The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."
Independent Cinema and the Migrant Experience in Europe
between Television and the Museum.

Beatrice Ferrara

University of Naples, bferrara@unior.it

Abstract

"Monument to dead television" is the expression the British collective The Otolith Group uses to define its activity of recuperating long-lost quality films, and re-screening them in contemporary art museums and gallery spaces. What these films share is a cinematic vocation and a complex approach to the question of memory and migration in Europe, and to the role of images as testimonies or documents. This essay explores The Otolith Group's interest in such forgotten archives of modern television in order to unearth their significance for contemporary museums today.
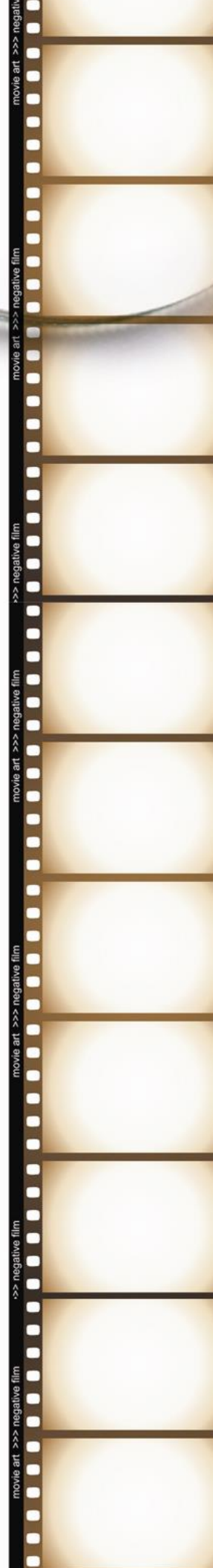
Keywords: *The Otolith Group, EU television archives, museums, identity and migration, attention economy*

The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."
Independent Cinema and the Migrant Experience in Europe
between Television and the Museum.

Beatrice Ferrara

> Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of
> its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.
> Walter Benjamin (quoted in J. Fisher 2007)

"Monument to dead television" [1] is the expression that The Otolith Group (2010, 6) — an artist-led British collective that gravitates around the theorist, artist, and curator Kodwo Eshun and the anthropologist, artist, and curator Anjalika Sagar — uses to define one of the most intriguing directions of its multiform artistic practice. [2] In fact, since 2007, the collective has been engaged in the activity of "excavating" and "reframing" (ibid., 1) long-lost quality films: recuperating and re-screening them in contemporary art museums and galleries. These films were originally produced and broadcast by European national public TV channels during the late eighties and early nineties.

In particular, the attention of the Group has focused so far on two major works of "excavation." The first one is the retrospective *The Ghosts of Songs* — a *re*-presentation of the entire filmic corpus produced between 1982 and 1998 by the British experimental group Black Audio Film Collective, and originally broadcast (albeit not in its entirety) on BBC Channel 4. [3] The second — the artwork *Inner Time of Television* — is an experiment of *re*-screening of the thirteen episodes of the TV-serial *L'héritage de la chouette*, realized in 1989 by French artist Chris Marker for the French channel La Sept. [4] What these films share is a complex approach to the question of memory and migration in Europe, and to the role of images as testimonies or

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

48

documents. In these works, the authority of images is questioned and rendered vulnerable through a deep and innovative exploration of the audio-visual languages of their period.

This essay will explore The Otolith Group's interest for such "forgotten archives of contemporary televisuality" (The Otolith Group 2010, 5) from the point of view of their implications for contemporary museums facing the challenges and welcoming the possibilities of "an age of migrations." The specific reference here to The Otolith Group's artistic-curatorial practice — amongst many other possible case studies that show a conceptual and operative affinity with the Group's "excavation" projects — is indeed neither fortuitous, nor gratuitous. In fact, a cautionary note is needed in advance.

The Otoliths are certainly not the first ones to propose such an operation of archival excavation and subsequent re-presentation, in the space of contemporary museums and galleries, of artistic materials originally conceived for the TV screen.[5] Nor are the Otolith Group's curatorial projects the only ones that have acknowledged the importance of keeping alive the memory of such filmic works from the past decades, specifically for the fact that they foster a reflection on the unfinished business of identity and representation in postcolonial Europe.[6] However, to date the Otoliths are certainly the ones whose curatorial premise inserts such a common practice of appropriation and curatorship within a broader and much more original frame: that of a critical reflection on the changes that have occurred in the relation between TV and the museum—as technologies of memory and attention—over the last three decades. As they write,

[our "monuments" seem] to be understandable as [acts] of appropriation or curation. [They seem] to be a matter of rendering previously inaccessible work visible. Indeed, [they] might be considered as a public service that parallels the kind of work made available on Kenneth Goldsmith's invaluable ubuweb site. […] On reflections, however, ambiguities seem to emerge […]. What becomes immediately apparent is that

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

49

television [works] such [as these] could never be broadcast on British television today—[with their] seriously playful pedagogy whose scale, scope, aspiration and ambition has long since disappeared from high definition digital television. […] [In the "monuments"] what was once routine and domestic returns […] as an artificial encounter which makes visible the technical conditions of a now extinct form of mass spectatorship. (2010, 5-6)

This essay will thus explore such notion of the "monument to dead television," or, in other words, its double character. On one side, an act of appropriation and curatorship of works in which the memory of migration is critically addressed. On the other, a reflection on the changes that have occurred in the visual technologies of memory, which inserts the Group's artistic practice also within the discourse of the critique of contemporary neo-liberal "attention economy."[7]

The first section of this essay will therefore provide an overview of the specific themes and issues that make The Black Audio Film Collective's and Marker's works relevant to a reflection on European migration today. The last two sections will instead inquire more specifically into whether and to what extent The Otolith Group's projects of excavation of such works may prove to be a "best practice" for contemporary art museums in an age of migrations. Attesting to the central role of museums as public and pedagogical sites, and as technologies of construction of a memory of postcolonial migrations, the essay will thus propose some potential operative strategies relevant to museums, which emerge as suggestions from the Otolith Group's "monuments."

