

Cut, Splice, Assemble: re-editing the world

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Nira Pereg's scissors

"As you have seen on the screen, scissors are the best way".

Alfred Hitchcock (1)

Everything began with fortuitous encounter on an editing table of a pink flamingo and a gunshot. In *67 Bows* (2006), every time the gun goes off, the pink flamingos at the zoo in Karlsruhe duck their heads as though cowering at the noise. The process is repeated 67 times, and then begins all over again. Between shots the birds cackle away at their usual activities, while the spectator anxiously awaits the next detonation. When *67 Bows* was presented in Washington D.C. in 2011, the museum had to put up a notice beside the work

to assure the public that no animals were harmed during its making.

However, the cruelty is not where you might expect it to be. The birds are in fine shape. The encounter between gunshots and pink flamingos took place away from the zoo, in a sound-editing suite. While it is true that no animal was

harmed during the making of the work, the audience is tormented during its screening - until, that is, they realize that the cruelty is not to be found in anything done to those long-legged fowls; it all happens during the editing process of cutting and splicing. There is a noise with no visible reference (the

detonations) and an image whose live sound is relegated to the background (the flamingos lowering their heads for some unknown reason). With this cutting and splicing process, Nira Pereg offers us a completely new take on the question of editing - the seminal activity of filmmaking. Her work is rooted in

the whole business of cutting and splicing, *montage* and *démontage*, (2) construction and destruction, and progresses with it.

Whether dealing with pink flamingos, gravediggers, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, Pereg's point of departure is a documentary image. With her tripod-mounted camera, she observes and films a clear-cut, full-on image. The many shifts, dislocations and changes in the representation of what are often well-known, complex and politically charged situations derive from the various editing processes she creates and develops. It would be too simplistic to think of

these editing processes in terms of the old debate about fiction undermining the documentary. In her work, the notions of fiction and

documentary lose their explanatory power. What's at stake is something else: it is the world itself that is re-edited and reassembled (*remontè*).

My concern here is to identify, in a fragmentary and inevitably discontinuous way, some of the cuts and the accompanying splices that guide Nira Pereg's scissors in her task of re-editing the world. These are but fragments, and one can read and re-edit them into whatever order one wishes.

cut1: cinèma bruitè (3)

"First there were silent movies and then there were the talkies. Language started wreaking havoc with the images; because they talked, people listened to what they said. They didn't say anything before, which meant filmmakers had to restrict themselves to things that were simpler and clearer."
Fernand Deligny (4)

"I actually used the idea of separating the sound from the image in a small work, called *G Spotting*, I did in 2003."⁽⁵⁾ In a long take of a building's fanade, a flat off-camera voice seems to be directing the movement of the camera, which moves accordingly along the wall. When one sees the film, it is not clear whether Pereg followed the instructions of the voice while filming the fanade or whether she added the corresponding voiceover later in the editing suite. Either way, the sound editing is the central element of this single shot. Needless to say, in spite of the blatantly un-sensual flat voice, the effect of this editing process is rather erotic – the text and the work's title are explicit enough.

This process, which fits in with a certain experimental filmmaking tradition,⁽⁶⁾ foreshadows what began properly with the pink flamingos and has been a feature of Pereg's work ever since. In the pieces since *67 Bows*, live sound has gradually disappeared from her work and sound editing has come to play an increasing role. Although it is still possible to hear street noises in *G Spotting* that are not completely shut out by the voice, live sound is already less obvious in *67 Bows*, and by *Sabbath 2008* it has completely disappeared. Apart from occasional voices (whose presence is all the more noticeable for being the exception), the same effect is in evidence in *Kept Alive* (2009-10) and even more so in *Scenario* (2012), *Abraham Abraham* (2012), *Sarah Sarah* (2012) and *Mandatory Passage* (2012-13). The sound is detached from the image

or, more precisely, an imageless sound is attached to a soundless image. The soundtrack consists only of noises. Pereg's recent works are not talkies; they are *cinema bruitè*– films with added Foley effects.

