

On Logical Revolts

Louis Henderson in conversation with Amira Gad

Amira Gad

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Louis Henderson's *Logical Revolts* (2012) is a 42-minute film in search of the traces of Egyptian civilian resistance against colonial and military oppression, from 1952–2012, filmed on location in Cairo, Port Said and the Sinai desert. It uncovers the annotated script *Blue Vanguard* (1957), a United Nations commissioned film by Thorold Dickinson on the 1956 Suez crisis, which was banned and never screened. Henderson discovered the document in the Thorold Dickinson collection at the London College of Communication. References to any implication of guilt on the part of Israel's contribution to the crisis are emphatically erased by the censor's red pen. The Dickinson script attempts to unravel the complexities of the Anglo-French colonial legacy at Suez. Intrigued by a possible connection to the Arab Spring of 2011, the filmmaker travelled to Egypt to uncover some truths about this document, and in the process reflects on the 2011 revolution and the historical events that led up to it. *Logical Revolts* is an archaeology of 25 January 1952 to 25 January 2012, revealing the stratigraphic layers that build up from the rubble of history.

Amira Gad: *Logical Revolts* is often described as an 'allegory of revolution'. Can you comment on this description?

Louis Henderson: The idea of presenting the film as an allegory of revolution comes in part from the way that Jean Genet approaches Palestine and the history of the Palestinian revolution in his book *Un Captif Amoureux* (A Prisoner of Love, 1986). This book greatly informed the development of the narrative of the film during the editing and writing stage – both in terms of Genet's insistence on the personal reading and 'failed' representation of a situation in which he was always a white European outsider trying to look in on something that escaped him culturally, but also the way in which Genet tells the story of the Palestinian revolution from a perspective (on his death bed) that reflects back on his memories after a long period of time has passed between the actual experience of the event and its retelling through the book. Throughout *Un Captif Amoureux*, Genet reveals the impossibility of him ever truthfully recounting the revolution and shows how by transforming his experience into words on a page, any notion of truth slips away like sand between his fingers. Instead he alludes to the possibility of the récit and of images in a dream as ways to describe a personal experience, as it may have been perceived through the senses of an individual:



Louis Henderson, *Logical Revolts*, 2012. Video still.
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I must stress that it's *my eyes* that saw what I thought I was describing, and *my ears* that heard it. The form I adopted from the beginning for this account was never designed to tell the reader what the Palestinian revolution was really like [...] All these words to say, *this is my Palestinian revolution*, told in my chosen order. As well as mine there is the other, probably many others. Trying to think the revolution is like waking up and trying to see the logic in a dream.[1]

