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“The counter-attack is articulated in an associative way, through support and solidarity”

Sonia Chikh (Les engraineurs)

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Interview with Sonia Chikh conducted by Birgit Mennel and Stefan Nowotny

Let’s start off by talking about the name of the association that you are a part of, Les engraineurs. It seems like there is a certain ambiguity. So, could you explain the meaning of the name to us? Or just simply explain who Les engraineurs are and what it is that you “engrain”?

Les engraineurs comes from the slang expression “*engrainer*” that can be both positive or negative: it can be “to make you do something”, which is to say, if we give a definition in standard language, “do something with a group of people”, or even “push someone do something both in a good and bad sense”. And Les engraineurs, in fact, comes from the experience of a group of youths that a French professor “*engrained*”, if you want to use the word: he pushed them to write a script, he pushed them to make films and they fell into the cinematic spiral, it made them desire. So an organization was created: that is Les engrainers.

Going back to the double sense of Les engraineurs, "*engrainer*" is also what is done with the grain that is planted, that we seed and, as well, it means that there are a lot of pushing that is going to come, above all for the littlest people. So, there is also that sense in the name.

We work a lot with adolescents who come from working-class neighborhoods but also with adults and the elderly, too. We make television series, documentaries, news reports... But the main job is allowing people to express a point of view or an opinion through an audiovisual tool. It can be dance, music, design and, just like that, it ends up on film.

What is the task or the importance of audiovisual production in what we call the "French banlieues*"*[1] *or, in other words, in a para-urban context?*

The importance lies reclaiming audiovisual media. It is very important because the *banlieues* are stigmatized, they are shown in a certain way when they are filmed; what I mean is that we live inside them, we are on the interior, there is our vision of things, we know how things happen there and we then show that in another way. Without necessarily setting the negative aspects aside. But this means that the *banlieues* aren't shown only through burning cars, etc., because there isn't only that. There are also people who do positive things. And I think that it is also interesting to show that too, because the mainstream media doesn't.

Could you tell us a bit more about the modes of production and collaboration?

Les engraineurs' productions are made through public subventions that come from the state, both on a regional and a municipal level. Really, the production is also the money that we get to make films – don't you agree? And so our films are produced starting with those subventions. After, we also try to create projects that are not funded. In that case, there is the question of self-financing which is an entire different thing; in order to raise money, we have to sell things, for example beverages or things like that, so those activities are quite particular, we also sell DVDs of films we've already managed to make. But, in fact, you want to know how we make these films...

…Yeah, and how the collaboration between the youth and the members of the association works: there are different people who seem to assume different and quite specific functions, those who bring the ideas and other who have the expertise or the specific know-how for editing, to give an example.

Oh yeah, there are people who are specialized according to the roles they play in the structure. So we have an administrator who manages all of the subvention files, there are all the facilitators who are there to coordinate the writing collectively. That means they are the spokespeople of the organization in a workshop and they coordinate and direct it. After that, there is all the technical stuff: to be honest, there are editors, there are the cameramen and there are the sound engineers who all come. All of these people are not necessarily paid by the organization, they also come out of their own good will. But that also poses some difficulties because they are not free all of the time and so really things have to get done kind of independently sometimes.

Does that mean that the people who manage the writing workshops are part of the association whereas the cameramen and the technical staff are not necessarily part of it?

That depends, because there are people of the association who have been educated slowly over time, so in a non-institutional way – they didn't go to a school to have a diploma for this. Certainly, all of the technicians bring their know-how and pass it along to the others. So, there is a group that has formed inside the structure and a kind of autonomy has been created – and there is also the retransmission of the know-how that takes place.

So you are really a network?

That's it, in fact, we are all polyvalent. Me, for example, I am able to edit a film, just like I am able to create a subvention file; and I'm also able to run a writing workshop. After, we can make choices and say: I'd prefer to not edit and to be behind the scenes, I prefer running workshops; but seeing the forces we have, that taught us that people should have a minimum of training to be able to manage a project if there aren't the people who come by their own good will into the organization.

As far as the youth are concerned, they are not the ones who run the workshops. We are the ones that frame the workshops but since it is collective work, the youths run the debate or the discussion themes; but there are not any youths who just come in and run a workshop, like that. That is done based on the projects. For example, last year there was a young boy who worked on a project with *Musik à Venir*. There was a scene and he had to film it and broadcast it live. And he was the one with the idea and so he coordinated it with us and the other association. And it's really

valorizing because he had the force to write a project and think about how to organize a team, etc.

I, myself, learned to do all that with the association, but it took time. I've been with Les engraineurs since 2000, I've had time to learn, the time to plant, the time to master that and then grow again. And the association changed: there was a change in the direction so, at a certain moment, the objectives changed too. Personally, I see myself more in the way it is now because, at the beginning, the organization still was like it is now but, at a certain moment, there was a fuzzy period when the association was used like something that could give certain people access to the mainstream media or help them become a famous director. Well, that wasn't supposed to be the primary goal of the organization. So it completely changed and it was kind of forgotten that the original goal was doing social work before anything else and that audiovisual media was a only a tool for that.

