

# FACING DARKNESS

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a film by JEAN-GABRIEL PÉRIOT



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**JEAN-GABRIEL PÉRIOT**

FRANCE, SWITZERLAND, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA  
DOCUMENTARY / ENGLISH - BOSNIAN / 2023 / 110'

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# Synopsis

The siege of Sarajevo lasted from April 1992 to February 1996. Young men were called up to protect their city, a few of them chose to take along their video cameras to face the violence they witnessed throughout those grueling 1,425 days.

Now, 30 years later, they show us their films and share their wartime filming experiences and thoughts on cinema as a means of survival and resistance.

# Interview

## with Jean-Gabriel Périot

### SENSITIVE MATTERS

***Facing Darkness looks back at a little-known, or rather forgotten, episode in European history, more specifically the siege of Sarajevo between 1992 and 1995. This part of history is explored through excerpts from films made by young filmmakers who were called up to serve in the army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time. Why examine this story through these particular images?***

– It all started with a documentary film festival in which I participated in Sarajevo just after finishing the film *Nijuman no borei (200 000 Phantoms)*. At the time, I was astounded while talking with young men my age. What they told me about their lives during the siege was very concrete and harsh. A far cry from the images we saw on TV screens overseas. Listening to them, I realized that, had I been born 1,000km away, my life would have been radically different. So, I promised myself I would one day return to Sarajevo to make a film, because I felt the need to do so. A few years later, the concept for a future film emerged, but it concerned the visual memory of the city of Sarajevo. I wanted to tell the story of the city from its foundation in the 15th century by the Ottomans up until the last war. It was even more interesting since Bosnian-Serb nationalists voluntarily destroyed the town's various private and public archives during the Siege. How do you tell a story when the visual remains of the past have all but disappeared? One day, during the researches I was doing for this project, I came across films that had been made during the siege of Sarajevo by local filmmakers. Those films seemed to me to express the emotional state of the people of Sarajevo both accurately and powerfully. While reading the biographies of those who made these films, I learned that some of them were extremely young at the time of the Siege. That instantly stopped me in my tracks. How and why were young men between 16 and 25, who were called up to serve in the army, able to make films like these? It was this question that led to the making of *Facing Darkness*.

***Do the filmmakers featured in Facing Darkness represent all young Bosnian filmmakers who produced images in Sarajevo? If not, how were they chosen?***

– In reality, I identified around a dozen young filmmakers who filmed in besieged Sarajevo, but some of them shared the same experience in the sense that they were able to make their films within the same production framework. So, I focused on five of them: Nedim Alikadić, Smail Kapetanović, Dino Mustafić, Nebojša Šerić-Shoba and Srđan Vuletić. I chose them for the exemplarity of their trajectories and because the films they made at the time struck me as the most relevant or most moving.

***The first half-hour of Facing Darkness is a montage of excerpts from the films or rushes made by these young filmmakers. They provide a behind-the-scenes look at the Siege and were shot in highly unstable conditions. Why did this apparently “poor-quality” footage become material rich enough for you to dedicate a film to them?***

– First of all, it’s important to note that if we’re talking about the memory, and particularly the visual memory, that one may have kept of the siege of Sarajevo, it is first and foremost made up of footage from foreign TV news coverage. We can also include a few documentary films shot on site by foreign filmmakers, like *Bosna!* by Alain Ferrari and Bernard Henri-Lévy (1994), and then fictions made a posteriori, like those by Danis Tanović or Jasmila Žbanić. Compared to these films or televised news footage, the images that interest me might indeed seem “smaller”. That’s precisely what I like about them: that “smallness”. But it corresponds to several things – firstly, the very rudimentary technical tools with which their directors had to work at the time. The lack of electricity was certainly the most complicated aspect to manage, but finding tapes or making copies on VCR was also quite a feat. All the images produced in Sarajevo during the Siege were made amidst this constant lack of material, which demanded a considerable effort – and all this at a time when it was also necessary to find the means for one’s own survival, food and water above all else. So, the decision to film was not only a challenge, but also a response to a desire, an urgency, even a need.