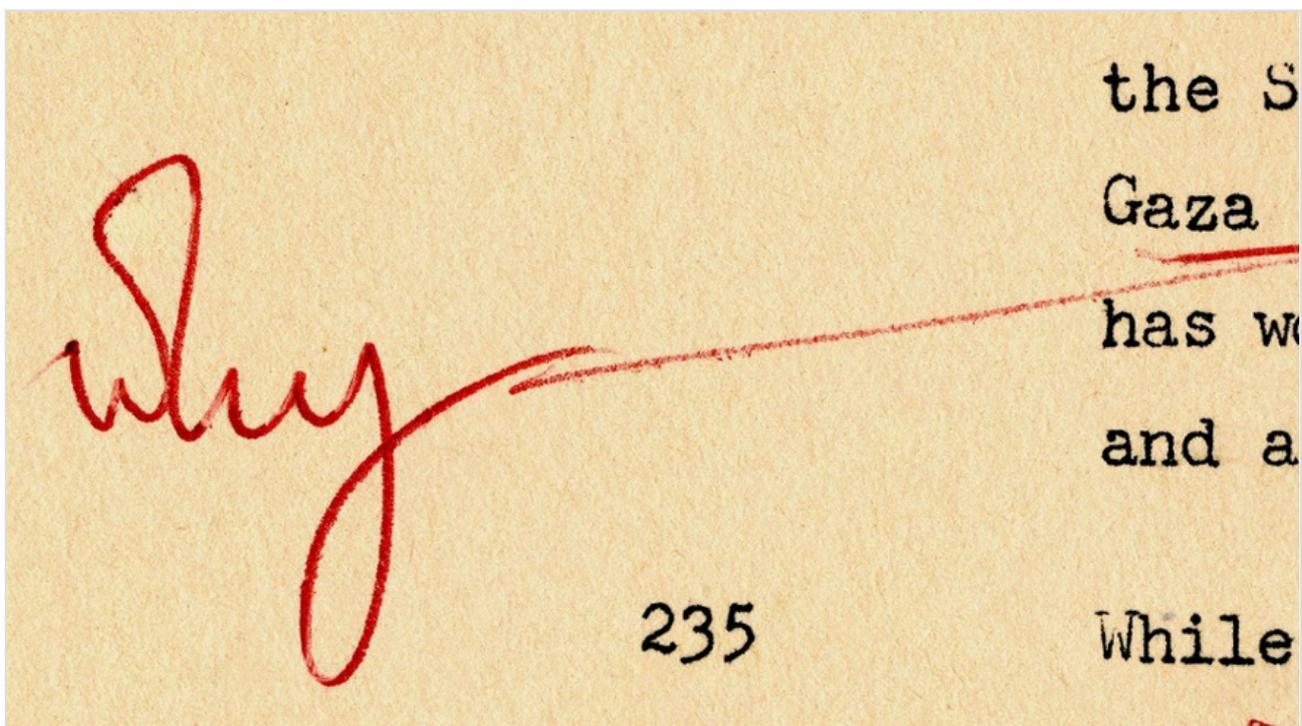
And so this form of dream-like allegory as a tale, a récit based upon some form of true experience that is being retold through a fictionalized account, seemed to be the most appropriate way to approach the topic of the Egyptian revolution and its relation to Egypt's colonial ties with Britain and France. In the first instance because it was a way to self-reflexively and critically challenge the role and the potential fallibility of the first person narrator in the telling of colonial histories (just like Genet), and in the second instance as a way to elaborate on the idea of the documentary as a genre of fiction that opens up new paths for a political way of making cinema today; through its means of playing with and bending the plasticity of the real. I believe that in suggesting the film as an allegory *based on the real* (rather than a factual account), I allow the possibility for a critical reading of not only the situation – and the history of said situation – being unfolded through the narrative, but also the position and role of the artist who is weaving the material the viewer is watching. This is also suggested by the poem *Démocratie* by Rimbaud that opens the film. The desire for such an approach is, for me, an important ethical positioning and is something I continue to explore in my work.

AG: When referring to your work, you said it 'takes the form of an essay-film: the coming together of text and image'. What is, for you, the potential and/or limitations for such an understanding of a cinematic approach?

LH: 'Even letters, books and documents, that which the speech-act has torn itself from, have passed into the landscape, with the monuments, the ossuaries, the lapidary inscriptions.'^[2]

Image and text coming together create something I call (borrowed from Gilles Deleuze) a stratigraphic image, and is an image that cinema can uniquely create. The stratigraphic image has within its folds many layers of time and can be created by showing an image of something – a mountain in Sinai let's say – and then having a voice read a written text over this image, but that the image does not instantly refer to the murder of Egyptian resistance fighters by the Israeli army in 1956. The image is not of what the voice speaks of, yet, what the voice speaks of is buried within the image, it is underneath and inside the image: '...there are corpses beneath these rocks'. The voice releases what has happened in the image at another time and therefore works towards a shifting, a *vibrating*, of the geological layers that have solidified a particular point in history. In turn, this allows for that history to become alive again and to perhaps be remoulded into something quite different. This could be understood as an animist/materialist critique of History – a way to de-capitalise history perhaps – much in the same way that Derek Walcott proposes with his poem *The Sea is History* (2007). Speaking of his poem in a lecture from 1979, Walcott answers the question 'where is your history?' by replying: 'I would say, "It is out there, in that cloud, that sky, the water moving." And if the questioner says, "There's nothing there," I would say: "Well that's what I think history is. There's nothing there." The sea is history.'^[3]