Reminder: Acts of Retelling

Throughout its three sections, this essay aims at unearthing three potential meanings of the notion of the "monument to dead television": a *reminder* of the past, a *memento* for the present,

and an *homage* to the future. The first meaning — the *reminder* — hints at the ways in which the Group's monuments bring alive a forgotten moment in European cultural history: a phase in which an autonomous discourse about migration was articulated through the public apparatuses of mass spectatorship, which were committed to engaging with the risky processes of the re-narration — or better of the "re-telling," to quote Stuart Hall, of Europe.[8]

Indeed — as I shall explore in this section of the essay — what seems to motivate The Otolith Group's interests for TV works such as those by the Black Audio Film Collective and Chris Marker seems to be, first of all, the fact that they function as a *reminder* of a time when the themes of identity and postcolonial migrations in Europe were being articulated and developed by independent cinema with such a force, and to such an extent, so as to foster the opening of new public media circuits. Specifically, in those years new TV channels were inaugurated, which produced and distributed filmic reflections on urgent questions otherwise unable to be addressed on a national and mass scale. In this sense, the Group's project of excavation seems to have the first intention of circulating an otherwise forgotten memory of this experience, whose implications for contemporary Europe in the age of migrations are still very relevant. The idea of the monument as a *reminder* is therefore used here to suggest the ways in which The Otolith Group's excavations seem to be understandable as a way to carve out, in the institutional space of the museum, the ideal place of remembrance for a lost moment when critical public engagement with the open question of identity in postcolonial Europe took place through a capillary and mass-oriented media platform such as public TV.

To explore these issues, I will first need to introduce the cultural and social climate which led to the emergence of new social forces able to put pressure on public media, as to foster the opening of new TV channels. As already mentioned, the specific moment in the history of

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

51

public European TV, which *The Ghosts of Songs* and *Inner Time of Television* bring alive, goes from the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties. This was a period of experimentation for innovative ideas of film culture (both for the cinematic screen and for the TV screen), and for a new concept of cinema "as social practice on a national scale" (The Otolith Group 2010, 7).[9] The new film cultures that developed in these years had a strong pedagogical and public commitment. Thich reveals how deeply embedded they were in the climate of the late eighties — a moment when concepts such as "canon, curriculum, common and culture […] were disputed" (The Otolith Group 2010, 8). The "national scale" of the French and British cinematic independent enterprises was in fact everything but nationalistic. On the contrary, these experiments attested to a refusal to reinforce a clear and pure myth of "the nation." They were an attempt to create alternate narratives, capable of fracturing the institutional frame of the nation, in order to expose it to the pressure of forgotten bodies, uncharted routes, and unregistered migrating memories, which spanned a global scale. To use Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray's definition, these were the years of the "militant image," which designates:[10]

> any form of image or sound—from essay film to fiction feature, from observational documentary to found-footage ciné-pamphlet—produced in and through film-making practices dedicated to [militant struggles]. […] It refers not just to individual films but also to new modes of production, exhibition, distribution, pedagogy and training made possible by forms of political organization and affiliation. (2011, 1)

In countries such as the United Kingdom and France — where the Black Audio Film Collective's corpus and Marker's films were produced — the period of the "militant image" comes to designate a moment when the issues of migration had become pivotal. In both countries, this was a time when migration was a key topic in public discourse. In fact, in both the countries this was the moment when the confrontation with the respective imperial pasts

and the dark legacy of colonialism were being brought up by migrations and their inter-generational consequences. And moreover, in both the countries this was also the period when new public TV channels such as Channel 4 (1982) and La Sept (1986) were inaugurated under the pressure of new emerging social forces.

The agenda of these TV platforms was to provide an alternative to existing channels, by broadcasting high-quality educational and artistic works. In the specific case of Channel 4 — around which The Otolith Group's attention is focused — this was programmatically aimed at being a platform for what were then called "the minority groups" (Brown 2007; Hobson 2008).[11] However, the social pressures that led to the inauguration of TV channels such as Channel 4 emerged from what happened elsewhere—beyond the institutional media platforms.

As John Akomfrah of the Black Audio Film Collective recently stated in an interview with scholar Lindsay Dovey (Dovey 2010), in the United Kingdom these were in fact the years in which a younger generation of "black British" was struggling to articulate their multiple identities (of ethnicity, gender, and so on).[12] This younger generation of "hyphenated British" — as they were called to hint at their multiple identities — were the sons and daughters of the first immigrants who had reached the United Kingdom from the former British colonies after WWII.[13]

Since the late seventies, a mixture of unprecedented factors affected the life of this younger generation: the growing unemployment on the one side, the political ethos of the refusal to work on the other, the diffusion of personal media such as portable cameras, together with new forms of racialization, criminalization, and racism in the British urban centres. All these diverse factors would lead — at the very beginning of the eighties — to a season of unrest and creativity, of racial fear and cultural cross-pollination alike. A season whose main

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

53

protagonist in the public discourse was the controversial figure of the "young black British" (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, and Clarke, eds. 1978; Gilroy 1987).

During these same years, the number of black British enrolling in university-level education also grew exponentially, and it was also within the educational context of art schools and the university that the season of independent cinema was born. It might be said that cinema (together with music) became, in these years, the preferred language for the younger generation to articulate blackness as a "zone of becoming" (Akomfrah, in Dovey 2010) — against a public discourse which hovered *around* them, but which inevitably forced them between the two monolithic discursive systems of *information* and *counter-information*.