You talked about the stigmatization of the banlieues*, and notably the youth from the* banlieues*. In what measure do you see the work of Les engraineurs as an audiovisual counter-production, a sort of counter-articulation starting from the* banlieues *that opposes the representations of the* banlieues *in the mainstream media?*

Our job is to show the things they don't want to show. You've seen some of Les engraineurs' films: we show the burning cars too, but we don't show them in the same way. The way we film, the way of interviewing people or the way those people are portrayed in a film – all that isn't done in the same way it's done on *TF1* or *France 2*, [2] they aren't made cliché. What I mean is that we also try to make the people who are trapped in the image come out, because they are labeled and are also sucked into that label a little. So, it's a question of saying: no, wait, it's not because you have that label

that you have to play that role. So you can also have this other important role; and at the same time, there are kids who aren't involved in all of that stuff at all, who are into other things and who just want to show other things.

Aren't there also a lot of misrepresentations in what is shown my the mainstream media? Isn't there also a central problem: concerning less the aspects of life in the banlieues *that are not shown and more the aspects that are shown badly?*

Yes, for example, *banlieue* violence is represented really badly because, all of the sudden, the images we see are images as if it was a war when that really isn't the case. And at the same time, that violence is not trivial, it doesn't just happen like that. What I mean is that it is something that swells and swells and swells – and at a certain moment, it explodes. And after, there are different things that really happen... but those things happen even in a village where a guy shoots another guy because he stole his potato field: here, it's a guy who shoots another guy because he stole his scooter. We're facing typical cases, only that the *banlieue* lets people– or at least it lets politicians –stigmatize those people and scare the population saying "see, those people there, they are scary, they are dangerous, etc., etc.". There is also a political message behind it. So, the solidarity that could exist between different environments is broken. And I'm talking about villages because, for me, they are just like the *banlieues*: they are excluded from everything, they don't have public services anymore, like the post office, doctors are far away, etc.. So it's kind of like the *banlieues*, where we find ourselves all alone. We'd say "ah, French villages are great, but French *banlieues* scare us more" – except that it's the same thing in French villages because, without those services, it really is dangerous. It's dangerous because the guy who lives in his field, who never comes out, who doesn't have any access to culture,

who doesn't have access to the media and things like that – I'm sorry, but that's not much of an open mind able to integrate into society.

In this context, what was the role of the autumn 2005 riots? Can we say that things have changed? And have there been changes on a tactical and strategic level – not only after those events but also the representation of those events?

No, things haven't changed; really, they've been reinforced, they've been accentuated. In the end, what changed on a political level was saying: "We need to calm things down, how are we going to do that? We're going to balance a budget and that budget is going to bring housing up to norm so that it can officially exist". But as long as we don't fix the economic problems, like unemployment, and the social and cultural problems, like culture shock or even having access to reading and writing skills, for me it's as if you make a trash can out of a huge apartment, all clean and beautiful outside. Well, you see, that's where we're at. So, you can make things pretty, but if what is on the inside is bad, the thing isn't going to change. So, they started working with that dynamic – without saying that, behind all that, there's something much more important going on. I know that social housing is important, but people having access to a job, access to reading, to writing, to culture so they can have exchanges and so they aren't folded back into the same community isn't any less important. All that has also created communitarianism and thus a close-minded attitude to other things that exist in France. Borders are accentuated, and even reinforced, saying: "you, you're there, we, we're over here, and there is no middle ground, there is no bridge, there isn't anything at all". For me, that's what it is like, in any case. The 2005 riots didn't change anything in and of themselves.

But aren't they a reference point?

No, for me, they aren't a reference point. It was a moment when things heated up a bit but, in fact for me, what I hoped in resect to 2005 was a raising awareness in those working-class populations that, at a given moment, would politically position themselves, taking to the streets, demonstrating for the right to just employment, to be able to be treated like normal people and not like people who are put in a kind of *HLM*[3] cage and who are only solicited when there are elections – and after the results are forgotten for a while. For me, the fact that people don't wake up in that sense bothers me, it gets on my nerves because I think that when there are a lot of us we can have an effect on the decisions made by politicians.

In what measure did the autumn 2005 provoke discussion or intensify your discussions? Or did you rather say "Why, all of the sudden, all this mainstream media attention"?