With regards to *Logical Revolts*, I would say the mountain is history and that the mountain was once the sea and before that, it was fire – and within all of that is the blood and flesh and living matter of the beings that have passed through that space. And so, history is this movable and moving mass of things that live and that die and that live again and die again, a movement back and forth of coming and becoming – much like the waves and the tides of the sea. If history is inseparable from the Earth then it must be understood that history is not something fixed within letters, books and documents held in archives, for example, but it is indeed part of the composting that makes up the culture of the soil that gradually seeps within the earth as a form of underground resistance. This is one of the major potentials for the coming together of text and image: the way in which a stratigraphic layering of image and text (and sound) can construct a rereading of history in the present by proposing it as a living and transmutable thing. In terms of limitations, quite simply, this method can become a bit reductive, overly simple and didactic – but then again, I like didacticism!



AG: Your methodology can be considered as an excavation of an archive and the piecing together of fragments of history into a narrative that enables a better understanding of a specific Egyptian history and context. You often refer to your film as 'cine-archive' or 'archaeological'. Can we also refer to your film as anthropological?

LH: The film can be understood as anthropological in so far as archaeology is a branch of anthropology – the study of material remains from human culture activated in the present as a way to read and reflect on society as it is lived today. Yet this is an anthropology that offers not only a reading of the culture being presented under the optics of the 'study', but also includes an awareness of the subjectivity of the person conducting the 'study' and acknowledges the role that they have in creating the reactions and relations of the people that take part in the film, therefore trying to undercut any notion of authenticity or achievement of truth in the film. This can be understood as a form of reflexive anthropology (albeit fictionalized in the film and deeply unscientific, *unanthropological*) and was approached as a way to work towards a post-colonial critique of the anthropological pretensions inherent in certain types of cinema in general, and my own work specifically. To take this further, I would like to propose that the film is also fictionally-anthropological in the way that this reflexive process actually poses more questions about the person and the culture of the person making the film. *Logical Revolts* ends up being more of a reflection on the processes and failings of what it means for an outsider to go to another culture and attempt to read the history and politics of that culture from a position on the outside. In this sense, we could say that an anthropology of reciprocity is approached as a way to critically work and think through the problems of representation that so haunt anthropology (and thus documentary and ethnographic cinema) due to its history and involvement with the European project of colonization. I would not pretend to have found any answers to this but propose rather a series of thoughts and questions through the film and its processes.

AG: Can you talk about your film as a 'topographic study of an archival text'? Why, in your opinion, is this a fitting methodology for approaching the subject matter at hand?

LH: This idea of doing a topographic study of an archival text actually came from reading an interview that Celine Condorelli conducted in 2011 with Jean-Marie Straub about the film, *Trop tôt, trop tard* (made with Daniele Huillet in 1981). This film inspired *Logical Revolts* in many ways: in terms of its method of research of archival topography, the symbols and images used to evoke the idea of revolution, the space, time and distancing created through camera placement and movement, and also in the way it uncovers certain buried histories of peoples' revolts by looking into the failings of the French Revolution in the first half of the film and, in the second part of the film, resistance to British colonial oppression in Egypt before the Nasser regime. In the interview, Straub describes cinema as an art of space, a topographical art that is interested in a geography of thought. This he opposes to writing, which is unconcerned with questions of geography, of place. He speaks of his and Daniele Huillet's method of going to the archives in Paris to find written accounts of workers grievances during the French Revolution and then going to the towns and villages that these documents speak of, in order to '...see where all this happened, where it had taken place'. Yet, as Straub reveals, '...there is nothing left. The topography, nothing else'.^[4] However, in the film we have the voice of Huillet reading the workers accounts in the present, over-laid as a voiceover onto images of the places that engendered these texts. Here, we have an example of a stratigraphic image that collides two temporalities, and creating a spectral transparency of a political history. Therefore, I see this archival topography as a form of archaeology that has as its aim to find the

