

Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

Guerin, Frances and Eisenberg, Daniel (2012) Archives and Images as Repositories of Time, Language, and Forms from the Past: A Conversation with Daniel Eisenberg. *The Moving Image*, 12 (1). pp. 112-118. ISSN 1542-4235.

DOI

Link to record in KAR

<http://kar.kent.ac.uk/43438/>

Document Version

Publisher pdf

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

archivist, Lampert is an artist whose films, videos, and performances have been screened at museums, festivals, and arts venues across North America, Europe, and Russia.

Joel Schlemowitz is a Brooklyn-based experimental filmmaker whose work has shown in the MoMA Cinemaprobe series, the New York Film Festival, and the Tribeca Film Festival. He has taught filmmaking at the New School since 1996.

NOTES

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

1. William C. Wees, *Recycled Images* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), 5–7.
2. “A very special series of films screened on a repertory basis, the Essential Cinema Repertory collection consists of 110 programs/330 titles assembled in 1970–75 by Anthology’s Film Selection Committee: James Broughton, Ken Kelman, Peter Kubelka, P. Adams Sitney, and Jonas Mekas.” Anthology Film Archives, “About/Essential Cinema,” <http://www.anthologyfilmarchives.org/about/essential-cinema>.

Archives and Images as Repositories of Time, Language, and Forms from the Past

A Conversation with Daniel Eisenberg

FRANCES GUERIN

Daniel Eisenberg was born in Israel in 1954 to Holocaust survivors. In the late 1950s, his family immigrated to the United States, where he has been making experimental films for over thirty years. Black Dog recently published the first major critical study of his films, *Postwar: The Films of Daniel Eisenberg*.¹ To accompany the publication of the book, Video Data Bank Chicago has produced a DVD box set titled *Postwar*. It will include the films *Displaced Person* (1981), *Cooperation of Parts* (1987), *Persistence* (1997), and *Something More Than Night* (2003).

Characteristic of Eisenberg’s films from the twenty years spanned by the four that are the focus of both the recent anthology and the DVD, each turns to the archive in search of material to interrogate, recast, and perpetuate a host of otherwise unresolved relationships: between past and present; between generations, continents, political systems; between the personal and the private; and between different media. All of Eisenberg’s films embrace the breadth of formal experimentation offered by the medium of cinema. And simultaneously, through their dense weave of moving and still images, literary and philosophical quotations, sound and silence, the films offer a conceptual and historical richness that challenges their viewers to rethink the grand historical narratives that have propelled the twentieth into the twenty-first century. Eisenberg’s is an intellectual cinema whose concerns cross continents and generations, all the time maintaining a deep commitment to history and the world beyond the films themselves.

Daniel Eisenberg lives and works in Chicago and is professor of film/video/new media and of visual and critical studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Copies in 16mm of Eisenberg’s films are available through Canyon Cinema, San Francisco; Light Cone, Paris; Freunde Der Deutschen Kinemathek, Berlin; and Daniel Eisenberg Films. Digital video and DVDs are available through the Video Data Bank, Chicago, and Daniel Eisenberg Films.

This conversation with Daniel Eisenberg takes up and takes off from the issues raised in *Postwar* as they engage with the relationships that emerge between the filmmaker, his films, and the archive. The book is a creative venture that sits side by side with, rather than as a definitive interpretation or closed theoretical analysis of, Eisenberg’s films. The conversation took place on March 17, 2011, between Paris and Chicago, and it was recorded in London.²

FRANCES GUERIN (FG): I was struck by how the authors in *Postwar* consistently place your films within often very different historical trajectories of the avant-garde and other forms. One trajectory that is not mentioned, one that I see your work converse with, especially as it relates to the love of the archive, is the work of Joseph Cornell. Particularly, I see the relationship

to Cornell's building on the surrealist went to appropriate (from archives or dustbins) and to take on the object as its own.

