

THE FLAG / LE REPLI

A film by Joseph Paris
Production : Drôle de Trame



LOG LINE

The Flag is about state islamophobia and the French way of threatening civil liberties : it focuses on deconstructing the identity-based political and journalistic discourse that has become dominant in France and how it is used to justify the decline of civil liberties.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

The Flag is a documentary essay that documents the intensification of an identity-based discourse that has become dominant in France and the decline in civil liberties. It goes to meet those who suffer the effects and who together try to resist it: exiles, Muslim citizens, inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods and activists. The film focuses on deconstructing the political and journalistic discourse that has supported this hardening of attitudes over the past thirty years. Confronting current events with archival footage, *The Flag* is a committed film, written in the first person, which enlightens and alerts.

SCREENING LINK :

<https://vimeo.com/544905160> / butterfly (English version)

<https://vimeo.com/552629250> / papillon (French version)



LONG SYNOPSIS

The Flag focuses on deconstructing the identity-based political and journalistic discourse that has become dominant in France and on the decline in civil liberties.

The Flag is a graphic film, a montage film; written both from the viewpoint of its author, in the wake of Chris Marker's essay films, and the one of Yasser Louati, human rights and civil liberties advocate.

Starting from the observation that the states of emergency decreed by the presidents of the French Republic, successively and for more than 6 years, have permanently damaged our liberties, Joseph Paris wonders. What if the security reinforcement that has led to a surge of violence against certain minorities had little to do with the events that justify the use of this violence? What if we were already "at war" long before the covid epidemic, long before the 2015 attacks in Paris?

The Flag goes back in time to try to understand how the issue of security has become an inescapable part of the French public debate.

The director posits and shows, through meticulous work on the images, how identity-based withdrawal is used to justify closing borders and tightening police control, and how the response to the 2015 terrorist attacks is the culmination of decades of policies aimed at designating "enemies from within" and to erect a peril at the borders. It makes withdrawal a political construction and not just a policy of reaction to danger.

The film analyses the progressive and methodical construction of a political discourse that has become widespread almost to the point of becoming commonplace, by relying on official speeches and television news archives broadcast from the 1980s onwards, and by looking back at events where both the left and right governments have adopted themes that at one time only the Far right supported.

The images produced by the power are re-edited to better deconstruct the message they convey, thus highlighting the manufacturing process of opinion manipulation.

On another framework the film is focused on the effects of these discourses in the present time. Joseph Paris builds his reflection camera in hand. He immerses himself in the struggles against state repression, since 2015.

It is a film that has been long matured and elaborated in the field. Shot over a period of seven years, the film reflects on current news that assail us and leave us little time to put them into perspective.

The film follows activists on the front lines : Yasser Louati is one of them. Human rights and civil liberties advocate, frequently interviewed by the CNN on issues related to Islamophobia but absent from the French media, he is a maverick. He appears as an alter ego of the director.

The FLAG brings together historians and sociologists, including Abdellali Hajjat, Vincent Gay and Mireille Delmas-Marty, who condemn the security and identity-related excesses of the French state and show how extreme patriotism, expansion of the field of secularism and irrational clashes with Islam coincide with policies of exclusion and the marginalisation of hundreds of thousands of citizens.

The film goes to meet those who suffer the effects and who together try to resist it: exiles, Muslim citizens, inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods and activists... or the actor Slimane Dazi who testifies about his withdrawal of nationality.

Based on his experience as an experimental filmmaker, Joseph Paris presents an original point of view on French society, that had claimed to be inclusive but is now full of security devices. Delivering a film with an assumed subjectivity, written from his viewpoint, Joseph Paris builds a reflection around surveillance, confinement and on the citizen's consent with this repeated observation: when we accept that the rights of a minority are scorned, the rights of all are soon threatened.



SHORTENED DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The Flag tells the story of how a liberal democracy like France gradually abandons the principle of the rule of law when crises arrive. Our film shows how the restriction of freedoms is accompanied by the creation of an "other" in French political discourse.

Just after the attacks in Paris in November 2015, while the French population was mourning, the State and the media were condemning the terrorists, but also all Muslims, and foreigners with them. Since then, it has seen an build-up of security-centered legislations coming hand in hand with the exacerbation of a society divided on identity. The state of emergency has been declared, renewed many times, and has finally become common law.

The Flag shows this process at work, and highlights how it is connected to contemporary French history.

