsewhere in the Jewish Diaspora).⁴ At the same time, in both physical-geographical and

mental-conceptual terms, the layering of the Shoah and the Nakba at Deir Yassin / Kfar Sha'ul also leads to new aporias. Although it forces us to think of the Holocaust and the Nakba together, it would be problematic if this led to making comparisons that would implicitly equate one trauma with the other. The open, fragmentary form of Unmade Film arose from precisely the impossibility of doing justice to all the different aspects and the complexity of this place and its history in a single work. The usual memory-pitfalls surrounding the Holocaust and the Nakba and the specific configuration of Deir Yassin and Kfar Sha'ul coupled with my own growing awareness of a kind of hegemony of memory (in other words, the secrecy and/or determination to suppress the consequences of the Zionist politics of occupation) became the starting point for this project. That and the problem I have already touched on, the problem of the logic of comparisons, convinced me that I couldn't simply juxtapose the story of my great-aunt with the history of Deir Yassin, although she and my personal, emotional connection to the place were, of course, central to the process of Unmade Film (and are present in The Stills, for instance). As in earlier works, I felt it was important to get away from the temporal and narrative dimensions of history and to approach the historical palimpsest spatially, through place, as is the case in The Voiceover, an imaginary audio tour through Deir Yassin / Kfar Sha'ul. The history of the massacre of 9 April 1948 and its crucial influence on the subsequent Palestinian exodus has been written about (although it is still a source of controversy and debate in the Israeli mainstream) and has in some ways come to epitomise the Nakba in Palestinian collective memory. Nevertheless, the place itself – that's to say, Deir Yassin / Kfar Sha'ul – remains all but unknown, geographically invisible (like over four hundred other villages that were cleared in 1948). This is also due to the fact that in many senses this place is “out of bounds”, Survivors of the

5 Jacqueline Rose has described the marginalisation of Holocaust survivors in Israel for instance in the fact that no mention is made of them in the law enacted in 1953 establishing a national Holocaust Memorial Day, as a form of “conditional remembrance”, see Jacqueline Rose, “Introduction” and, for a more detailed account, the chapter “Displacement in Zion”, in *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007).

massacre or their descendants who now live on the West Bank are often not permitted to travel to Jerusalem; and then there is also the fact that Kfar Sha'ul, as a mental health centre, is not open to the general public, which means that it also eludes representation in a physical sense. The place is in a mental realm, in all respects.

Andrea Thal: Your approach also addresses the political necessity of conveying a sense of the not visible connection to the more distant history of the place. Although many of the houses that once made up the village of Deir Yassin do still exist, they have been extended or used as premises for the Kfar Sha'ul mental health centre since the early 1950s, and the place has thus largely been disconnected from its own history and, in that sense, from a central aspect of memory. This is all the more striking since the same buildings remain in use, with the result that on a material level there is a very direct connection between Deir Yassin and Kfar Sha'ul. As you say, there are no commemorative plaques alerting visitors to the history of these buildings. To me it seems that Unmade Film is a process in which the viewer is drawn into an attempt to simultaneously connect different memories to the place and to contemplate them as parts of a whole. In that sense, this process is also an attempt to break down hegemonial forms of conditional remembrance.⁵ And this multifaceted view has to be re-created time after time; it cannot be permanently put in place, once and for all. This is an elaborate, debilitating form of work because you always have to start from scratch again, which can give you the feeling of being stuck, of repeatedly having to struggle for recognition, of running out of strength.

In addition to the fact that there has been a mental health centre in this place for some decades now, there is a further psychological dimension stemming from the unspoken subconscious and from the buildings themselves that point to a blind spot regarding the past. This aspect has become very important in your work and in the research we have undertaken together. You conducted a series of conversations with individuals in Jerusalem and Ramallah who work in the field of "trauma rehabilitation". This became the basis for The Script. We also read, amongst other things, texts by Frantz Fanon on colonialism and psychiatry and discussed these in meetings with psychologists.

Uriel Orlow: At first, these conversations were closely connected with my research into the place. I interviewed medical staff at Kfar Sha'ul in order to find out more about the treatment Holocaust patients received. Originally, Kfar Sha'ul was set up as a “working village”, where patients fulfilled simple tasks in the open air. In the 1960s, this was replaced by psychotropic drugs and sedated sitting around.