From this specific point of view — in its attempt to escape the closed circuit of information and counter-information (with their obsession for the truth-value of images, testimonies, and documents), and to provide an alternative narration of identities in postcolonial Europe — the broadcasting agenda of TV channels such as Channel 4 and La Sept distinguished itself in a very original and significant way. The specific *artistic and cinematic* character of the filmic works that were broadcast attested to an unprecedented emphasis on the role of imagination, fiction, and affect in the processes of subjectivity creations. It was along this common trail of poetics and politics, of imagination and narration, that diverse filmic languages, such as those of the new black cinemas and Marker's "white and post-colonial" cinematography happened to touch and influence each other.

It should be however emphasized how the Otolith Group's choice to dedicate their "monuments" to Marker and the Black Audio Film Collective does not imply the fact that, according to the group, Marker and the Black Audio Film Collectives could be considered as the perfect representatives of this season of European public culture. More precisely, what

distinguishes the Group's curatorial choice from many other similar projects of excavation of TV and cinema archives lies in the fact that both Marker and the Black Audio Film Collective represent two "eccentric" directions of independent cinema — which is the reason why they are still so intriguing. As Gill Henderson writes about the works of Black Audio Film Collective, for example, "they were radically different from any other independent film and video of that period" (2007, 7).

In fact, as The Otolith Group brilliantly explains in the books accompanying these excavation projects (2007, 2010), the most fascinating aspect shared by The Black Audio Film Collective's corpus and Marker's films was the fact that they were works that defied what their audiences expected from images. Indeed, they confounded not only those audiences who were unprepared or unwilling to be exposed to radical contents and sensitive themes. They also displaced those audiences "who were ready for radical polemics and righteous anger," but only when these came in the guise of films which cleaved "the well trodden path of […] social realism" (Henderson 2007, 7).

"How does one begin to say something about a story everyone claims to know?" (Akomfrah, 2011). This was, indeed, the question behind Marker's *L'héritage de la chouette*, for example, and the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986). Both are works to which The Otolith Group dedicates a consistent part of its curatorial effort. The latter is a poetical narration of the 1981 racial riots that took place in the neighbourhood of Handsworth, Birmingham, in the United Kingdom — whose news coverage had been extraordinary, but which still was pleading to be narrated in an autonomous way. The first is a TV-serial in thirteen episodes dedicated to a critical reading of Ancient Greece and the all-too-white myth

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

55

of the Greek roots of European culture, in which thirteen personalities linked to contemporary Greece give their own account of themes such as "democracy," "history," and the "Olympics."

In both the works, the will to narrate something about stories around which a huge mass of information had already been gathered — and around which a consistent media-based memory already existed — becomes the chance to explore the role of fictionalization in the practices of memorialisation. *Handsworth Songs* therefore addresses not the "truth" about the race riots, but the survival of an inter-generational memory of racism and antiracism, which is addressed through an innovative use of public images that transform themselves in opaque fragments of a narration and a memory which cannot be other than personal, in-becoming, fragmented.[14] *L'héritage de la chouette* becomes instead the chance to present Hellenism — and the myth of the white roots of "the West"—as "the inverted twin of Orientalism" (The Otolith Group 2010, 10) — with an intensity that cannot but recall Martin Bernal's observations on the "fabrication of Ancient Greece" in the first volume of *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (published in 1987, when Marker's filming for the series began). Both the works explore the limits of the document, the interview, the historical narration, the themes of roots and origins by "anticipating an encounter with questions of the absence or unreliability of memory and archives: [a] prescient commentary and meditation on migrant culture and globalization" (Henderson 2007, 7).[15]

The curatorial premise behind the Otolith Group's excavation projects must therefore be understood first of all as a way to *remember*—and re-*mind*—a specific moment in European public culture whose echo on the present is still very strong, but whose memory has been lost. The Group's first aim is therefore to remember a time when the social and critical pressure brought on by migrations became the terrain where new forms of organization, new ideas of

collective narration, and a new and fluid conception of identity in Europe were developed. Moreover, to remember such a moment is a way to remember how—in the words of theorist Mark Fisher

> "mainstream media" is not a monolith, but a terrain. It wasn't because of the largesse of broadcasters that the BBC and Channel 4 became host to popular experimentalism between the 60s and the 90s. No: this was only possible on the basis of a struggle by forces – which were political at the same time as they were cultural – that were content neither to remain in the margins nor to replicate the existing form of mainstream. (M. Fisher 2011)

Here, the Otolith Group's "monuments to dead television" become archival explorations whose aim is to resume and re-trace the routes of such struggles, to narrate *another,* forgotten story of Europe's contemporary past: a moment that was overshadowed by a very iconic event, such as the fall of the Berlin wall, and slipped out of public memory. A moment, as The Otolith Group writes, "in which the meaning and authority of origin, ancestry, legacy, history, nationality, race, civilization […] and the idea of the West was being contested" (2010, 8). A moment which only these stubborn remnants can still narrate, emerging from the zones of amnesia of the contemporary media archives.

Memento: Technologies of Memory and Attention

In the introductory section to this essay, I have suggested that the "monument to dead television" has a *double character.* On one hand, it is a regular act of curatorship and appropriation. On the other hand, it is a reflection on some changes occurred in the technologies of memory. These two aspects correspond, respectively, to those two levels involved in the construction of a "monument to dead television," to which the Group refers with the terms "excavation" and "reframing."