space of which an archival document speaks about. It is a search for the landscape within which the speech-act, recorded in the written document, is buried. The essential goal is to release this speech-act from the layers of stratigraphic rock that cover it, almost in an animistic sense, to allow for the layers of historical sedimentation to eventually erode and for the agency and vitality hidden within that record to come alive again in the present, and in doing so allow for a politico-historical re-reading of a present situation in relation to its past, thus opening up new narratives and possible futures. This is also a political positioning that evolves from the archaeologist's desire to release themselves and their objects of study from the dusty confines of the archive itself, the authoritative building that contains and organizes law and order. It is therefore a form of resistance to control, a political act that tries to counteract the writing of history from the point of view of the *arche* – a tautological principle that allows for some to rule over others from simply an originary right to rule. Archival topography resists this and moves on from this.

In relation to *Logical Revolts* more specifically, in January 2011 I had found a script (in the Thorold Dickinson archives at London College of Communication) for a film that was made by the United Nations about the 1956 Suez Crisis, which was never shown and so never really existed as a film. It had remained for 55 years as a written document, as a script of the images that once were made. I decided to go to the places that the script referred to and try and find new images in the present that could reveal something about a possible connection between the 1952 Egyptian revolution, the Suez Crisis, the Nasser military regime and the then-current revolution that was trying to oust Hosni Mubarak. Behind this web of connections was an idea that essentially Mubarak was a descendant from a line of oppressive rulers that had started with the military coup of 1952. The military coup that forced into submission any other form of political resistance to British colonialism, and that stamped out the flames of a potential peoples' revolution that had been in the process of becoming many years before 1952 – this is the thesis put forward by Mahmoud Hussein and Alfred Ehrenfeld in their book *Class Conflict in Egypt: 1945–1970* (1974). This form of archival topography, of archaeology, was the most appropriate manner through which I felt I could approach the subject of the revolution in Egypt at that time and so I went to Egypt exactly one year after the Tahrir square movement began, to see what was left of the struggle, and this became the film.

AG: There are a number of cinematic references in the film. Can you elaborate on these?

LH: This cinematic referencing is also related to archaeology and stratification in that I reveal the stratigraphic layering that has built up my own cinema. I was born in the cinema in a certain sense and I am a true cinéphile. I actually *learned* how to make films through watching films and reading film theory. As the text that narrates the film is full of quotations without quotation marks, the images that constitute the film are also full of hidden visual quotations. This is a method of montage borrowed from Walter Benjamin, who borrowed it from the surrealists and who perhaps borrowed it from Rimbaud. Yet more crucially for the film, this was set up as a device to point towards the way the filmmaker in the film (both sides of his schizo-personality: Henderson and the narrator) is so embedded within European culture and a Eurocentric way of looking at the world: how else to film the roundabout at Tahrir square than how Straub and Huillet filmed Place de la Bastille in *Trop tôt, trop tard*? How else to make a film in Africa than how Pasolini attempts to in *Appunti per un'Orestide Africana* (Notes for an African Orestes, 1975)? This builds up the strangely arrogant and self-assured position that Henderson assumes in regard to his subject and thus further complicates the viewers' understanding of how they should relate to the film, its narration and its failings. Often in the film we are presented with a history recounted through a voiceover. But the image contradicts what is being told and shows how Henderson is never actually close to understanding or really commenting on what surrounds him. Reality eludes Henderson permanently

and plays tricks on him, so much so that in the end he finds himself in the desert, faced with the nothingness of the mountains and the night sky. Eventually, he gives in and gives up on his (essentially colonialist) project of discovery and unearthing of history. Within this moment, the filmmaker goes through a process of becoming humble, of the humus, down to earth,[5] and in fact becomes part of the rock, the earth, the wind and the sky. Henderson is buried into the landscape and eventually dissolves into the 'meaningless...broken hieroglyphs of the stars'. This is a form of self-criticism in the German Romantic sense, that a work made in fragmentation can contain its own negation within itself; precisely due to its incompleteness, its openness – it gestures towards a void.