It is both a film from the director's point of view and from that of Yasser Louati, a former pilot and an outstanding activist. The fact that his professional relationship with Yasser Louati turned into a friendship, certainly means bridging the gap between the us versus them, undoing the separation, and that's absolutely what's the film aims to do to the viewer and therefore to society.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Yasser Louati : both the alter ego and the compass of the director.

« I met Yasser Louati in a worrying security context, which has never stopped getting worse.

To give me guidance I would often take Yasser as my compass, for the collective memory of which he is the bearer but also because these narratives remain for him what they are not for me: a reality experienced firsthand. »

Yasser is one of the red threads of the film. Filmed up close and personal, it is he who faces the suspicions of CNN reporters, he who goes to meet the bereaved Muslim families following the Nice attacks of July 2016, he who meets the activists of the libertarian left and invites them to gather. Joseph follows him in his life as an activist and in his more personal reflections.



The Kraiker family in Pantin: They live in a working-class neighborhood in the Paris suburbs. As soon as the attacks of 2015, they are targeted by police harassment. Several times, police officers come to their home, without reason, and commit physical violence on the mother of the family and her teenage son, Wassil. Since then, this family denounces, testifies and gathers those who suffer the same fate.

Assa Traoré and Amal Bentounsi both lost their brothers, killed by the police. They are campaigning for the recognition of the guilt of the police officers who murdered their brothers. They organize meetings and demonstrations to make known these acts and prevent police violence.

During the filming, the trial of the murderer of Amal's brother took place, and the verdict convicted him.

The Muslim community of Nice: in the aftermath of the attack that targeted the residents of Nice in July 2016, the city's Muslims are taken to task by other Nice residents who accuse them of complicity. Yet they were hit very hard by the attack. Joseph and Yasser visit families, the imam, and Feiza Ben Mohamed who is their spokesperson and testifies of her concern.

RESEARCHERS:

Joseph asks historians and researchers to enlighten him in his approach.
He meets with:

Abdellali Hajjat is a sociologist who has written *Islamophobie : Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le « problème musulman »* (Islamophobia: How the French elites build the "Muslim problem"). For the film, he develops his "onion theory", which Joseph puts into images to illustrate how the French state is constructed like an onion : from the central, privileged and powerful layers to the most eccentric, disenfranchised layers. He is the first one who states that when one accepts that the rights of a minority are flouted, it is the rights of all that are soon threatened.

Vanessa Codaccioni is a researcher in political science, she wrote *Répression : l'état contre les contestations politiques* (Repression: the state against political protest.) For the film, she documents police violence and questions the repression operated against the protests.

Mireille Delmas Marty was a jurist and professor emeritus. She defines the rule of law and demonstrates to Joseph how the succession of states of emergency has endangered the French rule of law.

Thomas Deltombe is an essayist and the author of *L'islam imaginaire* (The imaginary Islam), in which he explains, through a detailed study of media and political discourse, how Islamophobia has become an instrument of "regeneration of racism" in France.

Vincent Gay is a historian and the author of *Pour la dignité : Ouvriers immigrés et conflits sociaux dans les années 1980* (For Dignity: Immigrant Workers and Social Conflict in the 1980s). He has documented the strikes of the car industry workers in the 1980s, and the way in which French politicians and journalists transformed the wage and social demands of these workers into extremist demands. Joseph takes television footage of the events and edits them to deconstruct the racist discourse and expose the right-wing violence that this discourse has fostered.

EVENTS :

Throughout the 7 years of filming, Joseph filmed and analyzed the events that marked the French landscape and exacerbated Islamophobia and the decline in civil liberties in the « country of human rights ».

The political speeches are re-edited to be dismantled in the film.

Deprivation of nationality

On the 16th of November, 2015, three days after the terrorist attacks, the President (François Hollande), while addressing Congress in Versailles - in the most solemn form of state protocol - justified the state of emergency by referring to the state of war. He proposed the deprivation of French nationality for an act of terrorism.



Nice

A few days after the truck attack that killed 83 people and injured 400, Joseph joined Yasser there to meet with families of the victims. The fact that a third of the victims of the attack were of Muslim faith did not prevent Muslims as a whole from being referred to as responsible.

Burkini

On the Côte d'Azur, the right-wing mayors, close friends of a former President of the Republic, during his primary election campaign (Nicolas Sarkozy), and a socialist mayor in Corsica, adopt a series of decrees prohibiting the wearing of the Burkini on the beach.