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

57

In the previous section of this essay, which dealt with the notion of the *reminder*, I have discussed the "excavation" level. As has been already established, this level is related on one hand to the content of the Black Audio Film Collective's and Marker's artworks (which means to their original approach to the narration of the post-colonial condition in Europe). On the other hand it is related to the remembrance of a phase in which emerging social forces succeeded in fostering the openings of new production and distribution channels, through which these contents and their languages would reach mass spectatorship.

In this section, I will instead focus more specifically on the other level, which is that of "reframing": the specific act of *re*-presentation of such TV works into the space of contemporary art museums and galleries. This change in the distribution platform is in fact programmatically addressed by The Otolith Group as a key element of their curatorial premise. Here, as we shall see, the role of museums becomes pivotal in the Group's reflections.

I have chosen to relate this second level to the notion of a *memento*, a reminder that is at the same time critical in its scope. On the level of "reframing," the Group's "monuments" are in fact programmatically aimed at raising critical questions that pertain to the present. As the Group writes in the *Inner Time of Television* book: "[This reframing is an] encounter [with] a moment when the intelligence of television was networked into a form of collective thought. [It is an encounter] whose effect challenge the certitudes and condescensions of the present" (2010, 10). Why have these works disappeared from public TV? Why is such a grand public project (like the one which rendered possible the realization and screening of quality film-works on TV on a national scale during the late eighties and early nineties) no longer a feasible option in Europe?

Indeed, as Mark Fisher has observed, the "reframing" in museum spaces of such artworks — which The Otolith Group so painstakingly recover from oblivion, by recuperating them from the archive of European media systems — suggests a reflection on the changes that have occurred in the media system and in the European platforms for public intervention.[16] As he writes, the screening of films such as *Handsworth Songs* in museums such as the Tate in London — which is now a possibility — was unthinkable in 1985. However, similar, but as if in a mirror reflection, what is unimaginable today is the possibility "of *Handsworth Songs* or its like appearing on Channel 4 now, still less being commissioned" (2011).

The Otolith Group's "reframings" are therefore to be taken not as mere nostalgic celebrations of the past, but as critical gestures. According to the Group (2010), the reasons behind the progressive disappearance of time and space for cultural intervention on a mass scale on European TV are to be found in the changes that have occurred in the technologies of memory and attention—the media—between the eighties and nineties and today. The Group claims that this disappearance has to be understood in relation to the passage from the broadcasting of Channel 4 and La Sept to the contemporary narrowcasting culture of digital television. As the Otoliths write,

> it is clear that the increase in the number of television channels has gone hand in hand with the elimination of time and space for cultural intervention. […] The move from the broadcasting culture of the late 1980s to today's culture of narrowcasting implies a shift from a captivated mode of attention towards a mode that media critic Linda Stone calls "continuous partial attention." (ibid., 5-6)[17]

Far from being a conservative reading of media cultures, this account provided by the Otoliths has to be taken as an invitation to think of technologies as entities that have to be considered within those wider social, political, and material assemblages from which they

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

59

emerge and which they engender. Without denying the existence of a positive continuum in the history of media—from which broadcasting and narrowcasting TV have emerged—the Otoliths also address the holes and gaps in this continuum. Their positions do not deny the positive resonance of media's general tendency toward openness and heterogeneity, which has increased with the years. Theirs, however, is an artistic-theoretical stance that invites attention to be paid also to the holes in the continuum: the points where it becomes apparent that media are a terrain that is open and exposed to feedback processes and to dangerous backlash effects. No media is neutral in its everyday use.

In fact, the Group's concerns resonate strongly with some preoccupations animating a very recent and really intriguing but still scarcely systematized research vector within contemporary critical theory: the study of the ways in which human capacities for attention and memory have undergone a processes of capture, valorisation and destruction in (post-)cybernetic societies.[18] According to the Group, the drive towards being "always on" and continually ready to catch up with fluxes of information that arrive increasingly faster and thicker is not only a characteristic of what are commonly considered as "the new media" — the internet, for example. On the contrary, it is a *threshold* present in every media, also the most traditional ones. For the Otoliths, TV has reached the threshold of "continuous partial attention" with digital narrowcasting, which in turn has contributed to hinder the capacity for continuous durational attention and active participation.

According to the Group, the political consequences of this destruction of the capacity to pay durational attention are important. Only durational attention can guarantee participative engagement, which is necessary to build critical mass around complex issues such as the production of new identities and the critique of monolithic representations articulated in films

such as those by the Black Audio Film Collective and Marker. Moreover, continuous partial attention affects the capacity for "taking care" and "building bonds;" thus, it affects the possibility of creating, in today's world, collective and participative experiences of collaboration and a shared use of time and space — of which the film cultures of the eighties are instead a terrific example.

It is here that The Otolith Group (2010) reverts to the museum — the contemporary art museum — as the space of potentiality. Can museums and galleries today resurrect such a "dead" kind of spectatorship by offering conditions of attentive participation that is no longer possible on TV? For the Otoliths, they can. The Otoliths suggest that museums should become the spaces in which more and more "monuments" are built. On museum premises, and under their promotion, spectators can recuperate the time to be deeply exposed to those recent, yet already forgotten, aesthetics, which bring with them the traces of past and common struggles for identity and representation. Each "reframing" can become the chance for a "self-conscious" experience; the curatorial gesture of "excavating" and "reframing" should in fact never be kept obscure to the spectators. On the contrary, it should be declared in the installation and exposition space (2010, 6).