Louis Henderson, *Logical Revolts*, 2012. Video still.
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AG: The title 'Logical Revolts' is taken from Rimbaud's poem *Démocratie* with which the film begins. What does 'Logical Revolt' mean to you and what can it mean in this context?

LH: The title does indeed come from *Démocratie* by Rimbaud and this poem is a vital key for unlocking the film and decoding its own hieroglyphics. However, *Les Révoltes Logiques* (*The Logical Revolts*) was also the title of a history and philosophy journal that Jacques Rancière and friends started in 1975 (they also borrowed the title from Rimbaud). This journal had as its aim a philosophical, political and critical approach to historical research and the writing of histories of the working class struggle; one that was radically different from the orthodoxy of Rancière's Marxist contemporaries. The group of *Les Révoltes Logiques* used an archaeological method of archival excavation to uncover texts, manuscripts, philosophical treatises, poems, notes and so on written by workers and activists in nineteenth century France (in short the *logos* of working class experience and struggle) as a way to elaborate on the needs, desires and dreams that became workers' revolts and revolutions of that period.[6] They were placing the records of workers subjectivities at the forefront of their philosophical investigations and were thus actively putting into *logos* the *logos* that had led to revolt. Hence the term *logical revolts*. This is one way of understanding what it can mean. But Rancière, having taken the phrase from

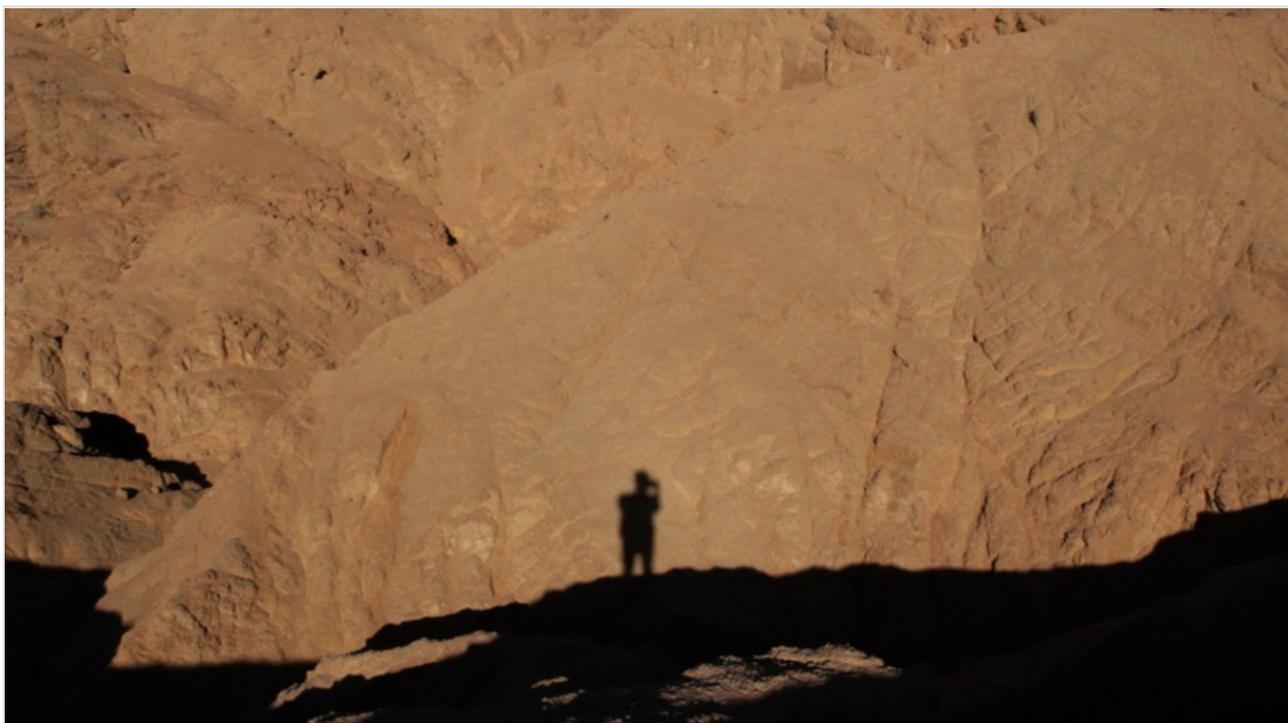
Rimbaud, understood also the meaning of creating a revolution within the *logos* itself; in the same way that Rimbaud broke with common structures of writing in the French language and invented words, turns of phrase and new ways of understanding what material can make up poetry (such as the words from advertising hoardings in his short sonnet *Paris*). As such, both Rancière and Rimbaud were looking for ways to elaborate upon experiences of revolt through revolutionary modes of writing. One last interpretation of the phrase 'Logical Revolts' could be that within the context of a colonized country, a revolt is the only logical outcome of such a situation. A revolution of decolonial proportions would surely be the most reasonable and justified reaction to violence of colonialism. Therefore, the revolts of these 'spicy and drenched lands' that the colonial soldiers in Rimbaud's poem are so intent on 'massacring', are the logical outcome of such a project of domination. Yet the phrase still sounds strange: *Logical Revolts*, as we might be more inclined to believe that revolts are not necessarily logical or reasoned events and are impossible to rationalize. They are perhaps as Genet describes them: working within an irregular logic of dreams.