Birth of the discourse - strikes in the automotive industry

At the start of the '80s, unprecedented social conflicts among immigrant workers led to the appearance of a series of images, whereby this working class, up until then ignored, was suddenly made visible.

The media spectacle of an opposition between French workers on one side and immigrants on the other omitted mentioning the unequal working conditions between the two groups, which constituted the very reason for the strike.

Headscarve

The story begins at the end of the '80s with the media controversy concerning three young girls wearing headscarves at school.

It ends fifteen years later with the voting of a so-called 'national harmony' law, which modifies the definition of secularism.

Police violence

Since her brother was killed by the police, Amal Bentounsi has been campaigning against police violence, gathering families of victims together, and trying to raise awareness.

During the appeal proceedings of the police officer who killed her brother, Amal Bentounsi confronted the man who claimed the right to self defence even though his victim died from a bullet in his back.

A five year suspended prison sentence is not much but it's rare for a police officer to even be convicted.

Refugees

It's 2016 and some police officers are already equipped with masks.

A prelude to the government coercive approach to the upcoming pandemic, the refugees were the first to be treated as both contagious and delinquent.

Permanent state of emergency

The jurist Mireille Delmas Marty : «There, you've said it, there's a kind of repressive one-upmanship. It is very difficult to fight it, and we have in a way proof of it with this strange combination of coming out of the state of emergency but entering measures specific to the state of emergency in our daily rights.

In itself it is something shocking, inasmuch as these are exceptional measures, which precisely should only be possible in circumstances that are themselves exceptional.

If we let them enter the common law, we will transform the common law into an authoritative law, even totalitarian in extreme cases.

State of law means a State subject to the law. It isn't a State that changes the law simply for convenience or political reasons, it's a State that consents to something that is superior to the State which is the state of law. »

Yellow Vests

The police violence exercised on the demonstrators called "Yellow Vests" in 2018 and 2019 unfortunately accredit the theses of Yasser Louati and Abdellali Hajjat: once the liberties of Muslim families were restricted following the attacks, it is the turn of the white working classes to be violated by the French police.

The layers of the onion are successively concerned. The rights of some are lost, the next ones are attacked.

COVID

When the President of the Republic (Emmanuel Macron) pronounces the word "war" again when referring to a virus, it is to add a new state of emergency to the permanence of the previous one.

For whatever the nature of the crisis, it is invariably under the same security motive that the decline in civil liberties is presented.

It remains terrifying to remember that the last time a state of emergency was declared, the freedoms that were taken away were never really reinstated, if not to be suspended once again.

THE END

This sequence is currently being written.

At the end of the trial of the Bataclan attacks, Yasser Louati wonders: the trial has made it possible

to relieve the grief, the criminals have been judged, but what about the ideology behind their crimes, what about the failures of the state and the police response that traumatised hundreds of thousands of citizens? France has become even more divided, with 89 far-right deputies recently elected to the French Parliament.

How do we move on?

Yasser Louati: "What will we do when the state goes further? Will we be able to cope?"



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The Flag is a film made in the turmoil and with the need to see clearly.

Our film started just after the attacks in Paris in November 2015. While the French population was mourning, we could observe that the power and the media were condemning the terrorists, but also all Muslims, and foreigners with them. There has been a process of naming the enemy within. We are concerned about the enactment of new laws that reduce the rights of one community first, and then the rights of everyone else.

We want to show this process at work in France today, and to highlight how this is connected to contemporary French history.

We intend to give a voice to the targeted populations who can testify : inhabitants of Paris suburbs, Muslim community, refugees, activists. We also rely on researchers, who give us an academic reading of the events.

It is important to us to give a voice to those who are directly concerned by the withdrawal, and to show, in the end, that everyone's fate is linked to theirs.

The Flag tells the story of how a liberal democracy like France gradually abandons the principle of the rule of law when crises arrive: first terrorism, then the pandemic.

Our film shows the process by which the restriction of freedoms is systematically accompanied by the creation of an "other" in French political discourse.

The way some discourses are othering a community is a process that has already been at work in the past, for example for 9:11, but we want to show how it is at work today.

In order to do that, we're bringing a new context and a new approach.

The new context is what has happened in France since 2015, hit by two crises against which both presidents - François Hollande and Emmanuel Macron - have declared each time to be "at war."