There were those debates, there were those questions, but they came from the people who always have them, all night, every day. And there were more of them in that period. But I saw it all like a kind of big game: who is going to prove themselves to be first and who is going to change public opinion the fastest and through what means? Now, were there any big public debates, national debates, on the question of the media, on the question of how the *banlieues* are treated, and on the question of the police chasing kids? Those questions were treated in a ridiculous way, and people were put to sleep by showing them images of fire, of dumpsters burning and police like they were at war and, behind them, a group of people from the mainstream media filming it all and people getting stoned. That's what was shown. So, really, I think that behind it all there was a reflection that should have happened: a

reflection on the question of the police, on the question of whether or not a kid should be chased because he doesn't have a helmet. On kids who do something stupid and then find themselves in a high-voltage sub-station, that seemed crazy to me. And those are questions that weren't addressed because it would have meant questioning the national police and, in other words, questioning the state – recognizing a fault. There are police officers who did that and some of them were punished and others were fired. It's an insult how after – all that lasted three minutes, three seconds on the nightly news – how there weren't any real debates, or the time and the positions necessary to really discuss these questions.

We've talked a lot about "counter" aspects, in a way, the need for counter-articulations, for example, or for counter-representations against the mainstream media, against political powers. What is behind that "counter"?

It's organized in different forms. We made an association where an activity is proposed, so the fact of being able, at any given moment, to give your point of view on the current state of things, on the questions that are mediatized right now. After, there are others who do it through music, through singing. For example, *Musik à Venir* with Abdoullah.[4] The themes addressed in their songs pose questions about society and about general themes, not only questions about the *banlieues*: they can be about ecology, they can be about Tahiti, they can be about the end of the world or natural disasters. They also address all those themes because they are concerned; they are tomorrow's adults and the world we are leaving them – it makes you think a little. So the counter-attack is articulated in an associative way, through support and solidarity. But there aren't any big networks that allow you to diffuse these ideas except for the mass media; there are people who get there,

people who are well known and who get a certain message across, but there aren't enough of them yet.

How do you see the role, in your work, of the postcolonial situation or the histories of migration? We ask this question because, certainly, these themes are present in Les engraineurs' films, but they don't seem to be on the forefront or constitute any of the major topics.

Really, for us, migration is our parents, it's our grandparents. I think that we've had an image of it without realizing it, so we don't insist on that point. And it's also a choice in Les engraineurs, I think, to not say "here's the Algerian woman or the Moroccan woman". However, at the same time, we have our own judgments of that, in relation to all the migrations that have happened for different reasons, immigration tied to WWII, to the labor force that had to be found at a certain moment, and to the peoples that were totally exploited. Plus, there is a non-history, a history that isn't recognized in France: the youth isn't taught, in schoolbooks, about the war in Algeria, and it's the same thing with colonialism in Africa – slaves are talked about but what really happened isn't, we don't talk about these things in depth. So, I think that for certain people, at least in my case, it's as if France got away with it, and it wasn't serious. Now, if our parents and our grandparents are here today, it's because there is a history behind. And recognizing that history is important, it allows people to mourn what was allowed to happen, and maybe make peace... with that history, in any case.

However, in Les engraineurs' films there is also a lot of humor. What is the importance of that humor or the tricks that can help to better cope with things, to be able to not only fight different authorities (state but also family authorities), but also to be able to laugh in their faces?

Yeah, really, that's what it's all about: we deal with these problems from a comic angle to not, rightly so, fall into discourses that can be heavy and to not say the same things that have already been said about the *banlieues*. For the people who do it, it's also an analysis of themselves, questioning themselves. In doing things in a humorous way, I think that it is easier to convey the ideas than in a structured discourse and it also helps... it makes it so that there isn't too much violence against ourselves, above all for the people who do it. And it's like saying, here we are, we're not bad. We can also laugh at ourselves, and laugh at you, there's no problem. At a certain moment, we just need to get on the same page, even if it's difficult sometimes.

Sonia Chikh is a member of the association Les engraineurs based in Pantin (Seine-Saint-Denis) in the cité *Courtillières. Since 1998 the association has organized writing workshops and audiovisual projects for youths aged 12 to 25. For more information, see the website: http://les-engraineurs.org/.*

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[1] *Banlieues* are translated as "suburbs", as these are also residential areas on the outer edge of a city, but the connotations of the term "*banlieue*" in France can be different from those in English-speaking countries. The "suburbs" in the United States, for instance, are generally associated with low population density, detached or semi-detached housing and middle and upper class inhabitants. On the other hand, in France *banlieues* are more frequently areas of low-income apartments and social housing. Thus, the equivalent of *banlieues* in the United States would be "the projects". In the UK, the equivalent would be a "council estate". The term *banlieue* itself comes from the two French words *ban* and *lieue* ("league", or roughly four kilometers) [translator's note].

[2] *TF1* is a national French TV channel, whose major shareholder is Bouygues. TF1's average market share of 24% makes it the most popular domestic network. It's also considered as the most viewed television channel in Europe. *France 2* is a French public national television channel. It is part of the state-owned *France Télévisions* group.

[3] *HLM* [*habitation à loyer modéré*], French for "housing at moderated rents" or "rent-controlled housing", is a form of subsidized housing in France [translator's note].

[4] See the interview with Abdoullah Ben Said in this issue of *transversal*.