

OPEN CLASS seeks to provide space and opportunity to spend time with filmmaking practitioners, artists, and thinkers working in very different ways, and to engage with their practice, working methods, and thoughts—to ask questions, to learn from their interests and movements.



OPEN CLASS
Conversations with
filmmaking people

Jean-Gabriel
Périot

WE
PROTEST
INADEQUATE
EVERYTHING

OPEN CLASS
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No. 1

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Still from *The Devil (2012)*
© Jean-Gabriel Périot

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Jean-Gabriel Périot

Poor Little White Girls, 2014, 2'48"
Undo, 2005, 9'43"
Hard Billy, 2021, 3'38"

How to begin

Okay, I never choose the films myself. I don't like to choose—it's impossible to choose, because (and it's a strange way to say it): I like all my films. And in the end, I always end up choosing the same ones anyway. So the game was: Marie-Hélène chooses the films. These three—I usually don't pick them when I talk about my work. Which is interesting because they are kind of unusual in my filmmaking.

Somehow, all my films are prototypes. I don't like repeating myself or doing the same thing again. That's one of the reasons I keep jumping from one kind of film to another. I try out different things. I like to work, and I like to play, but I don't like to repeat myself. But these three films, even if made with found footage as many others, are different. The first one, *Poor Little White Girls*, was made for the collective film project *The Darkness Collection*, shown at the Punta de Vista International Documentary Film Festival of Navarra, Pamplona in 2015. Oskar Alegria, then director of Punto de Vista, asked a few filmmakers to make short pieces about darkness.

I made this very short film for the exhibition, but it is also a short film on his own; it was screened in cinemas, festivals, etc. *Hard Billy* is a music video. I often work with music in my films. Leonie Pernet asked me if I'd like to make a video for her. And *Undo* is a commissioned film made for TV.

In many of my films, I use images that have no legal "author"—meaning journalists, amateurs, army cameramen and camerawomen, for example. It's allowed to use their footage for free. But I face the question of quality because I have to work with what I find, and sometimes the quality is poor. Technically, I'm pretty good—so I can manipulate the image quality to save money. It all depends on how I set up the production. If I make a film on my own, I don't care about the rights. I think we should be able to use whatever footage we want for free. As soon as you want to be critical about how History is told—all histories—we should have access to the material, without worrying about money. I just use whatever I want, but as soon as I'm working in a proper production—meaning I apply for funding and get paid to make the film—then yes, I pay for the image rights I use. I think that's fair. If I have no money, I steal. [*Laughter*] Jean-Luc Godard, for example—he stole. Footage, sound, everything. The funny thing is: if I want to use an excerpt from Godard (because I can't use it without clearing the rights!), it costs several thousand €.

Risks?

I only started to work with a proper production model because I needed access to archives that were otherwise not available to me. I needed to travel or do research in public or private institutions. And as soon as you enter archival institutions, you face fees, so you need some money. That's when I started producing my short films properly. (Feature films are a different story.) That includes clearing rights. The production model always depends on whether I can find the material I'm looking for or not. Sure, more and more is available on the internet, and in good quality. But still, parts of history remain inaccessible unless you have the money to get into the institutional archives.

I've had problems—and honestly, they were my own mistakes. If you steal, you need to be sure what you're stealing. For example: if you are making a film about the war in Ukraine today and you pick up stuff from the internet, you'd better make sure you're not using Russian propaganda footage. You need to research properly—be sure what images you are using. Take World War II: most of the footage in the archives is actually rehearsed battle scenes. Very often, cameramen arrived after the events and restaged them. Real documentary footage is rare at that time. You need to research: Where does the footage come from? Who produced it? Who used it? It changes how you look at the event—and how you edit it.

I made a film about the Black Panthers—*The Devil (2012)*. And when you do a film about the Panthers and you think, “Oh, that’s nice footage,”—take care. A lot of prominent filmmakers made films about the Panthers [e.g. Agnès Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, Carole Roussopoulos, Claudia von Alemann]. That creates problems in terms of rights—for images *and* music. I’ve had problems with music, several times.

For example: my film *Eût-elle été criminelle... (2006)*—one of those I made completely on my own. The whole film is edited to the French national anthem, which is public domain. I chose a version played by the army corps—also public domain—with a female singer, because it’s a film about women at war. But unfortunately, I didn’t pay attention to who the singer was. Everyone who saw the film thought I had deliberately chosen her. So, the film is ready, it is going to a festival, and then someone in the audience asks me: “Why did you pick Mireille Mathieu?” Ah yes—that was it. We were going to screen it on TV, make DVDs ... We needed the rights. But Mireille Mathieu said: no.

I had to change the score. The film is about violence. For me, it was *really* not about her as a singer or a person. She wasn’t the topic of the film. I did a double mistake concerning the rights and concerning a subplot which I did not want to address with the film.