DANIEL EISENBERG (DE): There are a lot of connections to Cornell. Growing up in Queens, New York, I probably lived ten blocks from him. He was very well known in the neighborhood as the crazy artist. I went to Binghamton and studied there, and of course, Ken Jacobs was there, and he and Jack Smith made pilgrimages out to Utopia Parkway to see Cornell. Cornell in his cryptic way would engage them in their collaborative projects. And of course, Cornell is probably the most accessible to Americans as a romantic surrealist. He's not really a classical surrealist in that he didn't have a larger social project, but he superimposes the romantic dream state onto the techniques of surrealism. And he indulges the archive in that way.

His personal archive and his love for the cinema is then processed through many of these techniques, through collage, through parataxis, these are the kinds of forms through which collisions occur. His archive also resides in personal memories, and in the films and the boxes, their sense of space, of interior space, and the way his personal memory of childhood reaches out to popular culture as well. From *Rose Hobart* (1936) on, there is a deep interplay between the personal and popular.

FG: Whereas in your films, there is an interplay between the personal and the historical, grand history.

DE: Exactly. And in that way, there is a parallel: there are things that are accessible to all, there are things that are not that then become touchstones for parallel kinds of private experiences.

FG: Which raises the whole idea of secrets. Cornell's work is so much about secrets.

DE: I feel less of an affinity to the world of secrecy, and in Cornell's sense of the world, there is a lot of sexuality built in. When you say "secrets," it leads me to think of what is and what is not known, what can and cannot be known, and ways of exploring those things through the archival.

FG: I was also thinking about this notion of the secreted, something hidden—I am talking about your work—but at the same time, escapes through the crevices, in between the juxtapositions. Somehow this is a mirroring of

the life of archival objects. Objects, images, and information that are kept from us, hidden from view, and then as the filmmaker, the artist, the archeologist, you come along and expose them. This process of exposure is a process of finding what is in between, of revealing what is not said, the silences of history.

DE: I see that more as a process that is like a stamping machine that stamps out an object for use. What remains from the stamping process is then saved as part of the stuff that is produced from the process. Oftentimes I am more interested in that, in what is left over, the excess. This is more the overlooked than the secretive. Because the images that are normally used from the archive are almost always motivated by some kind of narrative, driven by a narrative production. And when you come across something that is somehow freed from these narrative constraints, all of a sudden it has many different new meanings attached to it. And I find those images really exhilarating, because they exist in a "presentness"—a context that can only be produced at the moment of their apprehension, which the other material can't possibly produce because of its overdetermination. You somehow enter them through the present, whereas most of the narrative-driven images can be only accessed through a reference to the past.

FG: But there are images that you use that are anything but "overlooked." How would you see the images of the concentration camps, the gates at Auschwitz–Birkenau, Hitler at the Eiffel Tower? How are these images "overlooked"? They have been so overnarrativized.

DE: Right. Well, if I am producing them, then all of a sudden it is a different kind of archive. My presence there is very much a kind of inscription that counters the archival. If you are talking about the images of Hitler in *Displaced Person*, the whole point is to free those images so they can be seen in a different way. It's a linguistic exercise and formal exercise of film language: once they are put into my film narrative, using a new film language, the bonds that we normally associate with those images are freed, and we see them differently. I am very conscious of the rhetoric of cinema, as you are. And I am always trying to see an image for what is behind all that rhetoric, to see what can be accessed from deeper strata that haven't yet

been accessed. One of the only ways to do that is to mobilize some formal language that has not been really used before.

FG: So then what makes an image “overlooked” is not immediately present to the image? It can be hidden as well? Every image has some level of the overlooked. Which is to say that the sense of “what has been thrown away” is nevertheless in every image even when it is as produced and reproduced as those of Hitler in Paris—taken from Ophüls’s use of the images in *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969), who in turn took them from the archives?