Another thing I found moving about what makes this footage “small”: the fact that they aren’t perfect betrays their authors’ young ages. There are several filmic strategies at work. They’re either “amateur” films in the sense that the filmmakers are filming what’s happening all around them with their camcorder with no intention of making a film, or some creating comedy sketches with their friends like a lot of young people do. This almost light-hearted way of making films in such a harsh context is astonishing. Beyond that, all their films betray a certain naivety regarding

what's going on, sometimes even stupefaction or nonacceptance. Regardless, this footage harbor a certain truth; they seem to express the emotions of their authors very simply. But this requires knowing how to really look at this footage without looking down on them. On the contrary, they must continually be put back into their context. Beyond this specific case, I think it's crucial to safeguard and learn to watch these "small" images that bear witness to the destruction. History is built from "powerful" images: first television, then more or less commercial and institutional cinema. I see it as my obligation as a viewer and filmmaker to question why other types of images never or rarely make history. The footage shown in *Facing Darkness* give us access to the mindset of some of the city's inhabitants during the Siege, their despair, and their feelings. By conveying the emotions felt by their authors, they offer us a different way of experiencing the event.

***Whereas it was an "urgency" for these filmmakers to film the war unfolding all around them, was there a similar urgency to make your film?***

– No, this new work follows a long-term line of questioning that will likely be followed up on in the future. *Facing Darkness* could be seen as the second part of a series that began with *Une Jeunesse allemande (A German Youth)*. These two films explore the act of filming by focusing on filmmakers who, when confronted with the experience of violence, had to make the decision to continue or stop making films. Why do you continue or stop filming at a time when guns are doing most of the talking? This question is very important to me, especially since, in the case of Sarajevo, the act of filming was particularly dangerous.

***The siege of Sarajevo has been the subject of several historical works. What sources did you use for your research?***

– Making a film like this requires the work of a historian. The goal is obviously not to produce a text or a book. Nevertheless, I share along with historians the need to carry out extensive research. I think it's important to master the subject as much as possible. This translates to the patient reading of books on the history of Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the city of Sarajevo. I also spent a lot of time on site, visiting historic places and private and institutional archives, and meeting historians and witnesses to this history. This almost academic work is important not only to avoid making mistakes or causing misunderstandings, but also to better understand the films I watch and use.

***Your film includes very little contextual information. Is that because you wanted to avoid making an informative or educational piece?***

– I thought it would be interesting to leave the viewer’s gaze as open as possible, without bringing in external historical elements. I think you either make a piece that’s educational or one that isn’t at all. In the specific case of the siege of Sarajevo, it’s impossible to summarize, in a few minutes or even an hour and a half, all the factors that led to the war, what happened during the four-year Siege, and to describe the power struggles at the international level that explain the duration of the Siege. Embarking on an educational narrative might have provided a few elements of knowledge but without managing to explain everything.

More importantly, for me, this movie is about another question: what can these films, made by very young filmmakers at the time, teach us? What do they tell us about? I don’t necessarily have the answer, but what I do know is that their ways of shedding light on this moment of violence transcend simple historical or educational fact. They weren’t filmed with the intention of teaching us a lesson.

Beyond that, while there’s a risk that the audience of *Facing Darkness* won’t clearly understand everything they see, that’s merely a direct consequence of the fact that these filmmakers often made their films as a response to their own incomprehension or refusal of the situation they were in. They were barely twenty years old. The war took them by surprise without their understanding of where it might have come from. During the Yugoslav era, they grew up in a deeply intercultural environment and learned overnight that some of their fellow citizens had become their enemies. That’s why their adversaries are never clearly named in their films. While that may be surprising to us, it reflects the way in which they experienced the war.

***Was the idea, by extension, to place the modern-day viewer in a state of astonishment similar to the one experienced by the filmmakers at the time?***

– No, the astonishment evoked by the first part of *Facing Darkness* comes purely from the material itself. It was edited exclusively using excerpts from the films these young filmmakers made, which are still accessible. Had they made more educational films, I could have used them to provide more keys to reading, but such films don’t exist. It’s the material just as I found it that brings its energy to the first part. But unlike viewers discovering *Facing Darkness* for the first time, I was familiar with its two-part construction. I could risk viewers not understanding what they were watching for the first half-hour because I knew the second part would answer questions they previously had.