The installation *Inner Time of Television* (even more than the exhibition *The Ghosts of Songs*) is an experiment in this direction.[19] As the Group writes, "to encounter *Inner Time of Television* is to be invited to self-consciously inhabit a reconstructed mode of attention. Faced with a special configuration of thirteen monitors, the viewer comes face to face with a monument to dead television" (2010, 6). This "monument" is composed of thirteen TV screens disposed in the exhibition room. Each of them is set opposite to a seating facility (a chair or a stool), and earphones are plugged into each.[20] On each of the thirteen screens a different

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

61

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

episode of Chris Marker's thirteen episodes of *L'héritage de la chouette* TV serial is broadcast. In order to grasp the installation in its entirety and Marker's elliptic project as a whole, the spectator is invited to *invest* attention, time and care. The in-text materials accompanying the installation discuss the artwork from the point of view of its relation with a critical discourse on attention and memory.

This "reframing" works by profiting from the museum's temporal and spatial constraints and tendency towards "slow immersion" in a very significant way. The simultaneity of vision enhanced by the museum and gallery installation functions to make the original seriality of Marker's TV work apparent in its difference. The seriality of the TV product is indeed re-doubled in the format of Marker's episodes, which are linked to one another through a "mode of connectibility," which becomes apparent only through reflection and attentive participation.

As a way to conclude, I will sum up by emphasizing how, once the "reframing" level has been discussed, it becomes clear that the Otoliths' acts of recuperation of a lost condition of mass spectatorship from oblivion are not exactly aimed at filling a gap in collective memory. In fact, the Group's goal is only partially that of bridging an interval of amnesia that affects the present. On a close look, the project of "excavation" is aimed at rendering this gap, this interval, this distance between the recent past and the present, productive in its difference. The reference to a "dead" television takes on the uncanny features of a return from the past that troubles the certainties of the present. What if, at the end of the day, the monuments' final aim is that of reminding us that the cultural struggle for the becoming of European identities is not "new" as it may seem? What if, on a close reading, ideas such as "networked intelligence" and so on were not simply prerogatives of the "new media," but thresholds that move across time, and signal not just a technological condition but a mode of operation, a political investment in

collective practices of memorialization? What if, on the trail of a "monument" to something dead, a way towards the future starts to emerge? This last interrogation will be discussed in the following and concluding paragraph, where I suggest how the "monuments" might be understood as an *homage* to the past for the sake of the future.

Homage: Potential Futures

The TV and cinema cultures of the eighties and nineties, which (from the point of view of the United Kingdom) constitute the core of the Otolith Group's "monument to dead television," belong to a moment in time whose relevance for the present age of migrations has been too easily underestimated. Still, they seem to be determined to return to our memory, as numerous other screenings taking place across Europe of these and related artworks taking place across Europe seem to suggest.

"Shaped by the triple legacies of cineculture circa 1968, the subcultural permission of 1976 era punk and the demands for media access signaled by the Brixton uprisings of 1981," these TV and cinematic cultures emerged during a phrase of crisis of for European economy, identity and society (The Otolith Group 2010, 7). They were carved out of a public sphere that was apparently closed off, thus showing the force of grassroots energies to build up new forms of collective participation and, possibly, a *new* social sphere for a minor, potential, in-becoming Europe.

The desires, needs, preoccupation and constraints of that age uncannily resonate with the present historical conjuncture of the global economic crisis. The question that animated the militant yet demanding, social yet fictional cinema of the Black Audio Film Collective and Marker — "How does one begin to say something about a story everyone claims to know?" —

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

63

still has a tremendous relevance for the issues of migration and memory, and the representational practices involved in the processes of re-telling Europe.

Indeed, contemporary migration seems to be, perhaps today more than ever before, precisely *the* story everyone claims to know about. Overflowing from the channels of disparate media such as television, the web, cinema, newspapers and magazines, it is embodied as image, text, or sound in flash news, blog posts, in-depth documentaries, journalist buzz, "expert" commentary, photographic reports, worried statistics, activist information routes, academic volumes, cinema stories and sonic works — as well as being critically approached, exposed or exhibited through many other different artistic, research and curatorial practices. In a sense, migration, the fibre of that postcolonial urban milieu where the once reassuring and univocal yet violent fairytale about the separation between "the centre" (Europe) and "its peripheries" is no longer tenable (Julien and Mercer 1988), overfloods the media archives, the information channels, and the practices and places of representation. Still, the question of *who* tells *what* story, but also of *how* the story unfolds remains of the outmost importance.

Contemporary migration is certainly at the core of public discourse — which means that it is at the core of a terrain that is neither neutral, nor pacified. In fact, every act of narrating migration that is enacted on everyday media screens — as well as on printed paper, or in exhibition spaces — in Europe is an act of re-telling that is necessarily non-univocal. Every act of re-telling rests on power relations and on the flowing, mixing, or blocking of different fluxes of desire: power and desire to see, to tell, to hide, and so on…. It is from within this abundance that the perceived "boundaries" of Europe are literally carved out: are they more or less mobile? more or less porous? more or less fortified? To tell this story is not only a matter of subject positions (who tells what), but also of the fluxes of semiotic events in themselves and

of their circulation dynamics (how the story unfolds). As Maurizio Lazzarato writes in his work on the images that represent migration in Europe,

> we live in a world where images proliferate, but where their mode of production is not problematized. It's just assumed as something obvious, self-evident. The fact that there are a few hundred persons producing images for millions of spectators (whether in the case of a film or a nightly news show) is serenely accepted. (Lazzarato 2005, 291)

From the critical standpoint of this essay, such reflections may prove to be strategically crucial also to approach the question of memory and representation from the specific perspective of an interdisciplinary research project on "European museums in an age of migration." Indeed, if what is envisaged through this research is not only a place (but even more so a *critical platform* where museums' inherited approaches to the representation of culture and identity and to the embodiment of memory are put in transit and exposed to a complexity of uncharted and unregistered spaces, times, places) then it becomes necessary to recognize the importance of the acts of re-telling to unsettle any monolithic representation (Chambers, 2012). As Iain Chambers writes, "critical transit in this unfolding space is neither definitive nor stable — it is always an act of translation. Who gets to translate […] is never a neutral question" (ibid., 142).