Things scrape and scratch, and grate and drag. Pereg and her sound designer Nati Zeidenstadt work together as Foley artists collecting, mixing and recording by hand hundreds of sounds, which they then attach with great precision, one image at a time. (7) The aim of this painstaking work is to graft an effect (a noise) that sounds faked onto an image that looks real. When it is perfectly attached, the sound is never “off-camera” (*horschamp*); you always see what you hear. But the sound is never divorced from its origin outside the frame (*hors-cadre*). Seeing an image, you can hear that the sound comes from elsewhere. Rather than visible, the edit is audible.

Pereg's soundtracks prompt us to see things just as much because of what we hear as because of what the soundeffects shut out. In *Sabbath 2008*, the absence of live sound casts a pall of silence over the town. Even though there is a great deal of action going on in the work, the only thing you see is what you hear, namely the barriers being dragged out to close off the neighbourhood on the eve of the Sabbath. The sounds in Pereg's work control our gaze and turn visual details into central elements. As well as this control of one's gaze, there is a kind of complicity with the spectator. Like in a Jacques Tati film, the occasional car horn is heard unexpectedly, providing a counterpoint nod towards something that ought not, strictly, to be happening.(8)

In documentary filmmaking, the image is often guided by the soundtrack. Known for being the sound engineer of his own films, documentarian Frederick Wiseman records sound with an eye to the editing. Thus, in the editing suite, his sound becomes a leading thread in constructing the narrative. Sound plays an equally major part in Pereg's editing, but in her case the situation is reversed. Rather than seeking to reconstruct the lost truth of the documentary image by using “live” sound, she provides a new take on the filmed image by using recreated sound.

cut 2: re-editing time

“What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once again and innumerable times again [...]’”

Friedrich Nietzsche (9)

“The directors of the experiment tighten their control. They send him back. Time rolls back again, the moment happens once more.”

Chris Marker(10)

There is always something fascinating to be seen in the films the Lumière brothers made at the end of the 19th century. When one looks again at these early experiments, one (re-) discovers possibilities that artists and filmmakers have never followed up. In *Demolition d'un mur* (1896) for example, the Lumières filmed demolition gang knocking down a wall. First you see the workers cranking a screw jack against it. Then the wall collapses and they finish off the job with pickaxes. Suddenly things go into reverse and the wall rises up again. It starts to rebuild itself stone by stone, and then goes back up, all in one piece. It is said that the projectionist rewound the reel, but the film has gone down in history as a wall being knocked down and then put together again. This feat was achieved in a single take because the editing and the disassembling (*montage* and *démontage*) are contained in the image itself (wall down; wall up). As time is edited and re-edited, the nature of the space changes.

In *Abraham Abraham* and *Sarah Sarah*, Pereg films a single space – first full, then emptied, then filled again. The space in question is the Cave of the Patriarchs in the Israeli controlled H2 area of Hebron. Within a few hours, it is converted, by turns, into a synagogue or a mosque. Venerated by Jews and Muslims alike as the burial place of their common patriarch Abraham, the Herodian building overlying the cave is divided into two sections – a mosque and a synagogue. But at certain times in the religious calendar, the synagogue gets to annex the part reserved for the mosque (*Sarah Sarah*), and at other times the mosque takes over the part reserved for the synagogue (*Abraham Abraham*).

Like the Lumières' wall, demolished then rebuilt, the spectator sees a synagogue and a mosque vanish and reappear by turns. In the process, Jews and Muslims never meet. The separation is total. Yet, in the eye of the camera, they seem to play the same game, together. Things are biased of course because the referee is an Israeli soldier. But, through this process of "assembling" and "disassembling" (*montage* and *démontage*), Pereg is apparently indicating that it is possible for people to live together, in the same space, as long as it is at separate times. If a holy place can change identity and ownership in a matter of few hours without mishap, it is a pleasant thought that the same could happen on a domestic or neighbourhood level or even in a city or a country.

If the only way of being together in the same space is to be there at different times, then time is a central element of the equation. And time assumes additional importance insofar as each of the works is designed to be

projected in a loop. *Abraham Abraham* and *Sarah Sarah* can be reduced to the following sequences, repeated *ad infinitum*.

The *Abraham Abraham* sequence:

... disassembling the synagogue
>
empty space
>
reassembling the mosque ...

The *Sarah Sarah* sequence:

... disassembling the mosque
>
empty space
>
reassembling the synagogue...

Each group of faithful enters the premises when the other group leaves. The works constitute a perfectly orchestrated diptych. One group “disassembles”; the other “reassembles.”