DE: Yes. And in that case the optical printer becomes the pointing device, the arbiter of meaning. Between the archive that collects and the optical printer that directs, the view [of the overlooked] can be very highly specified. Let’s take that image of the woman handing flowers to Hitler at the train station in *Displaced Person*.³ The way the hands meet at the bouquet is of interest to me. This has nothing at all to do with the meaning of the shot except as an act of giving and taking. If we say, it has nothing to do with Hitler, it has everything to do with Hitler, it has everything to do with us, it has nothing to do with us. All of that combined makes that image so powerful—it is set free by the language of filmic rearticulation. So if we read it as handing Hitler a bouquet, then it is framed. But if we read it as a woman giving a man a bouquet of flowers, then all of a sudden, it reads so differently.

FG: Can you tie this to what you said about seeing the archive filmicly, through filmic or cinematic language? How do you create the new language that says “this is not simply a woman giving Hitler a bouquet”?

DE: In repetition, it’s simply a woman giving a bouquet to a man; “Hitler” is out of the frame . . . at the same time he’s never out of the “frame.” Let’s put it this way. [Roberto] Rossellini problematizes the differentiation of narrative cinema and documentary cinema in the war trilogy and solves the problem three separate ways, actually multiple ways. I am most interested in the way he solves it in *Germany Year Zero* (1946). The whole point is to read narrative cinema as a document or to read documentary cinema narratively. The archive has all of those valences, it’s an archive of language as well, and the different rhetorical

forms of cinema are capable of being reanimated in multiple ways, depending on the way that the images are used. The archive is not just a repository of images that have historical or indexical referents; it is a repository of language or of rhetorical forms from the past.

Take the use of the Signal Corps images that used color film for the first time in 1945–46 [*Persistence*]. The cameramen—who are in civilian life filmmakers from New York and Los Angeles—are completely aware of the fact that they are using color film for the first time; I did not manipulate those images as you suggested.⁴ I did not. That was Kodachrome, and they were quite aware of what it could do. So they were referencing classical landscape painting with deep focus and very far perspective points.

I was able to use the originals, straight out of the camera. The archive had the originals, and many of the reels were shrunken. To print them optically, I had to fashion a gate with smaller pins, and there was a lot of frame-by-frame work to get that footage to be stable. But I was very keen on making sure that it was reproduced that way because that’s the way it was seen by the cameramen. And it communicates something entirely different with that density of color.

They also reference other artistic forms. All of the different thematics of *Persistence* are tightly wound around each other. Whether it is a meditation on the archive or a meditation on the monument or a meditation on observation, we see the transition of an object from the everyday to the archival to the museal. And in that particular moment [1945–46], just after an event of historical rupture, all of those things are so tightly wound that the film becomes prismatic—each subject reflects a bit of the others: that’s why those images of the ruined landscape in that beautiful color material echo the Caspar David Friedrich paintings in the gallery sequence.

FG: Which leads to the complicated layering of time, and the relationships between times. There are so many different times at work in *Persistence* in the weaving together of visual fragments, which then give over to the weaving together of times and different temporalities.

DE: And of course, each composition has its own time. Not just the time of the composition but the ways in which compositional

strategies are formed are very historically marked as well. I am very aware of that.

FG: That's one thing I find so exquisite about the footage taken in the Stasi office in *Persistence*: its temporality echoes the inertia of the East German system. Were you conscious of that?

DE: Well, I wasn't going for that metaphor, though it isn't inappropriate. At that particular moment in 1991, I believe I was the first person to actually film in those spaces. It was a very intense experience. I certainly had the experience of going to places that were inanimate, that had huge kinds of historical power, the power of site. Certainly the Stasi archive had that, though there was a banality that the other places didn't have. Birkenau is not banal. It is immense and incommensurate. But the Stasi offices are reproduced thousands of times, down the block and everywhere else, and it's in fact the invisibility of the activity that occurred there that is so powerfully in friction with what you are seeing. So that's one reason why I superimposed the endless sound of the telephone ringing in that space, as an insistence on the uncanny normalcy of the space.

FG: Would you say that this supposed normalcy is a questioning of these bureaucratic systems of observation that, in turn, become a way of questioning the relationship between your films and the archives that they come from?