AG: 'With these images, I'm not entering the city or revealing anything about it. I'm removed at a distance and can only show the places as they exist concretely', says the voiceover early on in your film. The idea of 'disconnection' and 'remoteness' is quite dominant and present throughout the film: The scenes we witness are from the past and are mixed with archival footage. These are overlaid with a narrative that is not always referencing the object of the shot and which is narrated by a person outside of the context in which the story takes place and at times told second-hand; the artist Henderson, who assumes a third-person role, and the narrated text, still performed by the artist, pretends to be told by another person. Towards the end of the film, the voice quotes an early email from Henderson: 'Using the first person in cinema is a sign of humility. All I have to offer is myself'. Can you elaborate on this emphasis of disconnect? Can we speak of a dogmatism of an assumed Western perception of the Middle East that is staged and choreographed in this film?

LH: Distance and disconnect are created in the film in various ways: from the camera angles high up on balconies; the lack of speaking subjects in the image; the out of sync sound; the use of the postcard as an image of the present; and the split in personality of the narrator and the image-maker, for example. These are all ways in which an idea of a certain *honest* approach to a complicated and *foreign* topic is being apprehended. Yet, this honesty is entirely dishonest throughout the whole film and we are left with the rather strange and arrogant pretensions of a filmmaker slowly losing his grip on reality. The reasons behind this I have already mentioned but I will just emphasize that this disconnect and distance also came about quite naturally: when I went to Egypt to make the film I was very aware of not wanting to jump to any misconceived illusions about the situation at hand. So in fact I had attempted to create what might be called a respectful distance rather than pretending that I knew more than I did at that time. Hence my approach to filming was one of staying in the perimeter of things and observing from outside in, with a full awareness of my position at all times. Nonetheless, this distance was brought to the foreground, through the post-production processes of creating the narrative, to precisely critique (and self-critique) certain positions that filmmakers assume in regard to political situations of countries they do not necessarily know. And so we have the choreographing, as you put it, of this Western positioning which is, in the first instance, one of a permanent distance, disconnect and lack of understanding (humility, whether false or not) and in the second instance, of a forced political affiliation and assumption of knowledge that is not there (arrogance). The phrase: 'Using the first person in cinema is a sign of humility, all I have to offer is myself' is a wonderful way to allude to these two sides of humility/arrogance as it exactly contradicts itself through what it says: it contains its own negation within itself. Furthermore, the narrator quotes Henderson as saying it, but in fact the quote comes from Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (Sunless, 1983). The dichotomy is complicated through this continual movement back and forth between these two poles of a