In a linear conception of time the transformations of the synagogue into mosque and vice versa stand out as exceptions. But the infinite repetition of the same actions (a constant *démontage* and *remontage*) changes the very nature of time. With each “disassembly” and each “reassembly” the same scene is played out over and over again, creating a curve in time, which ends up closing in on itself, and, in what has now become circular time, we are reminded of a wall once rebuilt and of time going backwards. Without inverting the course of things but by “disassembling” the world, Pereg winds up re-editing time.

The circularity of time thus invoked is redolent of how time operates in myths. In Greek mythology, for example, attempts to break the circularity of time (Prometheus by bringing fire to mankind, and Sisyphus by chaining Death) were punished by eternally repetitive torments. In Pereg’s work, the stalemate in the Arab–Israeli conflict has become an endless zero sum game, where everybody takes a turn at being master of the space.

Is it a game or a torment? The answer to this question changes radically depending on whether the two pieces are presented simultaneously or separately.⁽¹¹⁾ In the former case, their juxtaposition reveals how asymmetrical the situation really is. However, since they are exactly of the same length and identically constructed, it is possible to project *Abraham Abraham* and *Sarah Sarah* opposite each other, in a single space, which confronts as well as joins together the two works. And then what you get is the following sequence.

Sequence for simultaneous projection of *Abraham Abraham* and *Sarah Sarah* in the same room, opposite each other:

... disassembling the synagogue and the mosque
>
empty space
>
reassembling the mosque and the synagogue...

The synagogue and the mosque are disassembled, and then reassembled, at the same time. In the same (exhibition) space and within the same (film) time, Pereg brings together two groups who are at great pains to avoid each other. She introduces a new rule into the game which makes it logically impossible. How can people live together in the same space and at the same time and yet be apart? The collage of this diptych creates an impossible chiasmic structure in which the silent, suspended moment of empty space is the only logical possibility. The game, then, becomes a torment and empty space appears to be the only thing that the two groups effectively share. The absurdity of the torment is reinforced by the fact that presenting the two works simultaneously shows how similar the activities required for emptying a synagogue are to those required for emptying a mosque. While each work shows people cohabiting in a single space but at different times, when the works are seen simultaneously all that remains is cohabitation in parallel time.

cut 3: assembling the work

“Your film – let people feel the soul and the heart, but let it be made like a work of hands.”

Robert Bresson ⁽¹²⁾

As I write this essay, Pereg is putting together a new piece with the working title *Mandatory Passage*. Over the last few months, I have had the privilege of being involved in this “work in progress,” before it gets to the stage where it closes in on itself and becomes a black box that will only allow people to see what it wants them to see. The artist has given me permission to describe a few moments of the ongoing work, which would enable me to analyze some of the mechanisms involved in its assembling. ⁽¹³⁾

“When I arrive in a place, I see everything at once and, at the same time, some kind of paradox in it,” says Pereg.¹⁴ Pereg seeks out the mechanics she will need to use in order to preserve and re-transcribe into her work that sensation of overwhelming reality that hits her when she starts a film. The research begins with weeks of shooting. In *Kept Alive*, she spent seven months filming the day-to-day work of some gravediggers. In *Sabbath 2008*, she spent all her Friday afternoons for almost a year watching the inhabitants of an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood closing it off for the Sabbath. Over the last two years, for *Mandatory Passage*, she has already accumulated hours and hours of

film of Qasr el Yahud.

Qasr el Yahud (Arabic: castle or palace of the Jews) is a crossing place *par excellence*. It was here that the exile of the Israelites ended after the flight out of Egypt. It was here in the River Jordan that John the Baptist is said to have baptized Jesus; and nowadays it is the West Bank's natural frontier with Jordan. Under strict military supervision, thousands of Christian pilgrims come here every day to relive the experience of baptism. But, these days, this crossing place is a place where nobody crosses. It is a minefield and a nature reserve and a three-kilometer wide buffer zone where no one is allowed to stop and look. The mines are scattered and hidden in the dunes, the flora and fauna of what is supposed to be a "nature" reserve are invisible and, apart from a few ruins of a few monasteries on either side of the puny River Jordan, any traces of anything that Jesus may have experienced are absent. It was this threefold absence under strict military supervision that struck Pereg when she first went there, and this is what she wants to transcribe into her artwork. Its working title references a fenced off corridor called "Safe Passage." It is a "mandatory passage" because it has been swept for mines in the middle of the desert landscape.

