

INTERVIEW
The Living and The Dead Ensemble
FEBRUARY 2020

The following text is an autofictional interview that we conducted with ourselves. It is an attempt at creating a piece of writing that incorporates all our voices at once. As such certain things are said by certain members of the group and these things can only be culturally linked to them and their identities. In doing so we attempt also to show the cultural diversity and generosity of the exchanges that we engage with in order to produce the films and texts that we work on as a group. This is not the dissolution of each individual's identity into a homogenised whole but rather an attempt at masking our subjectivities through the sonority of a disharmonic Ensemble.

The film Ouvertures takes as an initial premise the play Monsieur Toussaint by Édouard Glissant. Did you actually perform the play?

Yes, we put on the play as a one off performance in the cemetery in downtown Port-au-Prince for the Ghetto Biennial in December 2017. It was also for this event that we decided to create The Living and the Dead Ensemble. The play deals with the last days of Toussaint Louverture whilst in his prison cell in France, haunted by ghosts from Haiti's revolutionary past. In the film, the play is a starting point for a multi-layered narrative in which we act as the members of a theatre company rehearsing for the play, who are then haunted by the historical characters that they are playing. There is kind of doubling or tripling of our identities as ourselves, as actors and as characters from Haiti's history. On screen we are both ourselves and our imaginary characters. We acted scenes in our neighbourhoods, in places that we

know well, but with these historical figures present inside of us. It was an interesting and troubling process in which we were bringing our history back to life, and as such we were able to time travel.

However, this is not a historical film...

No, not exactly. It's as if the characters from the pantheon of Haitian history have taken our bodies as vessels to live within for the present moment. When the character of Toussaint Louverture arrives in Haiti, he is surprised to find Port-au-Prince as it is today. The city is very different from how it was in 1803 when he was deported to France by Napoleon. In 2017 everything has changed, its total chaos! He is shocked and doesn't really understand where he is. This character, the ghost of Louverture, has thus a displaced way of viewing everything around him, and it is through his gaze that the film represents Port-au-Prince, as both real and dreamed. This allowed us to form a

critical perspective on what the country has become since the revolution, and to claim that its legacy never fulfilled its promise. Yet at the same time the film shows that the youth uphold a revolutionary desire of socio-political change, and that the revolutionary spirit still has a flame burning somewhere. And besides, the theme of darkness and fire, of the night and the persistence of the last embers within the ashes of a fire, is very important to understand the film. It's a film about renewal. We don't get stuck in the past like something frozen, it haunts the present and shapes our future. We believe that this is what Édouard Glissant meant when he described Monsieur Toussaint as "a prophetic vision of the past". We think this applies to the Caribbean in general, as if its history is always to be told, to be practiced and kept alive.

You talk about these characters that take over your bodies. Is this similar to how spirits take control of bodies in certain religious ceremonies?

In fact it's more that a spirit comes to inhabit your body rather than take control. This is something quite common here in Haiti. The play that we created begins with a vodou ceremony in which the spirits are invited to come back to life. They become ghosts, enter our bodies and start to speak and make demands on history. In the film it's a bit different because there is this moving back and forth between people and the heroes of our revolution, between the living and the dead.

What do these heroes represent for you?

They mean a lot to us. These people are our ancestors and it's a real honour to play their characters, because they gave us our freedom. But there are not only great heroes in the play, there are also more modest characters that Glissant gives importance to and who are brought together in the same space around Toussaint. In the play, these figures come to France to haunt Toussaint in his prison cell in the Fort de Joux in the frozen Jura Mountains. They form a kind of trial in which Louverture's actions and position in the revolution are questioned, this is very important as he is still a much-debated figure in Haiti. In the film *Ouvertures* the movement is reversed; it is Louverture's ghost that comes back to Port-au-Prince to speak with the ghosts of Haiti's history, as they are brought to life through the play and the bodies of the youth of today. Initially we approached all of this really as a work of theatre, but suddenly something happened and we kind of fell in love with our characters, we really began to live with them - even outside of the rehearsals and the filming! Whilst working on the film there was this idea, of trying to lose our bearings with the everyday. For this to happen we organised trips out of Port-au-Prince as well, like when we spent some time together in the West of the island, looking for mangrove swamps and filming deep inside the Marie-Jeanne cave. These were very magical moments for everybody.

Why did you translate the play from French to Haitian Creole?

It is a reappropriation of our own history. For us, Creole was and is still a tool of resistance. Haiti is a bilingual country, people speak Haitian Creole and French, but Creole is the majority language amongst the population, and so French is seen as discriminatory. From the beginning it was evident that we couldn't put on the play in a public space in Port-au-Prince if we did it in French. We wanted it to be as accessible as possible, but we left some parts in French when this made sense. Sometimes the characters speak in French and then move into Creole to express a certain state of being, like when Jean-Jacques Dessalines (a leader of the Haitian Revolution and first leader of independent Haiti) gets angry he shouts in Creole. It's quite typical in Haiti to move between languages in respect to our different emotions. But the work of translation wasn't so simple because Glissant's style is very original, powerful and poetic. The translation process was a very important moment as we had to shift Glissant's writing into a Haitian imaginary, and Haitian Creole just doesn't work like French! It uses lots of images to quickly convey many different meanings at the same time, this was how Maroons slaves in the French colony created a language of urgency for example. In those times, Creole was also used as a way to hide certain things from colonists on the plantations, and as such our language uses many metaphors and detours of meaning.