With music, be sure you can use it. Because it can literally end the career of a film. I guess that’s something I didn’t fully anticipate in the beginning. It’s just ... when you work alone, and the film is more of a personal project, you sometimes forget to double-check everything. The rights can be complex, even if the piece itself seems free to use. So yes, I’d say: be sure. Or at least, try to be sure.

Procedures, findings and footage

Each film is a way for me to find an editing strategy—a way to question, or to work with a specific archive. In the case of *Poor Little White Girls*, it is based on a short clip from ... I don’t even know. I had this footage, I wanted to work with it, and the invitation to Pamplona gave me the occasion. I had seen the footage by chance. I honestly don’t remember when or where. But I remember the feeling, I remember I was puzzled. There seemed to be a story inside the footage, like a piece of fiction. I couldn’t grasp it. There is this little girl, watching us. Then this amazing woman, smiling. And a third, more distant woman, who looks sad. There was something nostalgic about it. I kept wondering what had happened to them. What we were really looking at. The editing gave me a way to extend that question—and to translate how I was seeing the footage. We actually see the same take twice. But even though it’s the

same shot, we don't experience it the same way the second time. The repetition is a very simple edit, but for me, it mirrors how I was looking at the footage—again and again, shifting from one figure to the other. There's not much more to say, really. This film is just an exercise in translating my gaze. An attempt to look, closely.

To catch, to be caught

Usually, I start by reading about a topic that bothers me—without really knowing why. I like reading. I read books. Sometimes stories or images just appear, almost unexpectedly, as part of the research. I watch things online—films, photos of a place, of people. And sometimes, in all of that, I find “something”. The first part of any of my films is always the research: the books, the texts, the reading. Then, once I decide to make a film, I begin to collect images. And I begin to place them into an editing application. That's another way of watching them. Through a frame. By chance. By reframing. By reversing them. Sometimes I change the speed. I pause. I test things. It allows me to see the images differently—and to get more precise in the way I look at them. And sometimes, while doing that, I discover small details. Details that suddenly point at the deeper question behind the footage—the “thing” I didn't know I was searching for. We will watch *Eût-elle été criminelle...* this

afternoon. You'll see—it's a film that uses the same footage several times, but each time it's reframed differently. The first time, you see it as a close-up. By the end, you get the full original frame. At the time, I was doing a film installation with World War II photos and film for the 2005 Festival Off-Courts Trouville (see the installation *Ami, entends-tu le vol noir des corbeaux sur la plaine?*, 2005). In the process I had to edit the material, and I started by cutting and sorting it by groups. As an editor, when you are dealing with very violent images, you need to find some distance. Some footage was so shocking, it was impossible to watch it like you would watch a regular documentary. You wouldn't be able to really see what is happening. Because it is too horrible and because you wouldn't have the time to look properly. Comes in the need to focus on technical things: check the frame, see if the colors match. But your eyes—they always go back to the human bodies. To the victims of the violence. You can't help it. So I had to “unfocus”, in a way. To zoom out. And that's when I started to see what I had never noticed before. What I discovered in the footage about the women who were publicly shaved at the liberation of France were: the people around the victims. And that's when I decided to make a film about that.

Editing footage is a form of discovery. I spend time with the footage—just trying things out. Sometimes nothing happens. Sometimes ... it's just a way to be present. I think: when people work with archival or

found footage, the important thing is to take the material out of where it came from—and place it somewhere else. That shift of context is essential. When certain images catch me, I want to know more. But I also feel the need to extract them—to bring them into a kind of neutral space. Though it's not really neutral, because I create it. I have to “clean” the footage: remove the music, the voiceover, the sound—all those elements that don't originally belong to the image. This process reduces the footage to its material state. And then editing becomes a space for play.

It's actually very rare to encounter images that have no caption. Most of the time, our relationship to images is framed by labels, by credits, by explanations. We're not used to being alone with images we don't know. When I take a film, cut up the shots, and rearrange them in a new order, I'm undoing the phrasing—de-phrasing what the initial author did. It's a way to let the shots exist on their own.

In my own way of dealing with images, I need to try to see in those images what makes me feel an emotion, to understand it. I need to defocus and then focus again, to clean and create my own relationship with all those images—and in relation to one another. I try to disrupt the natural order, or everything that is supposed to be around them. Sometimes, when I use different images while cleaning and creating a space for them, something happens. I can sense a change in their importance and prominence. Some images that seemed less relevant become really strong

when they stand alone, as if they suddenly have a chance to exist.

For me, images have their own singularities, and I allow myself to feel that. I don't see old pictures as mere objects. To “unfocus” is a way to see the images themselves, not just details. In a way, I need to step back in order to see them properly. When we visit exhibitions, I think we all do this: we look closely at a painting or photograph, then step back to see the whole frame, then move closer again to a point of interest. Something similar happens with footage.