The authors of the films I used are alive, so, they can tell us themselves about the footage they filmed, which can sometimes seem abstract to us today.

## TESTIMONIES

***The film comprises two parts: the one we've just discussed, made up of footage filmed between 1992 and 1995, and a second part, which brings together the testimonies of the directors of these same films, who rewatch and explain their films. Why did you want to give meaning to this footage based exclusively on the positions of those who made them?***

– I think the people who actually recorded this footage can provide the most detailed, most enlightening commentary. We sometimes think a filmmaker knows what they are doing when they make a film. But that's never entirely true. As a filmmaker, you're driven by feelings, questions, doubts, poetic aspirations, anger, love... You can even see filmmaking as a means of understanding what you don't understand. But even if filmmakers can't answer every question they're asked about their work or any of their films, the words they use to explain themselves always tell us something about their work.

In the specific case of the films shown in *Facing Darkness*, the main question was why these young men had made these films in the first place. They alone could answer this question. As young men, they were called up to serve, whether they wanted to or not. It was mandatory. Afterward, the draft took on different forms. Some had to take up arms, served on the front, and filmed outside of their duties as soldiers. On the other hand, others avoided taking up arms by using the camera. Working for the army's various audiovisual departments was precisely one of the only ways to avoid using weapons, even if it didn't necessarily spare them the experience of the front lines or the cruelest aspects of the war. Only these men could tell us about their military experiences and why they continued to film at that time.

Beyond that, listening to them also tells us about something else. It seems to me we all ask ourselves how we'd react to the horror of war. Personally, I don't see myself as gun-toting resistance fighter. But when you listen to these former young people, you realize that when the going gets tough, you can become far more courageous than you think. These young men who resisted with their weapons and their cameras are, for me, the most qualified to talk about it. It's impossible to avoid mentioning the friendship that binds me to these men. They're not exactly friend per se; but a kind of camaraderie was forged between us. It formed around three elements that bring us closer together: age,





gender, and the fact that we're filmmakers. We don't share the same history, of course, but we do have something in common. A trust formed from the moment they realized that I was coming to them for answers to the questions we might share.

***If we flip the perspective, does talking with them question the very status of a filmmaker? Did you consciously design a format that implied this mirror relationship?***

– I felt something while filming and editing *Facing Darkness* – that these men weren't speaking directly to potential viewers; they were speaking to me personally. Obviously, they know that in speaking to me, they're ultimately speaking to others; but the fact remains that the one receiving their words, the one to whom they were offering their experiences, was me. Me as an individual and as a director, before the viewer.

The staging approach I used consisted first and foremost of creating a space and time that enabled a dialogue that could not otherwise occur. A space and a time different from those of real life, of everyday life. I spent a lot of time with each of them before filming, which was important; but there are certain questions I could only ask while filming, in that unique moment. I knew that if I'd dared to ask them beforehand, the answers would have been different. There, we filmed each interview over two or three full days, in specific locations chosen with the protagonists – places that helped trigger their memories.

The length of those interviews and the fact that they were set in places that are important to them inevitably impacted the emotional state of the protagonists.

### ***How were the locations chosen?***

– We used several strategies. They're often places directly linked to their films, the places where they were made. But they can also be places linked to their experiences as soldiers (namely the front lines where some of them were stationed) or as civilians. What's disturbing is how difficult it is to imagine that in some of these places, namely on the former front lines, there was a war and battles that were fought there. It's so beautiful and calm today... The protagonists themselves talk about this difficulty of remembering those places as they were thirty years ago.

***The interview format is doubly reflective: not only are the protagonists asked to rewatch their films on a tablet in a significant location, but the film crew themselves are also filmed by a second camera that remains positioned a few meters away from them. How did this particular staging approach come about?***

– For these interviews, it was necessary to be able to show the interviewees their films. The need for the tablet quickly became obvious given the trips between the many locations. It's probably the lightest, and the most manipulable, way we had to take these films with us and watch them again.