Both in terms of the already mentioned complex economy of trauma and the politics of the site, Deir Yassin cannot be conceived within the singularity of an event (in the past) but has to be considered in its continuity, as still affecting the present; the occupation is still ongoing. This prompted me to conduct conversations with psychologists in East Jerusalem and Ramallah about their work with trauma sufferers. Yoa'd Ghanadry, a Palestinian therapist in Jerusalem, shared her critique of the current model of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and its implicit temporality; this was eye-opening and affected the development of Unmade Film. The reality is that for the trauma victim in Palestine, survival and rebuilding one's life does not take place in a secure afterwards, but in a situation where there is a constant danger of new traumatic experiences. The extended concept of “Continuous Traumatic Stress Disorder” (CTSD) that she suggests reflects the sense of time I wanted to establish in Unmade Film. My concurrent re-reading of Fanon's ground-breaking work on the connection between colonial violence and mental health⁶ led me to collect case studies over the course of a year and finally to present them in The Script in an elliptical, fragmentary form, translated into both Arabic and Hebrew (they were originally written in English, intended for the international organisations that were funding the Treatment and Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Torture). In this reduced, multilingual form – despite the clear specificity of the source –, a historical connection opened up. Perhaps on this personal, intimate, and fragmented level, it is possible to think together the two very different, not comparable yet closely interconnected sufferings.

Andrea Thal: In the text you mentioned, by Frantz Fanon, the short introduction is followed by a series of case studies that open up

6 See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1963).

a range of different perspectives on the psychological effects of war and colonialism. Many of them show that within the framework of colonialism, its military apparatus and policing methods – but also in any corresponding resistance organisations – little or no attention is paid to the psychological impact of what is being done. Fanon’s text is very persuasive, because it also shows us a realm behind the ideologies and conflicts; the individuals in his case studies seem to be entirely isolated, left alone with the traumas that are haunting them. And it is not least due to these effects that the horrors of colonialism, war, and persecution continue to make an impact (having been internalised, in a sense) even long after the conflicts in question appear to have abated.

Unmade Film was not only an ongoing process, it was also presented publicly in different places and contexts during its development. The first fragments of Unmade Film were shown in the West Bank and in Jerusalem during Qalandiya International: The Voiceover as an audio tour in Abwein, a Palestinian village in the West Bank, and The Staging as part of the exhibition Gestures in Time in Jerusalem. Some months later, there was a more comprehensive exhibition and a series of presentations of Unmade Film at Al-Ma’mal in Jerusalem and at Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah. That exhibition also saw the presentation of the first edition of this publication, which was subsequently enlarged for the next two exhibitions, at the Centre culturel suisse in Paris and at Les Complices* in Zurich. The individual stations of the project clearly differed from each other in certain respects, particularly in terms of the relationship of the work to a particular context, the modes of presentation, and the concept of the exhibition. For the exhibition in Zurich, we took the spatial appearance and idea of a production office as our starting point. In that exhibition setting, the individual elements of Unmade Film formed very strong relationships with each other, for instance, where the video works were shown on small monitors and presented alongside or with other parts of Unmade Film on a table. In addition to this, certain elements now had a visible presence, having hitherto played an “invisible” part in the research process and in the making of the work – a collection of books, for instance, or photographs taken during various productions. As part of The Production Office, we organised a two-day workshop, together with Eric Jacobson, called Struggling Critique / Struggling Film.

Uriel Orlow: The various exhibition formats are in many ways intrinsic to the modularity of Unmade Film. I was particularly interested in the way individual works function in a site-specific manner. For instance, The Voiceover was first presented in the restored centre of a ruined village in the midst of the Palestinian landscape. The rocks, the air – everything seeped into the experience of the work. In Paris, that whole context was missing, and I wanted to transpose it, with sound effects, into an eight-channel version. Or, in the case of The Storyboard, I showed the pupils' drawings in a separate room as part of the exhibition in Jerusalem, whereas they have since been included in subsequent showings as a supplement to the publication. The look and idea of a production office for the exhibition at Les Complices* made it possible, firstly, to present individual items in a much smaller space and hence in closer contact with each other and, secondly, to question the “finishedness” of the works, in the sense that some were in a provisional form or only partially shown. At the same time, the production office, as a meta level, foregrounds the format of Unmade Film, and provides a glimpse behind the scenes of the research and work process. Accordingly, the workshop (and the screen for the film events) were component parts of The Production Office. I felt it was important to open up another discursive space and to consider the placement of my work. What does it mean to present this exhibition in the city where I myself grew up in a Jewish community? How does the implicit criticism (of the suppressed memory of Zionist aggression) relate to the genealogy of the Jewish critique of Zionism and to the often (sometimes – not always – rightly) invoked danger of a form of latent anti-Semitism that reverberates in any criticism levelled at Israel? When I was growing up in Zurich, the fear of appearing anti-Semitic was often a reason not to be openly critical of Israel in Jewish circles. So it was important for me to make the connection with an alternative, often forgotten tradition of Jews voicing criticisms of Zionism, drawing on the example of Hannah Arendt, for instance, which was described in detail by Eric Jacobson, or, from a contemporary Israeli perspective, through the film Avenge but one of my two eyes by Avi Mograbi. The film Ici et ailleurs by Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean-Luc Godard (1976) – comprising footage that had originally been commissioned some years earlier by the PLO for a “propaganda film”, which used images and forms in a manner that Miéville and Godard