Nos défaites, 2019, 93'

In France existed for a few years an educational film program. High school students could choose cinema as their main subject with eight hours of film per week, they had courses in theory, history, and in their final year making a short film. I was invited by a movie theater in Ivry-sur-Seine, south of Paris which was working in cinema education; they had created a filmmaker's residency with the Lycée Romain Rolland, the local high school that participated in the film program. The goal of this one-year residency was to make a movie with or about the students. Because it was an educational program, there was no production budget. The filmmakers received a fee, and that was it. But three invited filmmakers succeeded to made feature-length films with the students, Claire Simon made *Premières Solitudes* (2018), I made *Nos défaites*, and Nathan Nicholovitch *Les graines que l'on sème* (2020) in that same school, the Lycée Romain Rolland of Ivry-sur-Seine. I was invited to this program in 2017. Since then, the program changed a bit, and this particular school wanted me to make a film alone with them. My idea was to help the students discover the process of filmmaking, but against the usual idea they have—that everything is planned, that the director decides everything, and so on. In reality, especially in

documentary filmmaking, you start from scratch, you just follow where life takes you and the film. It's a completely different experience than making a fiction film. It was interesting to try to deconstruct the students' preconceived ideas about what making a film means. My main goal was to offer them what I like about cinema—to make films about things I don't know when I start. I had made films with groups of people I didn't know before, prisoners in jail, women from the suburbs e.g. I work on historical events or on people I meet by doing a film. Even the process of making a film is always new. Making a film is a way for me to create relationships. I wanted to work on that.

I spent a year with the students, coming once or twice a week. We started with screenings of different kinds of documentaries. I showed them films to introduce people talking, testimonies, and dialogue. I showed them films from around 1968—about strikes, student movements, political films of that time. They didn't understand much, but they really liked those films. So I began there, thinking: if they can learn something about this period, about its politics, about the films by reenacting, fine.

I gave the students a large selection of excerpts—about three or four hours of some thirty excerpts. Each student chose what they wanted to perform. We talked about these choices for days. They worked on fragments only, which was more manageable given the time constraints. Some of them were really

... enthusiastic. And they all liked Godard. [*Laughter*] Rehearsing was complicated, the students were no actors, and the language is from the 1960s—it's very much spoken language. We used two excerpts of *La chinoise*, the language was scripted before and easier to manage for them. But all the other sequences sound like people talking naturally, with hesitations and pauses. They had to learn to phrase all of that. I invited a friend who is really good at directing actors to help, but the process remained fragile. That's why the students perform different clips, and each clip is repeated and played by different students. I didn't want them to fail—I knew it's complicated to act when you're not an actor. The big surprise was how good they became during shooting. They really transformed into actors, and their performances were very close to the original.

The second big surprise came with the interviews. During the classes, I spoke with the students about unions, about politics, the vocabulary and the ideas in the excerpts we had selected. Besides the reenacting, I thought it would be interesting to make interviews with them, in which they can talk about their own ideas about contemporary politics and how they see themselves as citizens. It was not supposed to be some kind of exam. Nor was it a trick. My question was more like: "Do you want to be in a union? Is this something for older people, or something not useful today? What do you think about it?" During these interviews, unexpected things

came up. It became clear that they didn't fully understand what they were reenacting, even if they spent a month to practice and to rehearse. At the end, I thought: "Okay, this is a film about acting!" You could be a perfect actor without having a clue about what you're playing.

*What do you understand by "defeat",
by "our" defeats?*

"Nos défaites" comes from a Brecht poem, "Gegen die Objektiven." It means being defeated, but also learning from that experience and moving forward. "Nos défaites" is like a subtitle for the film. I see a problem in leftist thinking in general, people on the left—myself included. We prefer to focus on our past successes or what we hope to achieve in the future. We don't like to analyze what we are not doing well. But we need to think about what we do poorly or badly. For me, these teenagers express a symptom of something that isn't working—in the educational system, at least in France.

Most of the students come from a working-class background, like me. In my family, we didn't really talk about politics. I was lucky—school taught me a bit. I had this history class about the parliamentary system, just a few hours, but enough to give me the vocabulary of politics—not the full concepts. At least we had some common language to talk. But today,

how do you build a society? How do you try to change it, if you don't have a shared language? For me, this is crucial. Because if you don't come from a family or background that provides the keys, and if school doesn't either—how do you get them? The experience in the film class gave the students a real push. A few weeks later, they went on strike. They all told me it happened because of the films. They started reading to understand what a union is, and when their own struggle began, they had some keys to start with. I think without the film project, some of them would have participated, others not. But now the whole class took part in the blockade.