Since I wanted to capture the protagonists' reactions as they rewatched the footage, namely by filming their faces, a second camera was needed. So, I was able to use it for other moments during the filming.

Filming interviews, especially very long ones, involves a specific difficulty, which is that of editing. To edit an interview as part of a film and not a TV news report or a video for the internet, you need shots that can be inserted between two other shots of the interviewee. The problem therein for me is that, as a filmmaker, I'm incapable of filming anything other than human beings, whether it's for a fiction or a documentary. I don't know how to do landscape shots, partial shots of a part of a body or an object, etc. And my other problem was that, since we'd expressly chosen the locations where the interviews would be filmed, we needed to show them to the audience. It was in response to these two issues that I used the camera to film the crew with the interviewee in wide or very wide shots in the actual shooting location. *Facing Darkness* is a film about filmmaking, so filming the crew at work afforded the advantage of showing what it means to make a film in concrete terms.

***Does being filmed yourself imply another way of being a filmmaker?***

– Definitely – especially for me since I’m naturally quite discreet. I don’t want to appear in my own films, either as a protagonist or as a filmmaker. In *Facing Darkness*, the challenge for me was to give as much space as possible to the protagonists, which was far more important than my own presence. The latter was merely a tool used to enable a certain kind of exchange with the protagonists, to make them feel safe or secure.

***This staging invites us to ponder the question of language, since the protagonists are speaking Bosnian. In fact, a translator is sometimes visible on-screen. How do you ensure authentic dialogue in those conditions?***

– I didn’t want the protagonists to speak in English. We always express ourselves better in our native languages. But that obviously raised the issue of how I would be able to understand them. I knew I’d never include the translation process in my film as is sometimes the case in other documentary films where you hear the translator doing their job for the filmmaker. But I also knew that I didn’t want to lose time and energy on consecutive translation while filming. So, I opted for simultaneous translation, which I listened to through an earpiece. That enabled me to access the content of what was being said in near real-time. And, at the same time, the passage through another language, through the translator’s voice, and the translation lag also act as a kind of protection. This is important when the stories that are told reveal the most absolute horror.

FILMING FOR SURVIVAL

***The editing of the various interviews seems to be constructed outside of a thematic scheme. How did you approach the editing of the second part of the film?***

– I didn’t have any preconceived notions about the way in which the interviews should be edited. Apart from the obvious, of course: at the beginning we would talk about the outbreak of the war in their lives and how each of them reacted, and at the end of the film, we would talk about the end of the war and its consequences. Between the beginning and the end of the second part, there was no obvious logic except to create it artificially. The human experience, aside from its strictly biological aspect, doesn’t follow a linear trajectory made up of a series of events that fit together logically. In Sarajevo, during the Siege, life was totally disorganized.



There was no rationality. When you listen to the protagonists, you realize that it was normal to come back from two days at the front and go to the movies, that you could be on duty at the front and, during your breaks, make a movie with your friends. In Sarajevo, happiness or pleasure could occur between moments of horror. Beyond that, they all say they didn't experience time chronologically. They were trapped in a timeless space moving forward. So, an edit intended to respect their words and experiences couldn't use overly directive guidelines. It was the emotional and thematic issues that determined the final arrangement of the various interview sequences. Ultimately, I chose to focus on interview sequences talking about cinema and based on excerpts from films that I felt were the most relevant or the most touching.

***Was editing the step during which the violence experienced and suffered by the protagonists was rationally distanced?***

– All of those men suffered traumatic experiences. Difficult memories could only come up during the interviews. I knew we couldn't avoid it, even if I didn't necessarily want to. I'm too sensitive to face horror head-on. But I knew that each of them wanted to share their most difficult experiences with me. They also accepted to take part in this film because they needed to convey certain things to someone outside their daily lives. I knew we'd have to go there to then reach a certain emotional strength in their testimonies, even if I knew I'd never edit moments like those.