DE: Well, the regimes of observation are not lost on me. The archive depends on them . . . in other words, in the past, what was visible was the product of either politically authorized or highly capitalized forms of observation. Film was not cheap. The people who controlled it controlled either the means of production or the State. We are at a very different point in the history of moving images—where cell phones more likely produce the documents of history. I routinely trace this movement from documents produced officially to unofficial documents to our present moment, when we can see everyday revolutions being mobilized by cell phones and social media. It's a much more democratic space of image production. So the question is, what constitutes the archive today? Is it the Cloud? I don't know if this can be answered, except in the use of images. In the end, the archive is constituted by what is

and isn't used, what is and isn't saved, and by whom. It's for others to define somewhere down the line.

FG: Is there a distinction between the role of images in the creation of today's revolutions and the role of written documents? As much as social media and cell phone images have created revolutions—from Romania with the overturning of the Ceausescu regime to recent events in Egypt and Tunisia—documents from an archive, documents that didn't exist, but documents nevertheless, brought us weapons of mass destruction [WOMD]. It was a war that was predicated on fabricated knowledge.⁵ Images create revolutions, but in the case of the most recent war in Iraq, written documents create war and modern intelligence, even when they do not exist.

DE: There are lots of lapses in history, and certainly that was a huge one. That doesn't mean many of us weren't demanding the images and the evidence. Whether Colin Powell steamrolls the United Nations into declaring WOMD as being present in Iraq, I don't know how much that has to do with the archive or with image production as much as it does with power, unalloyed power. It's just being mobilized there for whatever use.

FG: Don't these kinds of power need an archive, as you show in *Persistence*?

DE: It doesn't need an archive; it needs a body of laws. That's a kind of textual archive of course. Law is the place where language is defined and redefined.

FG: To come back to the question of the reuse of the footage, the accidental fragments that become iconic images of particular events—like the Zapruder footage of John F. Kennedy's assassination—continually escape the mechanisms and institutions of control. And the way that you redeploy the footage of Hitler or images of Auschwitz–Birkenau does the same thing. It ensures the film itself constantly evades the mechanisms and institutions of control.

DE: Right, it slips. You can replay it over and over again, and each time you want to see something that you can't see, or confirm, or verify. And this is Nietzschean, and Freudian because it does in fact register an event: we want to keep replaying it over and over again to find the moment that never occurs in real time.

Because it doesn't occur in time, it occurs as a concept of an event.

FG: Do you see the way you reuse the iconic footage as doing that—accentuating the nonexistence of the moment?

DE: Yes, I think the images are pointers to the irresolution of residue and events. They can't come together again, they can't reproduce the event. Because the event is constructed from so many different things. Because film is immaterial. So we keep replaying it over and over again, as a strategy against its immateriality. But it doesn't produce anything other than a repetition of its immateriality. So I think the way I use archival images restates that problem. I use the repeated archival film images, let's say in *Displaced Person*, in multiple contexts that always, in the end, point to the way that every repetition or every return can be seen from a different perspective, and so it can then be interpreted differently. When you see an image in relation to other materials, it produces different meanings, and the accumulation of meaning then constitutes another event.

FG: Which extends to the meanings created by the spectator? For example, as he says in his contribution to *Postwar*, the footage of the young boys on the bike create Raymond Bellour's memories of wartime France thanks to its juxtaposition with other material within *Displaced Person*. And yet that footage came from an archive in Chicago.

DE: No, it came from an archive in New York. I was in New York at the time, 1976. It came from an American newsreel company from New Jersey. It was one of those crazy things at the end of the newsreel. There was the news of the day, then sporting events, and at the very end, a human interest item. This one was called "Everybody's Doing It." The "it" is playing paddleball. You can barely see it—everyone in the frame has a paddle with a ball attached to it with a rubber string. And in the middle of this stupid story, there is this one shot of the two boys on the bicycle. And when I saw it, I don't know what happened. Something about the way they were looking at the camera, and the way the camera followed them, had this enormous power. I became obsessed with that image; I kept wanting to see it again and again. And that was the beginning of the film.