In the debates after the screenings, there were always some teachers and parents in the room, and they often argued about the idea of “defeat”. Many times, the audience spoke about the film in relation to themselves, and especially in connection to the high school environment. Only a few people stepped back and looked at it from a broader perspective. What interested me more was how the process of making this film—as a collaborative effort with the students—may have changed their own understanding.

To reenact, to rehearse

I really like the process of reenacting in theater and film—the shift in time, the movement from one's own history to another's, from one culture to another,

to come to know another person's existence. A reenactment in a documentary context, whether as actors or as people involved, is a challenging and revealing experience. It is a way to keep history alive, because it offers the experience of living it. The idea was that perhaps the students in the film class could learn from this kind of experience. I showed them a lot of films from the 1960s and 1970s, but also contemporary ones. I was very surprised to see that they liked the old films the most. They decided to pick some of the most obscure films about unionists from the CGT. That really made me curious.

Only one student mentioned why he was interested. He said he had never seen workers portrayed in film before, “I didn't know you could make a film with workers.” That was puzzling. They were just beginning to discover film at school, real films, proper documentary films. They liked the idea that films can be made with “normal people”. This connects to my film *Retour à Reims (fragments)* (2021), which is interested in the representation of the working class in French cinema and TV; there was really a focus on the working class in cinema until it disappeared in the 1980s. In France, contrary to West Germany, the Communist Party was the major party of the left. They would not have the power, but they were almost 30% of the population, that means roughly 30% of the filmmakers, producers, TV commissioners, spectators were communist. They opened the floor for a large

documentary and fiction film production for or about the working class.

Coming back to the interviews, I think the students were not very attentive when I was elaborating on it, but that's okay. When they came to present the film at its release in France, in Berlin, and elsewhere, some of them accompanied me to the debates, or they presented the film and spoke with the audience alone. It was really interesting, because part of the audience thought they were idiots. Someone would say, "But how could you accept to be portrayed in such a mean way, the filmmaker made you look stupid." But they would reply, "Yeah, but that was two years ago. I was like that. I was 16 years old. I'm no longer that person. It's a portrait of me at that time, a portrait of me before the film." The film experience was a step toward becoming a citizen, a political subject. At 16, they were not politicized at all. They would say things like, "We don't talk about that," or "Yeah, but you know, I'm not white. I live in a suburb. My daily concern is avoiding being stopped by the police," or the sort. They were tough. I think the group dynamics became their teacher, bringing their perspective forward. I saw them grow up through this process. They would describe the film as a significant moment in their lives. And for them, it was clear they were two different persons—one on screen, and one on stage.

III

Eût-elle été criminelle..., 2006, 9'39"
*Nijuman No Borei (200,000
Phantoms)*, 2007, 10'54"
Un autre jour en France, 2016, 1'55"
Song For The Jungle, 2017, 14'15"

Money, salary, freedom

In my practice, I move between making films entirely on my own, with no budget and no demands, and films that are produced in a more usual way. There are also films that fall somewhere in between. The two last films of this program fit into the in-between category: the very short *Un autre jour en France* and *Song For The Jungle*, which share some of the same footage. I had wanted to go to Calais for a while but never found the courage or an idea to actually film there. We knew the camp would be destroyed soon. Around the same time, I was offered to make a short film for GREC, a French association funded by several institutions to support shorts made by young filmmakers. GREC commissioned a one-minute film for their "Collection dix minutes." In early cinema, they had cameras fixed on tripods and only one minute of film stock. I wasn't really interested in making a *Lumière minute*, but they

gave me 500€. With that, my director of photography, Amine Berrada, and the sound engineer, Paulin Amato, traveled with me to Calais. I gave each of them 100€ for transport, food, and to operate camera and mic for the day. I knew we would be stepping into a difficult situation, which is why you see us mostly on the outskirts of the camp. We entered the camp but didn't film inside. I stayed mostly observing. I ended up editing a 15-minute version, *Song For The Jungle*, and a short for GREC, *Un autre jour en France*.

Renting a studio for sound mixing and color grading was too expensive, so I asked Frédéric Dubreuil, one of my producers at Envie de Tempête Productions if he could help fund the remaining post-production. As for my team, they all have regular jobs as producers and technicians, making a living with their work. I work with two cameramen who regularly work on films and have stable positions. They like working with me. For 15 or 20 years, they have accepted to work with me on low- or no-pay projects for a few days, which they can afford to do.

The good thing is, even when I have a budget, I can still make a film with very little money. I made *Nos défaites*, for example, with 500€, which was the fee I received for the residency at Romain Rolland high school. I remember that Frédéric gave me 10,000€ and we got 10,000€ more from a distributor for the French release, so we used that amount for post-production. That's it. It's really cheap for a

feature film. *Nijuman No Borei* was funded with 40,000€. At that time in France, the average budget for a short film was around 100,000€. With 40,000€, I was able to pay for archival footage, cover my stay in Japan, and I was paid around 2 to 3,000€ for two years of work—which I was happy with.