Since the terrorist attacks of January and November 2015, it has seen an unprecedented build-up of security-centered legislations coming hand in hand with the exacerbation of a society divided on identity – mostly stigmatizing its Muslim community. The state of emergency has been declared, renewed many times, and has finally become common law.

As individual freedoms are restricted in the name of the emergency, the emergency passes but the restrictions remain.

The new approach we propose is both formal and narrative.

The film offers a cinematographic device in which we deconstruct the political discourses and we create a space where the viewer is free to make his own reasoning. We don't necessarily want the viewer to agree with us, we want to trigger a reflection to him.

At the same time it will be exploring in the archives some sequences of the French political history, in a constant confrontation with top experts knowledge (sociologists, historians..), to take into account where these speeches come from.

And following since 2015 some of the major current social issues related to the matter (like the crackdown on Muslims, racial profiling, police violence etc..), to see where these speeches lead us, what are their concrete consequences.

It is not about making a film that is a simple transcription in this register of research work, nor is it a film based just on witness accounts. The aim is to ask how cinema, specifically, can bring something

new to embrace these issues.

The film gives a voice to researchers, inhabitants of working-class areas, Muslim citizens, refugees, and activists.

It is both a film from the director's own point of view and from that of Yasser Louati, a former pilot, an outstanding activist, the main character who later became a friend of Joseph. It has to be said that the way this professional meeting with Yasser Louati turned into a friendship, certainly means bridging the gap between the us versus them, undoing the separation, and that's absolutely what's the film aims to do to the viewer and therefore to society.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Cinematically, the film's approach borrows from New York experimental cinema and the work of German filmmaker Harun Farocki. *The Flag* is a graphic film, of montage and the result of an important formal research.

The counter-narrative that this film sets out to achieve cannot be summed up as substituting its own discourse for that which it opposes, nor can it be played in vain with image versus image.

The Flag is made up of principally two types of images: those that we can qualify as 'images of power', television archives of public speech, and the filmmaker's own images, filmed from 2015 to the present day, that document the effects of these speeches and the counter-images of the struggles. These two types of images are always linked in the film with continuous confrontation / face to face.

Both with the split-screen, and by printing images to give them back a materiality that allows the director to physically edit, treat, cut images, Joseph is making visible everything that comes with images production : the film shows the process that is usually hidden and brings his subjectivity about that. The director uses several formal devices that consist in putting the images of power at a distance from the spectator.

The device is frequently put in abyss. The director's hands appear, they take hold of an image or a newspaper to turn the pages, fold them or sometimes make them undergo tricks and spells to exorcise them symbolically and depreciate their power.

As a counterpoint to the images of power, the images of the director do not present a fixed frame and the image, most often trembling, reflects his emotions.

For his formal intentions, the director refers to Harun Farocki, whose works inspire him to the highest degree and whom he considers to be the modern thinker of images of power.

Joseph subscribes to the Farocki's simple idea that an image is in no case true or false, and that in all cases it is questionable.



EDITING NOTE

The version of the film presented here is almost complete, with only a few aspects left to work on until the end of the summer.

About the editing :

The beginning and end scenes of the film are at this stage intentions, Joseph will come back on the editing of these two parts and notably on the voice-over. The scene in Calais will also be slightly reworked.

About the image:

The remaining work on the image consists of redoing or perfecting the visual effects, without changing the time montage. In particular, the sequences of image manipulation at the table and the special effects in paper, some of which are still in the film in the form of mock-ups, Joseph is working on re-filming and replacing these parts in the montage. In addition, the online of the archival footage is in progress (i.e. the replacement of the archives that appear numbered in the image and crossed out with the INA acronym by the clean and HD archives) and some paper visual effects need to be redone after this online stage.

About the sound:

In its current version, the film's editing contains many silences, but an important sound design work is underway until September, carried out by Alejandro Van Zandt-Escobar; ambient sound for the outdoor scenes, sound design of the archival footage, and sound creation on the special effects in paper. Joseph is very enthusiastic about this work in progress, the first proposals are in the direction of a powerful sound design, capable of keeping the spectator on the edge of his seat throughout this film, which is conceived as a political thriller, while respecting the intentions of the director, who wants to allow the spectator to stand at a distance from the images without being manipulated by them, in order to leave him the space to think about the images and to freely form his own opinion on the different subjects dealt with in the film.

Finally, until the final recording of the narrator's voice-over, Joseph thinks of revising the narration of certain sentences, sometimes simplifying its wording.