However this was also something we found in the way in which Glissant uses French in his own particular way, as a form of camouflage and marronnage, to hide and to flee from immediate understanding. In French the word for understanding is "comprendre" - which actually has the word "prendre" in it, which means to take. In a sense then, understanding something is to grasp it, to take hold of it, and Glissant was someone who was more interested rather in the action "donner-avec" or giving-with in English. We felt that his work tries to give something with its obscurity, and this generosity on his part was what allowed us to invent our own language with his words. And so we spent a lot of time trying to understand the poetic images that Glissant created, and to transpose them into another language, another time. Therefore it wasn't just a translation, but really a reappropriation of a text, or perhaps an echo-translation of a text in that we repeated back Glissant's words through words of our own. Words that had been transformed through our bodies and the landscape in which they were spoken, words that had to sound properly in the Port-au-Prince of today.

How was the film written?

It's hard to say exactly! The film's method was improvised as we went along. We spent a lot of time together as a group; translating, rehearsing, drinking, eating, talking and travelling around Haiti. Eventually the scenes started to write themselves throughout our

conversations, and imposed themselves on us! We reenacted conversations we had had, improvising certain situations that we had already lived or made up entirely. Because we embodied the characters, it was really them who were directing us. But it's true that the work around the play posed questions to us about ourselves as young haitian artists, and these questions started to become part of the film. For example, the question of the representation (or lack of it) of women that fought during the Haitian Revolution and the connection to the feminsit struggle in Haiti today. At times we no longer knew when we were in or out of the film, as if the film became a form of life, a lived experience.

The theme of rehearsal/repetition within the film came from the theatrical side of the work, but ended with being the form of the film itself...

That's the spiral! It's an important motif in Haitian culture. Things are repeated but in fact they change and transform. There is a constant form of return, but never back to exactly the same place. Hence the spiral as opposed to the circle. A circle is a full revolution that comes back to where it began, whereas a spiral is a revolution as a constant process of struggle that moves forwards and backwards at the same time. In the film this is apparent in various ways, such as the cave in the Jura that is in the beginning of the film is remembered at the end when we are walking inside the Marie-Jeanne cave in Haiti. These

are two similar places but they don't have the same music, they have a different resonance and they lead to different paths separated by an ocean. The cave of ice in the Jura leads to death and rebirth, whereas the cave of fire in Haiti leads to life and new sights. The film develops in the form of a spiral. This was also a means to free ourselves from the repetition of history, to free ourselves from the Western tradition of storytelling where the narrative is linear. It is an art of detour, of chaos, and of wandering, because gradually the Ensemble starts to move on - we forget the play and the film becomes a journey.

You have mentioned many times this notion of a journey. In Ouvertures it seems that memory is held within the characters, but also in the places you go to perhaps?

The idea of cultural transmission is connected to certain places within the history of Haiti, like the lakou for example. A lakou is a space that is at once familial, mystic and spiritual. It is a communal living space in which ancient knowledge and stories are transmitted. There is always an altar in a lakou, inhabited by spirits, and often in the centre is a sacred Mapou tree that allows the connection between the world of the living and the spirits. The lakou is mostly present in the countryside today but it remains culturally very important. We could say that in the film the Ensemble becomes a community that starts to wander, looking for a refuge, a place of rest, but also looking for their history in the places they

find themselves in, and each place gives them a piece of their heritage. They maroon from the city to the countryside, passing by for example, Pont Rouge where Jean-Jacques Dessalines was assassinated in 1806. The Ensemble also go to mangrove swamps, which are highly charged natural spaces at once a protection for the land against hurricanes but also used as hiding places for runaway slaves during the period of colonial plantations on the island. Eventually they end up in a cave, which was a place of refuge and resistance for these Maroon slaves but also much before, for the indigenous Taino that inhabited the island before the Spaniards first arrived. To go and film there was a way to rediscover our memory in the birthplace of our people. We travelled a long way to get to the Marie-Jeanne cave, which is an immense and very impressive cave made up of many different layers of galleries, with very ancient stalactites and stalagmites. All of the places we went to composed a part of the story and therefore became characters within the film also. The cemetery for example, a place in which for the vodoun life ends but also begins, is a very important site for the film and for understanding the narrative.

So the journey is therefore quite fantastical and magical ?

The journey was both physical and spiritual in the end, it was a journey in space and time. The film became a kind of hallucination in which we were caught. But a hallucination

is not necessarily negative, it can also be a way to travel, to free oneself. Besides, in the film, the remedy that we take that produces the effect of an hallucination is more a key towards the journey than something to cure us of a malady. Poisoning played an important role in the Haitian Revolution, as the character of Mackandal (the famous rebel slave) reminds us, and the film plays with ideas of different forms of magic as powers of liberation within the struggle. In this sense the music in the film is also thought of as a vehicle, and the Rara orchestra that appears at the end is understood as a time travelling machine.

Can you speak about the importance of music in the film?

Music is evidently very important in the film, it works initially as a kind of dividing line between the frozen Jura and the Caribbean, two worlds that dialogue, and then it becomes more and more material as the film progresses. Beginning with the Baroque funeral music of Henry Purcell and then the Monteverdi opera in the cave we have something of a ghostly presence of sound, and as the film enters Haiti we hear contemporary Haitian music such as Trap by G-Shyt, and thus it becomes more embodied, corporeal and of the now. In the Jura the idea was to explore certain Baroque themes, notably ideas around the abundance of forms in nature, and motifs based upon accumulation and sedimentation, which is both the geological principle of the Jurassic

landscape but also the principle behind Creole as a spiralist language and the tradition of Creole storytelling. Édouard Glissant was very interested with the idea of the Baroque as an impure and excessive form, developed in opposition to scientific rationalism and its grasping of nature. Therefore meaning in Baroque is slowly created through the accumulation of repetitions, like a limestone deposit, and the film in its editing as in its music follows this same path which again takes the form of a spiral. ●



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