For me, the question of budget involves several issues. The smaller the budget, the more freedom you have regarding the funders or commissioners. When you work with television, the commissioner can be very intrusive. Once you start a “proper” production, you have to deliver the film you promised, the film you sold to them. That can be complicated because I don't always know what I'm doing at the start. I don't want to take the risk of being forced to deliver exactly what I planned without having the freedom to change things along the way. It's important, of course—a lot of money is involved. Personally, I think about budgets in terms of a factory worker's salary. When I agree to make a film for a 100,000€ budget, for a feature film that's very little—in France, the average feature film budget is 3 or 4 million €, and for documentaries, it can be 5 to 700,000€—, so 100,000€ is really a low budget. But if I calculate how many years a worker would have to work to earn that amount, it is still quite a lot.

Cinema is an industry, even when it is experimental, documentary, or short films. As soon as money is available, you try to get it. It is a game. Most of the time, we don't need so much money to make a film.

More budget means better catering, more time, higher salaries—it is comfortable, and everyone is happy because there is money. But at the end of the day, the film itself doesn't change. That feels like a waste to me. I'm careful never to ask for more than what the film actually needs. My salary is one of the things I can reduce or remove. I feel lucky to have gotten funding to make my films so far, and to have been able to make the films I wanted to make. But I don't expect to live solely from my work as a filmmaker.

I know it sounds like a cliché, but most artists and filmmakers come from bourgeois backgrounds. For them, to have money to make their work is something normal. The more they can get, the better. This is out of reach from me, who is coming from a low working class and who is already happy to be able to make films. We often think of filmmakers as artists. There is an artistic dimension in how we create stories, space, time, and poetry. But that's just a small part compared to the technical work involved. On the technical level, we are colleagues, sharing the pleasure of making films, whatever background we are coming from and whatever way we tend to produce our films. In this regard, we are curious about each other's work, no matter what kind of film it is. Even if we don't agree on style or approach, it is interesting to understand how the work is made. This kind of curiosity exists among filmmakers, though we may disagree as artists.

The problem now, especially with budget cuts in public funding, is that I don't feel comfortable being paid only by the State to be a filmmaker. I earn money from working as an editor, from screenings, from teaching, and I get a salary that way. For example, for *Retour à Reims (fragments)*, I received 10,000€ for screening rights, two months' salary of about 4,000€ per month, and a final payment of 2,000€—so roughly 20,000€ over two years as part of my income. Besides that, I get unemployment benefits, screening fees, money from TV releases, awards, and festival prizes—all of which is unpredictable, but still income. About six or seven years ago, I stopped working regularly as an editor. I had done many different things before. Now, sometimes, to complete my income, I make commissioned films, music videos, or films for exhibitions. Many of my colleagues are in a difficult situation. They want to make a living from filmmaking alone. Of course, some succeed in having films produced regularly, but you need several films in a row to be funded continuously and earn steady money. If you make one film every five years, how do you manage?

My strategy has always been to separate paying my bills from my filmmaking work. That gives me a lot of freedom. For instance, I have a film commissioned by ARTE, I will receive 150,000€. That's not much. With that budget, I will make the film in my own way, and I'll get the support to do it. The commissioner knows that with this budget, no claims or

pressure possible. Less financial comfort means more freedom. By making this choice, I also take the film out of the logic that I should be paid for my work. If I do something that generates money, I can use it for myself or make another film for 500€ and be flexible with my resources.

Another thing that helps me a lot is that I'm very skilled in editing, and I know a lot about post-production. If I don't have money for color grading with a specialist, I can manage myself. When I started with filmmaking, I was lucky to receive awards. Instead of using the money as a personal income, I invested it in equipment—computer, camera, etc. That's how I stay independent and cover technical needs. Many filmmakers are neither editors nor do they own equipment. I can make films with almost nothing. I get a bit inventive to find ways for shooting, but editing and most of post-production cost me nothing. When I began filmmaking, it was complicated. I didn't choose to work with friends. I had no clear idea what I was doing and couldn't explain what I was looking for. I had no clue. This is one reason why I worked a lot with archives—because I could work alone in my room without asking anything from anyone.

For me, the usual process of writing (then shooting then editing) is too demanding. The necessity to have a script, to explain everything, is too boring. The first writing fund you apply for (in France they ask for 15 pages) requires a lot of work. When you write 15 pages, you already know what you're going to do,

in a way, the writing forces you into the conceptual work. The money is a kind of reward for your writing, it is not helping you or your film. Of course, you still need to rewrite and rework, and in the end, you spend 3 or 4 years before getting some money. I stop applying to funds as soon as I have enough money for the film instead of wasting energy trying to get more.