***On one hand, you use a very specific staging for the interview while, on the other, your editing establishes a kind of distance from the trauma experienced by these men. Could this be seen as a way to question the idea of normalizing evil or, on the contrary, the absolute necessity for humanity to survive?***

– There’s an ethical stance that I hold dear and that guides my work: it’s perhaps in the most violent moments of our histories and our present that we can find that which, within the very devastation, can make us optimistic, despite or against all odds, about human nature and the fact that history is never fully written in advance.

The siege of Sarajevo was one of the most brutal moments in our recent history. When the Bosnian-Serb nationalists closed off the city, the army of Bosnia-Herzegovina didn’t even exist. The local police were the only institution of defense. The resistance was organized in a few hours, amidst terrible chaos, and without any professionalism. But despite having heavy weaponry, the Bosnian Serb nationalists didn’t manage to enter the city, nor did they ever succeed in the following four years. To go back to the film, I’m still surprised not only by how these young men barely hesitated to join in the fight, but also the fact that they never lost hope to the point of stopping filming. The fact that they filmed shows that even amid hell, we can manage to assert ourselves against all odds. In any case, in my cinema, even if it focuses on the darkest moments, it’s important to me to fight against despair.

***But darkness is indeed the main subject of the film. Does this darkness shed light on a repressed part of history?***

– I wouldn’t use the term “repression” here because repression implies that we’ve buried events in the subconscious that can resurface in the future. For me, it’s more about exploring forgetting and how certain events simply leave no mark. It’s about knowing what we retain, individually and more importantly collectively, from the past and why it’s difficult to escape the “main” narratives. We forget almost everything and when we do remember something, it’s what we might call “the official history” – and if we’re talking about visual memory, we only recall the images associated with it. As a filmmaker, I’m lucky to be able to delve into the virtually unknown or forgotten parts of history; to show that there are other stories, other possible narratives, by showing that there are always images other than the ones we collectively remember.

Most of the footage seen in *Facing Darkness* are ones that would’ve remained unseen if I didn’t make this film. And by staying unseen, they can’t be part of the construction of the history of the siege of Sarajevo.

At the end of the film, when Dino Mustafić says that it's hard to watch this footage today, he also says that we need to do so collectively. We must realize the horror we as human beings are capable of creating. Making the effort to watch these films also makes things more optimistic because they reflect strength of life and hope of their authors. We must look in the shadows to see what stands up in the way.



# Jean-Gabriel Périot

Born in France in 1974, Jean-Gabriel Périot has made many short films on the edge of documentary, experimental and fiction.

He has developed his own editing style that questions violence and history, based on film and photographic archives material. His films, including ***Dies Irae, Even If She Had Been a Criminal...***, ***Nijuman no borei (200 000 Phantoms)*** and ***The Devil***, have won awards at numerous festivals throughout the world.

His first feature film, ***A German Youth*** opened the **Panorama section at the 2015 Berlinale**, before being released on German, Swiss and French cinemas and honored with several awards. ***Summer Lights***, his first feature-length fiction film, premiered at the San Sebastian Film Festival. It was released in France in the summer of 2017 and ***Our Defeats***, a feature-length documentary, was presented at the **Forum of the 2019 Berlinale**.

His latest feature film, ***Returning to Reims***, a documentary adapted from Didier Eribon's book, and starring Adèle Haenel, was presented at the **Directors' Fortnight in Cannes** and released in 2021. The film won a **César for Best Documentary** in 2023.

# Credits

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Screenplay</b>                | Jean-Gabriel Périot   |
| <b>Photography</b>               | Denis Gravouil, Amine Berrada, Amel Djikoli, Augustin Losserand |
| <b>Sound</b>                     | Henri Maïkoff, Xavier Thibault, Laure Arto                      |
| <b>Editor</b>                    | Jean-Gabriel Périot   |
| <b>Producers</b>                 | Cécile Lestrade   |
| <b>Co-producers</b>              | David Épiney, Eugenia Momenhaler                                |
| <b>Production</b>                | Alter Ego Production (France)                                   |
| <b>Co-production</b>             | Alina Films (Switzerland)                                       |
| <b>Additional co-producer(s)</b> | Kumjana Novakova, Pravo Ljudski (Bosnia and Herzegovina)        |