personality that has split into two – Henderson/narrator – who is actually just one; perhaps me?

Rimbaud's poem *Démocratie*, that opens the film, sets up this ambivalent dichotomy – and in this way is the key to understanding the narration and what it stages. Rimbaud wrote the poem just after his traumatic experiences of the Paris Commune and its bloody downfall in 1871 and the poem expresses a desperate feeling of dispossession towards the lost potential of a defeated revolution. He sets this up by assuming the voice of soldier in a colonial army who claims: 'In the great centres we'll nurture the most cynical prostitution. We'll massacre logical revolts'. Rimbaud authors and speaks the lines himself, yet the whole poem is written in quotation marks and so we have a doubling up of two voices that creates a kind of free-indirect speech, which is nonetheless distinctly marked as the voice of an other (importantly, *I is an other* for Rimbaud).^[7] In doing so he creates an ironic distance between the poet and the poem, and between who is saying what is being said. This undermines any belief in a fixed 'self' behind Rimbaud's poetic discourse and allows for a comprehension that the violence behind the phrases should not be taken at face value but rather be critically assessed from the point of view of the reader. However, just to complicate things even further, Rimbaud wrote this poem just before he gave up writing poetry to become a soldier in the Dutch Colonial Army and set off for an expedition to Java – to one of those 'spicy and drenched lands' of his *Illuminations* (1886). And so the incongruous positioning of his fictionalized third person in the poem *Démocratie* sets up exactly this form of ambivalent self-criticism that oscillates between differing positions of humility and arrogance, honesty and dishonesty, first person and third person, subject and object, truth and lies. I think I could say that Rimbaud feeds the basis of my cinema.



Louis Henderson, *Logical Revolts*, 2010. Video still.
Copyright and courtesy the artist.

AG: If you were, today, to produce an epilogue to *Logical Revolts* what would it be?

LH: This question came up in a slightly different manner when I had initially made the film: a friend of mine

suggested that I could make a series of films about this character 'Henderson' and that each film should begin in the place in which the last film ended. In this case, the sequel would have to begin in Sinai and make its way to Palestine. Given that an epilogue is in some respects the beginning notes of a sequel, I would say then that the epilogue could explore more closely the ties between Egypt, Palestine, Israel and the United Nations. These different elements are intimately bound up within the history and present of the Middle East (not to mention the USA, France, Britain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Russia and so on) and yet, they are not fully explored in the film. For example, the relationship between Nasser and the Palestinian Fedayeen^[8], and how this led to the difficult tensions between Egypt, the United Nations and Israel and the eventual dismissal of financial support for the Aswan Dam from the American president at that time – Dwight Eisenhower – that led to the nationalization of the Suez Canal, which started the Suez War.

It would be interesting to develop upon the relationship and support of the Soviet Union in the Middle East at that time, and the ways in which the USA intervened amidst its attempts at stopping the 'spread' of communism during the Cold War, such as the 'Eisenhower Doctrine'. So the epilogue would be about Henderson in Palestine, trying to find connections between this history and the present, and how the geopolitical situation in the region started to change after the revolution began and the downfall of Hosni Mubarak. Yet, maybe the most interesting way to make an epilogue would be by precisely following this idea of the dissolution of the narrator in a 'post'-colonial reading of a country's present situation. The Western and *orientalizing* figure disappears and loses their agency as the narrator of this history and so, potentially opens up the path for a people's narration of the revolution as they may have lived it. This would be to work in the complete opposite sense of that of Genet and myself, though it would be an interesting counterpoint to the narration that is set up and could be a way, perhaps, of offering a richer critique of history and its fabrication.