This was the conundrum faced by the independent cine-cultures of the eighties — when cinema migrated into television. From within this crisis, new energies emerged. In their uncanny return, the TV and cine-cultures of our recent past have changed their platform. The Otolith Group's decision to revert to museums to build a "monument" to a phase of our recent past is therefore particularly interesting. As we have seen, it is an operation which deserves attention first of all for its artistic interest, as a *reminder*: reeling again the archive of the past

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

65

brings to the fore new memories for old struggles, and revives through old memories new struggles.

Moreover, the Otoliths' monuments are of critical interest for the present as a *memento*, in so far as they invite us to be attentive to the ways in which our memory and our attention are constructed, shaped, and created within the media assemblages to which we are attached. At a time when museums are invested in the critical discourse on memory, they are often accused of being "static," and pressured to open up to the new, fluid forms of memorialization suggested by the archives of the digital age. Paradoxically enough, the Otoliths propose a way to transform these "weak points" of museums into their strong points. The "monuments" suggest that the time and space constraints of the museum are not necessarily in contradiction with the desire towards a more fluid and open agenda. Old spaces can be "othered," infused with new life, to again become places for the articulation of social and vexed issues.

Finally, the Otoliths' "monuments" are of instructional importance for a discourse on museums in an age of migrations. The third meaning of the "monument"—the *homage*—refers to the possibility of extending to the future the preoccupations that animate the Group's recuperation projects. To pay an homage to the past, and to reactivate it in order to reflect on the present, could therefore also be a way to imagine some potential operative ways for future exploration. For example, in the agenda for museums in an age of migrations, shared projects of excavation of the public media archive of postcolonial Europe could become a common practice. What pedagogical and social energies might such a project reveal? What new bonds can be articulated in the space of the museum, while being exposed to similar yet different stories that the media archives can reveal? It is true, and it should not be forgotten, that museums *are not* TV: this implies questions of free access, of public participation, and of mass

spectatorship that still need to be articulated. Yet, something may be engendered through this encounter, in the space of the museum, with past struggles on the terrain of public media culture.

A final suggestion seems to stem from the "monument to dead television." Also today, experiments that struggle to narrate migration and Europe's becoming in an autonomous way are carried out in the grassroots of media culture. But also these are threatening to soon disappear. Many will not even reach the surface, crushed by the weight of those clichéd images that engulf the media channels of our continuous partial attention. Could museums be the new public platform, not only for the excavation of TV products from the past, but also for the promotion of these high-quality contemporary TV products that address migration, which have a hard time being hosted on the television platforms they are aimed at? Could museums become a new channel that would first promote work that is intended for the TV, but which is at risk of an early death for lack of support?[21] And if so, would this be a way to foster a potential new alliance between independent cinema, European public TV and European museums? With this hope, this challenge, this suggestion, and these questions I conclude my critical encounter with the Otolith Group's "monument to dead television."

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

67

REFERENCES

Akomfrah, John. 2011. "Director's Statement for *The Nine Muses*." Accessed June 24, 2012. http://icarusfilms.com/press/pdfs/muse_pk.pdf.

Auguiste, Reece. (1988) 2007. "Handsworth Songs: Some Background Notes." In *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective. 1982-1998*, edited by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar,156-157. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Bernal, Martin. 1987. *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1787-1985*. New Brunswick: Rutgers.

Brown, Maggie. 2007. *A Licence to Be Different. The Story of Channel 4.* London: BFI.

Carey-Thomas, Lizzie, ed. 2012. *Migrations. Journeys into British Art.* London: Tate Publishing.

Chambers, Iain. 2012. "Cultural Memories, Museum Spaces and Archiving." In *Museums in an Age of Migrations. Questions, Challenges, Perspectives*, edited by Luca Basso Peressut, and Clelia Pozzi, 141-152. Milano: Politecnico di Milano.

Dovey, Lindsay. 2010. "Interview to John Akomfrah." Paper presented at the *Razzismo, immigrazione e potere dell'immagine* Conference and Screening Event, University of Naples "L'Orientale," Italy, October 14-16, 2010.

Enwezor, Okwui. 2007. "Coalition Building: Black Audio Film Collective and Transnational Postcolonialism." In *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective. 1982-1998*, edited by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar,106-123. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Eshun, Kodwo. 2007. "Drawing the Forms of Things Unknown." In *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective. 1982-1998*, edited by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, 74-99. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Eshun, Kodwo, and Ros Gray. 2011. "The Militant Image. A Ciné-Geography." *Third Text* 25 (1): 1-12.

Eshun, Kodwo, and Anjalika Sagar, eds. 2007. *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective. 1982-1998.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Ferrara, Beatrice. 2012a. "Memorie del futuro. I media e la memoria nel lavoro di The Otolith Group." *Quaderni d'Altri Tempi* 38. Accessed June 29, 2012. http://www.quadernidaltritempi.eu/rivista/numero38/bussole/q38_b02.html.

——— (ed.) 2012b. *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and Museum Practices*. Milano: Politecnico di Milano DPA.

Fisher, Jean. 2007. "In Living Memory… Archive and Testimony in the Films of the Black Audio Film Collective." In *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective. 1982-1998*, edited by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, 16-28. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Fisher, Mark. 2011. "The Land Still Lies: *Handsworth Songs* and the English Riots". *Sight & Sound* (September Issue). Accessed June 29, 2012. http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/newsandviews/comment/handsworth-songs-london-riots.php.