Work

I spent several years in Sarajevo for *Se souvenir d'une ville (2023)*. From the moment I decided to make this film, I knew I would need time to find the people, spend time with them, have a plan etc., but the decision to shoot was there right from the start. In a way, I don't need time to prepare myself to jump into the filmmaking process. For the film commissioned by GREC, *Un autre jour en France*, they called me, and three days later, we were in Calais. Another case: I made two films in jail. I was invited by the collective association in Orléans, MIXAR, working with art in public space to create a piece. I said, "Okay, I'm not a contemporary artist, nor an artist working in public space," but I signed up anyway. I knew the prison from a previous invitation. I was sure it would be the right place for such a project. We organized a performance, a concert with the prison detainees that was transmitted outside for the audience. Then, MIXAR wanted the event

to be documented. The idea came up to bring images from outside back to the singers inside the jail. Two DOP friends came from Paris with really basic cameras at the day of the concert. They were outside while I was taking care of the concert. I had not planned a film, but in the end, it became one: *Nos jours, absolument, doivent être illuminés* (2012).

What I like in filmmaking is that it asks me to work—to work almost like a university student: to read books, to take time to think, to make up my mind and to gain more clarity about what I'm looking for. It is a privilege to stay a student all my life. I need that on an everyday basis. Then comes the moment, the urgency to make a film. While working on *Eût-elle été criminelle...*, I was so upset about the rise of the far right, I needed to make a film to put all that frustration and questioning into something. I developed a relationship with this footage I had on my computer, and I started to edit. In the end, it's not a film about France, but that was the starting question. With Calais, it was similar. The situation was unbearable. I waited for an entry point. With *Nijuma No Borei*, it was different. I spent years reading testimonies of survivors of Hiroshima, I spent a lot of time in the city, I needed a place to mourn, to put the memories and all the pain I had absorbed somewhere. I needed to make a film in order to stay alive. This was another kind of need: finding a place for memories.

Nijuman No Borei is one of my favorite films of my own work. Picture by picture, we follow the camera turning around the building of what became the Atomic Bomb Dome. With this film, I understood a different way to think about cinema and the invisible, and Hiroshima a city of ghosts. Around this building, it feels like walking on a cemetery. People died here. It is in the picture, but it is also not. I worked for three years before starting the production, reading about Hiroshima. This is not a usual documentary. All the images are shown in chronological order. Many details matter—the architecture of the city, the monument, everything. It is a very personal film. It may not be possible for everyone to read it clearly. *Nijuman No Borei* was the first film I made about a place so geographically and historically distant from me. I watched many films about Hiroshima, mostly made by non-Japanese filmmakers. I noticed how often archival materials were used incorrectly—pictures from Nagasaki were taken as if they were from Hiroshima. In Hiroshima, there were no photographs of dead bodies taken, while in Nagasaki, many images of injured and deceased people exist. I didn't want to make the same kind of errors when dealing with such a serious historical event. In order to do justice to the subject, I had to work very carefully and double-check every detail.

In the end, *Nijuman No Borei* was a success and was recognized with awards, also in Japan. This

gave me more confidence to make films wherever I want—not because I expect everyone to love my work, but because I want to avoid making films that people actively dislike due to carelessness or disrespect.

About violence, positioning and involvement

Working with archival footage of real historical events is often seen as a historical educational documentary filmmaking. *Êt-elle été criminelle...* doesn't fit into that category. Yes, we see the crowd making victory signs and women being brought into the picture, their hairs cut, and heads shaved in public. But the film doesn't aim to tell history as it was or explain what happened on Victory Day in France 1944.

Instead, I focus on evoking emotions and shaping the viewers' mediated experience. I deliberately play with editing techniques and music to manipulate how the audience feels. During my time as a student, I researched propaganda films extensively—their editing strategies, how to influence and manipulate. I understood the power of film to shape perception and emotion. *Êt-elle été criminelle...* is tricky and ambiguous. It opens with fast-paced editing that can feel exhausting and overwhelming, creating tension and anxiety. Then it slows down, offering a brief relief. In the footage, people appear

happy, there is music. And you dive into violence again. My editing of the historical footage is designed to unsettle and betray the audience's expectations.

In my understanding, it is too simple to place ourselves firmly on the “good side” of history or conflict, or to pretend we will always be. That kind of certainty would be too easy—and perhaps, too naive. When faced with extreme situations, it is impossible to predict how we would have acted in this particular moment. Most people resist being confronted with the possibility that they themselves could have been perpetrators or accomplices of very disgusting things.