For this to take shape I would use a transcript of personal accounts of life after the revolution, something *truly* documentary in a sense – living material that could narrate its own experience without the unifying voice of a single narrator. In hearing empirical material about the post-revolutionary reality in Egypt today, we could move away from the typical narrative of the revolution as an epic story of the heroic people's brave emancipation from state oppression, told in a romantic fashion that offers a teleological and totalizing account of a linear history. This could then lead to an awareness of the tragedy of the revolution, its failings and its different outcomes; it would not be done to assume total pessimism on the event and what it engendered, but rather to try and offer a different way of reading the relationship of the past to the present and the future.

If this revolutionary romance tends towards a teleological narration of an inevitable horizon of emancipation, then the future is predetermined and fixed before it has even had a chance to happen. However, in reading the history of the revolution as tragedy (and this is a proposition put forth by David Scott in his book *Conscripts of Modernity: the Tragedy of Colonial Modernity*, 2004) we do not follow this form of narration, and instead have an ending that is left ambiguous, uncertain, unresolved where there is no triumphant final resolution to be reached, and so the future remains a possibility, an open potential to be speculated upon that we cannot foresee by looking to the past. Tragedy, in the words of Scott, '...orients us away from the assumption that the future can be guaranteed by the pasts accumulated in the present'. I think this would be an interesting way to reconsider the apparent failings of the revolution in order to see that the paths that might be taken are not predetermined or plotted through history: the impossible is certainly possible and a future is currently being constructed.

Louis Henderson is a filmmaker whose works investigate the connections between colonialism, technology, capitalism and history. A graduate of London College of Communication and Le Fresnoy studio national des arts contemporains, Henderson is currently completing a post-diplôme within an experimental art and research group at the European School of Visual Arts, where his research seeks to formulate an archaeological method within film practice reflecting on new materialities of the Internet. Henderson has shown his work at places including Rotterdam International Film Festival, CPH:DOX, New York Film Festival, Transmediale, The Kiev Biennial 2015, The Centre Pompidou, FRAC Midi-Pyrénées, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Tate Modern and Whitechapel Gallery. In 2015 he was the recipient of the Barbara Aronofsky Latham Award for Emerging Video Artist at the 53rd Ann Arbor Film Festival, USA, and a European Short Film Award – New Horizons International Film Festival, Wroclaw, Poland. His work is distributed by Lux (UK) and Video Data Bank (USA).

[1] Jean Genet, *Un Captif Amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

[2] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2, L'Image-temps* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985).

[3] Derek Walcott, quoted in Frank Birbalsingh, ed., *Frontiers of Caribbean Literature in English* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1996).

[4] Jean-Marie Straub, 'Speaking of Revolutions: Too Early, Too Late,' LUX Blog, 9 March 2011, www.lux.org.uk/blog/speaking-revolutions-too-early-too-late

[5] Etymologically the word humble comes from the Latin *humus* (ground), which also indicates an idea of the soil, of compost. Thanks to Filipa César for this wonderful insight.

[6] According to Rancière, *logos* has a double meaning as speech and as account. *Logos* is not merely the act of speaking, but is also that account of speech, determining who can speak and who cannot speak, as well as who can speak on behalf of others and how.

[7] 'I is an other' – '*Je est un autre*' is a famous line from a pair of personal letters that Rimbaud wrote to friends in 1871, the letters are collectively known as *Les Lettres du voyant*.

[8] Palestinian Fedayeen are militants or guerrillas, also known as 'freedom fighters' of a nationalist orientation from among the Palestinian people.

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