Gilroy, Paul. 1987. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. London, Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland and Johannesburg: Hutchinson.

Hall, Stuart. (1989) 1994. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 392-401. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

———. (1986) 1996a. "New Ethnicities." In *Stuart Hall. Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, 442-251. London and New York: Routledge.

———. (1993) 1996b. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" In *Stuart Hall. Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, 468-478. London and New York: Routledge.

Hall, Stuart, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke and Brian Roberts, eds. 1978. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Henderson, Gill. 2007. "Foreword." In *The Ghosts of Songs. The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective. 1982-1998*, edited by Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, 7-8. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Hobson, Deborah. 2008. *Channel 4. The Early Years and the Jeremy Isaacs Legacy*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris & Co.

Italiano, Carolina, ed. 2011. *The Otolith Group. Thoughtform/ La forma del pensiero*. Roma: Mousse.

Julien, Isaac and Kobena Mercer. (1988) 1996. "De Margin and De Centre." In *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, edited by Houston A. Baker Jr, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg, 194-209. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

69

Lazzarato, Maurizio. 2003. "Struggle, Event, Media." Accessed July 12, 2012. http://www.republicart.net/disc/representations/lazzarato01_en.pdf.

———. 2005. "To See and Be Seen: A Micropolitics of the Image." In *B-Zone. Becoming Europe and Beyond*, edited by Anselm Franke, 290-297. Berlin and Barcelona: ACTAR.

Mercer, Kobena. 1994. *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

The Otolith Group. 2007. "This Day Remains – the Black Audio Film Collective." *Frieze* 106 (April Issue). Accessed June 29, 2012. http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/this_day_remains/.

———. 2010. *Inner Time of Television*. Beirut: Beirut Art Centre.

Stone, Linda. 2009. "Beyond Simple Multitasking: Continuous Partial Attention." *Linda Stone's "The Attention Project" Blog*, November 30. http://lindastone.net/2009/11/30/beyond-simple-multi-tasking-continuous-partial-attention/. Accessed July 29, 2012.

Stiegler, Bernard. n.d. "Within the Limits of Capitalism, Economizing Means Taking Care." Accessed June 21, 2012. http://arsindustrialis.org/node/2922.

Endnotes

[1] This research article was supported by the EU Project "MeLa* - Museums in an Age of Migrations" (FP7, www.mela-project.eu). A first version of this article was published as "The Otolith Group's 'Monuments to Dead Television.' A Suggestion for Museums in an Age of Migrations?" in Ferrara 2012b.

[2] The 2010 Turner-prize nominated collective The Otolith Group was founded in London, United Kingdom, in 2002 (http://otolithgroup.org). Although formally a duo, the Otoliths use the name "collective" to refer to their activities of global collaboration, in the legacy of the tradition of "integrated practice" first experimented with by the British art collectives of the eighties (Mercer 1994). Places their works have been presented include: *Manifesta 8* (Murcia, Spain, 2010), *Documenta 12 and 13* (Kassel, Germany, 2007 and 2012), the MACBA (Barcelona, Spain, 2010-2011) and the MaXXI (Rome, Italy, 2011-2012). For a critical overview of their artistic endeavours between 2002-2012, see: Italiano 2011; Ferrara 2012.

[3] *The Ghosts of Songs* was hosted at the FACT (Liverpool, United Kingdom, 2007), the Arnolfini (Bristol, United Kingdom, 2007), and the INIVA and Whitechapel Art Gallery (London, United Kingdom, 2008). For the exhibition catalogue and project documentation, see: Eshun and Sagar 2007; The Otolith Group 2007.

[4] *Inner Time of Television* was premiered at the 1st Athens Biennale in 2007, and presented at the 2010 Turner Prize and at the 2011-2012 *Thoughtform* exhibition at MaXXI in Rome, amongst other locations. For the artists' book on this project, see: The Otolith Group 2010.

[5] I am referring here also to the diffusion in Europe of museums specifically dedicated to films and TV, such as the Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin. It should be clarified that this is not the kind of museum where The Otolith Group's excavations have been presented so far. In fact, to date they have been primarily conceived for screening in contemporary art museums and galleries, or contemporary art study centres.

[6] As an example, consider the screening of the Black Audio Film Collective's 1986 *Expeditions One: Sings of Empire* (1983), *Expeditions Two: Images of Nationality* (1984), and *Handsworth Songs* (1986) during the Tate Modern 2012 exhibition *Migrations* and on August 26, 2011 at the Tate Modern's free screening events following the 2011 riots in London. For critical documentation on these events, see: Carey-Thomas 2012; M. Fisher 2011.

[7] The concept of "attention economy" has recently gained a significant popularity in critical theory. The expression primarily refers to the act of transforming into labour the human capacities for attention and memory. Here, and elsewhere in this essay, I will use the expression with a specific reference to a direction of criticism in which the valorisation of attention, affects, and memory is studied as a specific diagram of contemporary neo-liberal biopolitics. As in the analysis of Maurizio Lazzarato (2003), contemporary biopolitics affects the population through acts able to "modulat[e] brains […] by means of the occupation of memory and attention by signs, images and statements."

[8] In Hall 1990, the concept of "re-telling" is used to emphasize the dimensions of invention and creation involved in the processes of subjectivity production. Practices of re-telling take place when the past is

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

71

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

reactivated and critically elaborated; re-tellings work against any claim for an original purity to be rediscovered, and in favour of a concept of subjectivity as an open-ended production.