FG: So the film was begun by accident?

DE: Well, the reason that I have that shot is because I was working as an assistant editor on a film in New York called *America Lost and Found* (1978), and I was dealing with archival materials every day. It was another one of those shots that didn't make it into the cut because it had nothing to do with anything, and there it was, insisting.

There was a moment of contact between those boys and the camera, and that moment of contact was extraordinary. In whatever way one can describe that, and I can only describe it as a point of contact. There I was, watching this moment in time, and making contact with these boys across the abyss of decades.

FG: Those two boys look so like the boy in *Germany Year Zero*, and this resonates with *Cooperation of Parts*.

DE: They are all of the same time . . . but as someone who spent a lot of my own childhood on a bicycle, I was superimposing all kinds of meanings on the images. Not autobiographical, but the sense of a bicycle as a magical object.

The material has its own signature. We all know, when we see it, when it was produced, how it was produced, so we are brought back to the time of our own experience of those images in our own history. They are very hypnotic . . . they really produce a moment in time. And again, it's a combination of the ephemeral, the material, the peripherality of what is being seen, all of those things accumulate into that particular way of transporting it.

FG: And that's the magic of film as a medium. I think that's one of the primary tasks of experimental film: to explore what cannot be replicated in other media. And the strategies of exploration are placed in the foreground of the image, in the sound-image relations, or in your work, the text-image relations.

DE: There's something about working in an experimental manner that means that you don't have a teleology, you don't have an end point, a goal for the material or for the work. You are moving with it, you are exploring, uncovering, deeply involved in that process yourself. And the reason to do it is to share it with somebody else. That's the point. It's not to specify the end point where you want someone to go, it's to have someone go on that ride with you. And so the work is really constructed to have the viewer take the journey

along with you, of destabilizing both cinema and language in such a way that things become very much alive again.

FG: Again, this resonates with Cornell, his sheer love of film and celebration of the medium. Your films are not celebratory so to speak, but there is a reveling in the possibilities of the image. There are also moments when the images (as in Cornell's films) become romantic; even if they are someone else's images, they are romantic within your narratives.

DE: Yes, well, certainly in *Displaced Person* it is undeniable because it's about the way those compositions are formed. And I was exploring the political relationship of those compositions to desire, or how desire is produced politically. So yes, I was very much exploring the regimes of the romantic image in that film.

In *Cooperation of Parts*, I don't think that is particularly the case, it is really hard on the eyes. There's a lot of camera movement going on . . . and intentionally so. It's about an unstable image. *Persistence* returns to this idea of the primacy of composition. I'd like to point to the last sequence in *Persistence* shot in Berlin's Marx-Engels-Platz, titled "The German Question . . ." There are school kids taking the picture of the Marx and Engels monument. And on the plinth of the monument, there's graffiti that's been spray painted that says "wir sind unschuldig" [we are not guilty], which is also what they [the Nazis] said at the Nuremberg trials. The film then cuts to the verso of the monument, and the plinth has been painted—"beim nächsten Mal wird alles besser" [next time everything will be better]. And there is this older couple taking a picture. The entire film is really about preparing the viewer to be able to read those two images, that one monument, from front and back, with all that's going on around it, in all its depth. So that's what the film is trying to do. So you can read the world with all of that history and association attached to it, including the two historical filmed figures from the rear, facing east toward the Soviet Union, and within the film, its reference to Caspar David Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren* [literally translated as *Figures Seen from Behind*].⁶

FG: Leading on from this interweaving of times and histories, I wanted to ask you about your postscript to *Postwar* and the bleak

picture you offer of the present moment, that nevertheless expresses some form of hope.

DE: The idea that we can live in the postwar is a rethinking of the term because postwar in the past was that moment of destruction when the world had to rebuild social institutions, rebuild confidence, rebuild a sense of the future. After 9/11, in our present condition of endless, eternal war, if we can recast the postwar as that moment when we can think again in that way, then it can be a utopian concept—where we can think again about a future that is not just about the next impending catastrophe or the next setback.