questioned and took apart later for their own film – opened up a connection to a leftist, non-Jewish critique of Zionism but also to the ghosts of anti-Semitism. In the discussion, the question was also raised as to your and my positions regarding the identity politics and also the problematics of the legitimisation (or rebuttal) of accusations of anti-Semitism through identity.

Andrea Thal: Besides the questions you mentioned, at the workshop and during the exhibition there were often discussions and debates concerning anti-Semitism on the political left and the increasing level of Islamophobia in Switzerland. Over the course of the months when I witnessed first-hand the work that went into Unmade Film and later on, when Unmade Film was also shown outside the region it was concerned with – but also in discussions about this publication and the texts it contains – I realised yet again how much it matters to me to use my work on projects such as Unmade Film to create spaces that provide the opportunity for as differentiated a debate as possible. In other words, to be fully aware, from the outset, that we are broaching something that is extremely complex and difficult and contains stances to which or in which there seems to be no scope, or barely any, for dialogue or representation. This also means positioning myself as someone with “insufficient knowledge”, in other words, constantly considering new aspects of the subject (through and during the process of debate), reflecting on my own stance, reactions, and emotions, and trying to learn from that. Of course, every decision (to screen a film or publish a text, for instance) is also always a “statement” or implies a particular position, but it may also be part of an evolving process. This involves getting up close with something, which also means being caught somewhere beyond ideological positions. And it also means engaging with debates and pent-up emotions rather than avoiding them. In my view, this is what makes it possible to address these questions in artistic projects, assuming that we’re talking about an artistic praxis that is highly conscious of the question as to how something is presented (how things are talked about and what can be heard, when and how). In my view, this is seen in Unmade Film, quite explicitly and on a number of different levels, partly because the aim is not to produce a finite work but also because the individual fragments of the project – be it in the

exhibition or in this publication – only come together through the collaboration with the viewer. In the meantime, another part of the body of work has come into being, a lecture performance, in which you yourself appear and, amongst other things, address the difficulty of talking about this subject matter. This part, The Proposal, appears in this publication, separately from the text and image sections, as a continuous additional form, a kind of “narrative” running along and between the different languages and types of images.

Uriel Orlow: Although The Proposal is the last part of Unmade Film, it takes up an anti-linear position at the beginning. In it, I am returning to the story of my great-aunt, who is never explicitly mentioned in the other works, but whose story was my startingpoint and also the basis of my personal connection with the place. I didn't want to “record” this story but to tell it live and, in so doing, explore the impossibility of this narration and the way that it is caught up in the history of Deir Yassin. For this to work, as you say, the collaboration of the audience or viewers is essential: They become witnesses to the story and put it together themselves, on the basis of a fragmentary account. So we're going back to Pasolini and his notion of a screenplay as a structure that wants to be another structure.⁷ At the same time as I'm recounting the tangled story of my great-aunt and Deir Yassin, I'm also trying to get away from the narrative level, in order to observe and contemplate its narrative mechanisms, particularly the process of catharsis. This *mise en abyme* mirrors the inescapable contradictions at the heart of Unmade Film: not making a film but producing all the individual elements that make up a film, not telling the story to its end but still wanting to do it justice, not documenting the place Deir Yassin but examining it mentally. I am not trying to find a solution for these contradictions and conflicts, but a way to be with them.

7 See Pier Paolo Pasolini, “The Screenplay as a ‘Structure that Wants to Be Another Structure’”, in *Heretical Empiricism*, ed. Louise K. Barnett, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988).