[9] Such experiments took place through the formula of the independent "artistic collective"— a phrase that is indicative of a specific aesthetic, political, and poetical practice. The model of the collective workshop — through which the activity of film-making was carried out — was in fact directly linked with those new forms of social use of time and space first experimented with in the leftist militant autonomous milieu of the late sixties and early seventies (Enwezor 2007, 113).

[10] For the sake of clarity, it must be specified that the concept of the "militant image" is used by Eshun and Gray (2011) with a specific reference to the cinematic practices developed within the context of the tricontinental militancy for decolonization. However, their methodological stance is very apt to be transferred to the context we are writing about here.

[11] It might be useful to clarify that there were very close contacts between the two channels. For example, when referring to Chris Marker's *L'héritage de la chouette*, The Otolith Group has in mind the British broadcast of this artwork, which was presented in the United Kingdom in 1988 on Channel 4, with the title *The Owl's Legacy* (The Otolith Group 2010, 5).

[12] I maintain the definition of "black British" here in full awareness of its limits, and of the limits of any process of definition — as brilliantly exposed in Hall (1996b [1993]). In fact, I have decided to keep it precisely to evoke the timely critical mass that emerged around the critique of this definition. The use of the expression here is therefore not intended to suggest any monolithic conception of blackness, nor am I unaware of the many other issues raised during the season of independent black British cinema, such as those of queer or feminist cinemas. On the contrary, the use of term hints precisely at that historical moment when the condition of raciality evoked in the term became "a dimension of potentiality" from which many different singularities emerged (Eshun 2007, 75).

[13] The generational gap, which divided this generation from that of their parents — Akomfrah claimed in the interview — seemed to be unbridgeable. As the film-maker remembered, the history of this generational divide is to be understood within the history of the cycles of capitalism, which had first captivated parents' aspirations by pulling them towards United Kingdom as racialized labour force, and then discarded the younger generation, who happened to grow up in a transition phase between industrial and post-industrial capitalism (Dovey 2010).

[14] A 1988 note by Reece Auguiste on behalf of the Black Audio Film Collectives acts as testimony, for example, to the controversial reception of *Handsworth Songs* even in the black radical cultural circuits. The

unrealistic and opaque narration of the events that unfolded in the film was in fact accused of being almost "un-political." This marks an interesting turning point in black cultural politics around the eighties, which signals the crisis of the paradigm of "social realism" in militant poetics. See Auguiste 2007 [1988].

[15] An aspect that deserves more critical attention — but which I will leave unexplored for reasons of time and space — is that of the technical languages of Marker's and The Black Audio Film Collective's film. In particular, anti-realistic colouring, un-sequential image layout, and original soundtracks are some of the elements by which the authority of the document and the role of memorial testimony are questioned and exposed to the forces of narration and imagination.

[16] Mark Fisher's article is in fact dedicated to a screening of the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* at the Tate London, which is not directly related to any of The Otolith Group's curatorial projects. Nevertheless, the increasing number of museum screenings of works by the Black Audio Film Collective throughout the United Kingdom cannot be considered as conceptually unrelated to the excavation and recuperation first carried out by the Otoliths.

[17] Stone (2009) explains "continuous partial attention" as follows: "[It] is an always on, anywhere, anytime, anyplace behaviour that creates an artificial sense of crisis. We are always on high alert. We are demanding multiple cognitively complex actions from ourselves. We are reaching to keep a top priority in focus, while, at the same time, scanning the periphery to see if we are missing other opportunities. If we are, our very fickle attention shifts focus. […] Over the last twenty years, we have become expert at continuous partial attention and we have pushed ourselves to an extreme […]. There are times when [continuous partial attention] is the best attention strategy for what we're doing; and, in small doses, continuous partial attention serves us well. There are times when [it] compromises us. The 'shadow side' of continuous partial attention is over-stimulation and lack of fulfilment. The latest, greatest powerful technologies are now contributing to our feeling increasingly powerless."

[18] The authors who should be referenced here for their work on these questions are numerous, and their background and aims sometimes differ enormously. It is not my goal here to provide a complete list of these authors, or an exhaustive account of their work. However, I will suggest a close look at the critical studies by Lazzarato (2003), and Stiegler (n.d.).

[19] For reasons of pertinence, this essay has emphasized the aspects that all the Otoliths' "monuments" share. However, I am aware of the importance of the differences between them, which will hopefully be explored in further studies. Here I will just suggest, as an example, the importance of mentioning how, whereas the *Ghosts of Songs* is a more "classical" *exhibition* of which the Otoliths are the only curators, *Inner*

CINEJ Cinema Journal: The Otolith Group's "Monuments to Dead Television."

73

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.78 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Time of Television is an *artwork* by the Group, which is often exhibited under the curatorial care of external curators in collaboration with the artists.

[20] As images 08 to 10 show, the arrangement of the screens may vary according to the exhibition space and the curatorial choices.

[21] I take the chance to mention here that during the "MeLa" Brainstorming event "Museums, Migrations, Memory and Citizenship" (Naples on March 14, 2012), the panel "The Migrating Image: Mnemotechnics, Museums and New Media" proposed a first attempt at articulating a discourse on the relation between museums and TV in the construction of an autonomous memory of contemporary migrations in Italy. On that occasion, two works were presented. The first was the documentary "Gone With the Orange", directed by Nicola Angrisano of the Italian Street-TV Insu^TV, focusing on the 2009 riots of the African labourers in Rosarno (Calabria, Italy) and the new forms of racialization in the international division of labour. The second was the tv series "Appunti per una fiction su Castelvoturno," shot in Castelvolturno (Campania, Italy) by the Cultural Video Foundation and presented by Viola Sarnelli. These works are different in scope and language from the Black Audio Film Collective's or Marker's artworks here discussed, yet they are a way to tackle into the state of independent television today.