FG: Does this potentially echo what you are doing with your films and their relationship to the archive, your films as a place where the past is recast and rebuilt for the future?

DE: I can't make that parallel structure, as my new work deals less with the archive and much more with these other issues. But *Persistence* is also about producing images for the archive. The cycle between *Displaced Person*, *Cooperation of Parts*, and *Persistence* begins with the archival image. Everything in *Displaced Person* has a source outside of my own production and ends in *Persistence*, with my camera hopefully producing images for someone else in some future. Those images will hopefully be used again elsewhere out of context and in new contexts. That's the hope for the future.

FG: We have a responsibility to remember, and the culling from the archive in your films is a way of doing that, creating that possibility for memory in the future. Enabling the viewer to have a relationship with history, however vast it is. So there is a sense that 9/11 changes the landscape of how we see the world. At least, this is what your films are asking: that, through their relationship to the archive and the past, we will ourselves remember our own relationship to the past.

DE: I can see that, certainly. Every important event that requires a reinterpretation of the present is also important for any archive. I see what you are saying: that our personal experience of the past is reanimated, brought back to life and to reconsideration, so that the past can be read with a very different set of possibilities. The past still has possibilities.

Daniel Eisenberg has been making films and videos since 1976. His films have been screened throughout Europe, Asia, and North America, with solo exhibitions at MoMA, New York City; at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; and in festivals such as the Berlin Film Festival, the Sydney Film Festival, the London Film Festival, and FIDMarseille. Eisenberg's films have won numerous awards, fellowships, and honors, including a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and a DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogramm Fellowship. He has also researched and edited documentaries for National Public Television, including *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* and *Vietnam: A Television History*. Eisenberg lives and works in Chicago and is a professor in the Departments of Film/Video/New Media/Animation and Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Frances Guerin is a lecturer in film studies at University of Kent, Canterbury. She is the author of *A Culture of Light: Cinema and Technology in 1920s Germany* (2005) and *Through Amateur Eyes: Film and Photography in Nazi Germany* (2011). She is coeditor of *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (2007). Her book "*The Truth Is Always Grey*": *From Grisaille to Gerhard Richter* is forthcoming. Her articles have appeared in international journals, including *Cinema Journal*, *Screening the Past*, and *Film and History*. Her work in progress includes *Industrial Views: Art, Industry, and Identity in the Ruhr Valley*.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey Skoller, ed., *Postwar: The Films of Daniel Eisenberg* (London: Black Dog, 2010).
2. Thanks to Heather Green for her orchestration of this technical feat.
3. A repeated image in *Displaced Person* shows a fragment in which a woman on the platform

hands Hitler a bunch of flowers through a train window. Other women are eager to shake his hand. Each repetition of the seconds-long fragment is slightly different from the next: in long shot; in close-up, focusing on the exchange of the flowers; overexposed. The images are overlain with an equally fragmented sound track: a Beethoven string quartet, a radio lecture by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The images and texts move lyrically, guided by Beethoven, from the train station to occupied Paris to the boys on the bike. Through that movement created via the formal manipulations of editing and printing, the image meaning shifts in unexpected ways.

4. Eisenberg here refers to an earlier conversation in which I had assumed that he manipulated the images due to the brightness and clarity of the color. My knowledge of images from this period is almost entirely based on Agfacolor footage in German archives, which, due to the different color base of the stock, not only behaved differently but has deteriorated in surprisingly different ways.

5. In 2003, the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom claimed that Saddam Hussein attempted to purchase nuclear material from Niger to make what they termed "weapons of mass destruction." Their claim was based on documents that did not exist but nevertheless provided the justification for the March 2003 invasion of Iraq.

6. In his most well known paintings, such as *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) or *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1830), the German romantic painter Casper David Friedrich painted human visionaries in the distance, from behind, as they contemplated the natural landscape at dusk or daybreak. The gesture accentuates our own blindness to their insights and thus the loss of historical consciousness to our own finite vision.