Pereg defines her work process as an "act of creating collections." She collects the information necessary for constructing what becomes, as her research progresses, a field of study. To this end she groups things together that she can quote from (what she calls "evidence" and "bits and pieces"). She defines this *montage* work as "writing a script made up exclusively from quotations." The work is the result of this collage. She prefers to work out ways of gathering images and then assembling them rather than direct the scene and manipulate the resulting images. Over recent months, she has collected images of pilgrims walking into the frontier zone then, dressed all in white, wading through the troubled waters of the Jordan; of soldiers on sentry duty; and of a drummer. She has also filmed hours of driving along various roads. Not satisfied with her attempts to show what cannot be seen, Pereg has dug out a series of interviews she made with nuns during her residency at the R collets in Paris. In the filmed interviews, the nuns, who have never been to the Middle East, describe how they imagine the Holy Land to be. They are a counterpoint to the pilgrims that she filmed on the banks of the Jordan, whose expectations are so at odds with the desert landscape. Still working on her references, she has taken another look at Pasolini's comments beside the River Jordan in his 1965 film, *Seeking Locations in Palestine for "The Gospel According to St. Matthew"* (Pasolini was disappointed and ended up setting his imaginary Judea in Southern Italy). She has created a bibliography, visited websites, put together aerial photographs, and found photos of the invisible fauna of this "nature reserve" taken by an ethologist with movement-sensitive camera.

But there remains the question of what to do with this collection, with Qasr el Yahud and its miles of empty roads, its nocturnal animals, the drummer, the nuns, and the comments of Pier Paolo Pasolini. How can it be arranged

into a new work? To get it all to bind together, the artist needs to analyze this collection, check compatibilities, compare what is shown, what is said and what is heard, separate the sounds and organize the images. During this long and painstaking process, she is bound to drop a lot of footage. The Parisian nuns disappear. She keeps the Pasolini text. She spends hours watching what she has filmed in search of what she hasn't noticed in it. Looking at the images of pilgrims entering the water, there is one detail that takes her by surprise. It is the bottles they all hold and fill with the murky water of the Jordan. This detail becomes a criterion for selection. At the same time, she puts the animal photos together and edits them into a silent, animated short documenting the life of the animals. She goes about these tasks to the rhythm of the drummer. Her attempts to organize the images and sounds help her to organize the world.⁽¹⁵⁾

In an essay about Pereg's work, Hans Haacke describes in detail a complex installation she made when she was still a student at Cooper Union.⁽¹⁶⁾ She herself talks about her installations in the following terms: "They were very crowded and always had a few things running simultaneously. One time a college student told me: 'You make this elaborate space with all these objects to basically say this one thing.' She was right but I couldn't get her to feel this one thing without using all I used, which for me is scattered to pieces in so many different things; each makes a sound, a movement, and when they play together they can hopefully make enough sense, and bring forth this one feeling that she noticed."⁽¹⁷⁾ Although Pereg's material, these days, is documentary, the problem remains the same. It is about getting a lot of different narratives to hang together.

Pereg has developed more or less complex devices for transcribing all these various narratives. *Sabbath 2008* is a single-channel video work made out of a mix of events, which seem to be happening at once, but actually took place in different streets and times of the year. *Kept Alive* and *Scenario*, on the other hand, are synchronized three-channel videos, each juxtaposing events and locations on three separate screens. With these devices she orchestrates the world and, in so doing, shows us a world that is already orchestrated. The situations she films seem to be shaped by invisible rules. Rather than playing about with filmed situations, she presents us with game situations, whose underlying rules she has transcribed (or perhaps invented). Her characters are always in uniform – in disguise – and ready to play. They know exactly what they have to do. But in *Mandatory Passage*, players playing different games find themselves sharing the same board. While men dressed as soldiers guard the border, others, dressed as pilgrims, bathe in it. Pereg goes into the complexities of these situations and attempts to transpose them. In *Mandatory Passage* the complexity is such that she is hesitating about the format. There seem to be too many games for a single film, however many screens she uses. This throws the whole format of the work into question. She decides to transcribe the two-thousand year history of this (non-)crossing place into

several non-synchronized films.⁽¹⁸⁾ The viewer then is confronted with this diversity. She offers up the collection of her carefully picked and displayed discoveries. The spectator's role is to enter the archive, to see how it coheres, to re-edit it, to identify the rules and eventually – as Pereg herself did when she first arrived in the place – “see everything at once.”