It is quite rare to have footage of this kind, where a camera is capturing this very moment, and you see the camera's presence changing the event. The crowd becomes aware of being recorded and starts to stage. One of the first shots shows a man standing on a stage, repeating the same gestures again and again, as if to make sure the camera got it. The men lead the women toward the camera, they are proud of what is happening, they laugh, they want to preserve the memory of that moment—much like when you go hunting and take a picture of yourself with the body of the animal, the trophy, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib.

It is not at all clear or homogeneous who the people were that carried out the head shaving. The explanation that they could be collaborators blaming women and disguising their involvement with the Nazi regime during the occupation is just one among

several possibilities. It is a very complex situation. Perhaps they were individuals who hadn't been involved at all, possibly even resistance fighters or soldiers. The women could have been collaborators, prostitutes, or simply girls who had a love affair with a German. Some were just in the wrong place at the wrong time; single women hated by someone and denounced. A woman alone can hardly do anything to defend herself.

Coming back to the shaving, it's something that has occurred at different moments in history and in various contexts—say, in the Middle Ages, in psychiatric hospitals, in prisons. When the Nazis began to withdraw, across France, as well as in Italy and Finland, people enacted this kind of primitive performance. One of the major books on the topic by Alain Brossat, *Les tondues: Un carnaval moche* (1992) explains that during medieval carnival, everything was turned upside down—rules were changed, the forbidden was done. The message was: you don't get to decide who you collaborate with, you don't decide over your own body. Public head-shaving in 1944 was a very aggressive version of this practice. Somehow, it seemed to be a way of reclaiming the female body.

In this moment of in-betweenness, there was no space and no capacity to handle the situation through proper legal means—no courts, no rules, or laws. Very little footage exists of what happened to collaborators after the German defeat. In some places, people held tribunals; men, and specifically women,

were often shaved before the trial, then killed only a few hours later. The filmmaking in this particular moment reveals different types of image-making. Amateurs who still had some film stock left in their cameras were taking pictures, journalists were arriving with the army or the Résistance, and there were army cameramen and -women. In the footage, you can see different ways of observing and staging what was happening on the spot. Some placed the camera and filmed the people who were happy about what was happening. Others stopped filming because they disagreed with what they saw. In some places, French resistance fighters or soldiers arrived and said, "Stop, we didn't fight for this." Sometimes the cameramen participated, others walked away without filming. We see moments that could look like documentary footage, and sometimes it is almost a staging of those women.

I used some of that same footage in *Retour à Reims (fragments)*, which is another of my films based on archival footage. I had access to the original, unedited raw material. The footage had never been used for newsreels—it was too violent. In France, only days after these events, people stopped talking about it; people felt ashamed of what had happened. You can call it collective discomfort or even denial with these events.

I screened *Eût-elle été criminelle...* many times in high schools. Often, half the class doesn't understand the film. Some students would say: the

men were in the army, or in the Résistance, or prisoners in Germany—and “the woman” had sex with the Nazis. The teenagers express the same kind of gendered thinking as the crowd back then. They also talk about hair growing back—they don’t know that as a woman, at the time you are supposed to have long hair. It’s hard to listen to this kind of bashing. But at the same time, it’s good that the topic comes up. When teenagers say, “Yes, shaving is the right way to deal with it,” it gives you shivers. But who wants to challenge this kind of thinking? Who asks back, “Why do you think that?” or “What if you were really in love with someone and your parents hated him or her—would you still love that person?”

In France, some people don’t know what is happening in the film, they have no knowledge of the historical context. In Asia or America, people have no idea either. The film doesn’t give more context than “France, 1944.” The question is: how much information do I have to give the audience to understand? I’m not a teacher; I don’t give history lessons. It is not my duty to provide information in the film. I want to raise a broader question. If you don’t know the facts, you are invited to ask questions and find information online.

Regarding *Se souvenir d’une ville*—the film is about young filmmakers who lived in Sarajevo during the war—back then, the young men were soldiers. What happened in Sarajevo during that war is told from their point of view, from when they were

young and with their saying. And they all express very clearly that they didn’t understand the situation at all. So, I don’t have to explain it either. Of course, they’re not neutral. They use words like “Chetnik” to name their enemy—a term that is neither ethnic nor national. We may not understand “Chetnik,” but sometimes they say “fascist,” and we understand that (for them) their enemies are fascists. They frame the conflict politically, not nationally. That’s their position. They never mentioned—not even in my presence—whether they are Serbs, Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats, or from any other group.