Translated from the French by Jeremy Harrison

Notes:

1 Quoted in: François Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984, p. 346.

2 *Montage* is the French word for “editing.” Its literal meaning is “assembling” or “putting together,” so *d'montage* suggests “taking apart” or, even perhaps, “deconstruction.”

3 From the French *Bruit*, “noise,” and *Bruitage*, “sound-effects.” *Cinéma bruit* suggests filmmaking with sounds (*bruits*) added, or Foley effects.

4 Victor Renaud, *Fernand Deligny, à propos d'un film à faire*, 1986-1987.

5 Excerpt from an unpublished interview with Nira Pereg, 29 November 2012.

6 Notably, in experimental films by John Smith and particularly in *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976). In this film Smith adds a commentary to an insignificant scene shot on the corner of a London street in which he announces the comings and goings of the characters as if he were directing reality.

7 When reading the first draft of the text, Pereg added her personal comments. I believe they ought to be published as a counterpoint, an explanation or an addition to the reading of the text. The reader will find a couple of these comments in the following pages. Here is her first comment: “As a visual artist, my relation to editing is a bit unconventional, as for me there is always a moment in which I see things as materials, as almost physical objects. Sound has been a kind of physical material for me, much more than image. It can occupy space, it can be slapped on; it can be erased. Once I started to work with a sound designer, we took that to an extreme and started with no material – no sound. Creating or mixing our own sounds and putting them on the image have almost been a sculptural activity. We add, we invent, we lie, we build.”

8 All these effects create a tremendous wealth of sound, which raises the question of how to present the works in a single space. Should one isolate the images or establish a link between similar sounds? In the exhibition *Exceynes, Nira Pereg* (Centro da Cultura Judaica, São Paulo, 2012), the images were isolated but not the sounds. Visitors went with the flow of the sound effects.

9 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book IV, § 341, translated by Josefine Nauckhoff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 194.

10 Chris Marker, *La Jete*, 1962.

11 At the exhibition *Exceynes, Nira Pereg* (Centro da Cultura Judaica, 2012), *Abraham Abraham* was presented by itself. At the exhibition in 2013 at the Center for Contemporary Art – Tel Aviv, *Abraham Abraham* and *Sarah Sarah* are presented opposite each other.

12 Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, translated by Jonathan Griffin, New York: Urizen Books, 1977, p. 12.

13 I am particularly interested in the gestation of an artwork. Rather in the manner of what Bruno Latour has done in science through analysis of laboratory life and *science in the making*, I have developed an approach to filmmaking in which I analyze films being made and life on a film set. See my “La création au travail. Le film, produit d'un collectif” in Alexandra Bidet (ed.), *Sociologie du travail et activité*, Toulouse: Octares, 2006.

14 Extract from an unpublished interview with Nira Pereg, 29 November 2012.

15 Pereg commented on the first draft of the text adding the following thoughts: “It is clear to me that I am not interested in telling the story of the place, but more in creating a *modus operandi* by which the essence of the place can be experienced. I am not interested in what really happened in that sense, I am not obliged to share with you the details of the pilgrims' march from the ruins of a monastery to the Jordan river baptism site. I am much more interested in the suggestive quality of these events and images, their ability to transform or transcend themselves – from being real and here and now to being everywhere and always.”

16 Hans Haacke, “Guns and roadblocks,” in *Kept Alive – Nira Pereg*, Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv Museum, 2011.

17 Extract from an unpublished interview with Nira Pereg, 29 November 2012.

18 Pereg specified this analysis: “Although, as in previous works, there is a motif of emptiness (in the actual landscape, even) this work does not have a central narrative, simply because, although the space is shared, it is shared by elements which are very different and use the space for totally different activities. But for me they have similarities in their qualities rather than in their purposes. I want the viewer to sense what I sense, as my research continues: that although the activities are so different they all rotate in similar ways.”