Une jeunesse allemande, 2015, 93'

It took me 10 years to make *Une jeunesse allemande*, solely based of archival footage. In the first research phase, I began looking for fiction films about the RAF [Rote Armee Fraktion]. In the first research phase, there was almost nothing to watch about the group, except an excerpt of Ulrike Meinhof in an interview. This excerpt absolutely did not fit my vision of who is supposed to be a “terrorist.” The other material that was available were some fiction films and really bad TV documentaries; almost nothing was useful. Very soon, I edited a draft with almost no footage and a lot of text, so I could decide when and where the film would start and end. For 10 years, every time I searched through archives, I added findings to the edit, building chapters and developing parts of the film. The research became less and less precise. It is impossible to cover everything or question every detail, when the research becomes so broad.

Deutschland im Herbst (1978) was one of my first findings, Alexander Kluge made this episode film with many young and upcoming filmmakers. I particularly liked the short film by R. W. Fassbinder which is played at the end of my film. From today’s perspective, it’s impossible to fully grasp it, you can’t even start to make a film like that. You’d have

to reveal yourself completely to work this way. The film isn’t so much pro-RAF, but it is really against the state, very critical.

At the time, I was reading books about armed struggles in Western countries. That’s how I came across a French publication about the RAF. It wasn’t a good book, but I understood that almost all the RAF members had gone to university, held degrees, and came from cultural, religious bourgeois family backgrounds. I didn’t know much about Ulrike Meinhof, I learned that she was a journalist, an editorialist for the magazine *Konkret*, and worked in radio; Holger Meins was a student at the film school DFFB, and Gudrun Ensslin was a book publisher. Stefan Aust’s book, *Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex* (1985), hadn’t yet been translated into French.

The RAF is the only group (besides the Japanese Red Army) that had filmmakers within the group. I wanted to learn about their films, reports, and even their writings and photographs. All of this could help me understand why they—who were so involved with images—decided to form a guerrilla group in Germany. As a filmmaker, it really puzzled me. I quickly realized I can’t get any access to the archival material without funding. So, I wrote an application for a film project about the RAF, mainly to find the means to view the films made at the DFFB and archived at the Deutsche Kinemathek—Museum für Film und Fernsehen in Berlin. I thought maybe there was something in those images that could

help me understand. I probably wouldn't have made *Une jeunesse allemande* if everything had been online at that time.

I knew Harun Farocki's work, but I never met him personally. He had published several books and spoken about the subject. After leaving the DFFB, he took care of his films and preserved his material. I was aware of that. What I needed was information about the others to work with and to be able to identify their films at the Deutsche Kinemathek. That's why I looked at everything produced at the DFFB.

In France, we have a different history of television. At the time, there was only one channel, state-owned and controlled—the news was the voice of the government. But in Germany, with its various federal state TV companies and third channels, democracy was more performative. It was important to have all kinds of voices represented. That's why Ulrike Meinhof was on air as one of the leftist voices of the 1960s. In other countries at that time, someone like her probably wouldn't have been broadcast. But in Germany, it was part of the media rules that everyone was allowed to speak from their own perspective. Ulrike Meinhof worked extensively for the NDR, a very progressive channel. She was also interviewed several times by the RFB and SWR, as a journalist. Her film *Bambule* (1970) was produced by SWR.

At the beginning of *Une jeunesse allemande*, Godard asks, "Is it possible to make images in Germany? And by the end of the film,

we see whether it is possible or not." It's like the film is talking about itself. It is a way to keep the question of images and Germany alive throughout. The filmmakers of the footage might have been asking themselves, while making their films, what it means to try to change society. Kluge has his question, and everyone else has their own questions and answers.

The opening scene—the young man painting a swastika on the wall while people shout at him, and someone says, "es ist ein Spielfilm!"—is strange and hard to understand, but at least it points out the boundaries between reality and fiction. We're talking about films because they are a mystery. I like it when reality is about fiction. I didn't find much footage that plays with that blurry line between the two, except for people talking about cinema. I've found such moments only a few times, and I like to use them because they are revealing—they keep us awake and alert as human beings.

OPEN CLASS is a series of solos initiated by Marie-Hélène Gutberlet who teaches film at HfG with the aim of providing space and time to engage with filmmaking practitioners, artists, and thinkers. Thinking along their words, images and sounds not only makes film—and what draws us to it—more tangible, but also reveals the diversity of approaches to critical filmmaking, while pointing to the gap between what can be expressed and what can never be fully spelled out.

Jean-Gabriel Périot was our first guest. His film *Se souvenir d'une ville* has been screened in his presence 9 July 2025 at the DFF cinema in Frankfurt. The following day at HfG Offenbach was dedicated to shorts and excerpts of two of his feature length films, and exchange. The conversation with Jean-Gabriel Périot, recorded on 10 July 2025 provides the basis for the present text.

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Concerning Jean-Gabriel Périot's films, writings, interviews and radio features see jgperiot.net/
For further reading see Alain Brossat & Jean-Gabriel Périot, *Ce que peut le cinéma* (2018).