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THE MOVIE THEATER AS A 'CONTACT ZONE'. STRATEGIES OF CURATING FILMS MADE WITHIN AUTOCHTHONOUS STRUGGLES

In 2017, we began a historical and curatorial research project exploring the filmic forms and practices conceived during the political struggles of autochthonous communities.¹ Our aim was to study how filmmaking participates in struggles and how struggles in turn shape such practices. For that, we wished to create spaces for discussion by inviting filmmakers and activists belonging to, or working with, the affected communities to share their experiences during a series of events held in

¹ This project could not have come to fruition without the help, advice, and support of several friends and colleagues (in the order of their joining the undertaking): Skaya Siku, researcher at the Academia Sinica in Taiwan and a member of the Seejiq Truku people; Nicole Brenez, specialist of political avant-garde cinema; and Caroline San Martin, film theorist.

Paris. We centered especially on a set of situations and conditions present in North America and the Pacific region, in particular in Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia, Mexico, the United States, and Canada. The project, supported by Université Paris Sciences et Lettres (PSL) and administered by the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and La Fémis, enabled us to organize four international colloquia in the first half of 2019, with the latter institution becoming our base. Through these events, we turned one of the foremost French film and television schools, and a mainstay of the national film industry, into a ‘contact zone’: “[a] space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict”.² Besides the essential research-related preoccupations, and our wish to subvert the established historiographies of cinema, one of our aims was to attempt to introduce engaged filmmaking practices as an earnest and full-fledged object of consideration to Western creative industry training grounds and (social sciences) knowledge production institutions.

Coopting of Research and Cultural Production Institutions

While preparing for this project, we realized that in order to do justice to the richness of filmic forms and avoid distorting the autochthonous voices therein we needed to reconsider the strategies that are available to us (the organizers) and the participants (the practitioners and

² Pratt, Mary Louise. (1992). *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London, New York: Routledge, 6.

activists) in coopting and subverting capitalist research and cultural production frameworks.

For activists and militant filmmakers finding an audience is an integral part of their practice. Academic institutions have traditionally provided a platform for showing and discussing such works.³ That freedom, however, conceals a situation that becomes quickly wrought with complexities if the intention is to bring the film out of the film club and into a research space. This move entails considering film not merely as an object to behold and discuss but as a multifaceted research project in its own right. Here what's being considered is not only an intricate perceptual, cultural, social object and practice—that is, a film and filmmaking practice—but also the people behind these forms, the filmmakers and activists, and the communities with deep, complex, and often scarred pasts. This wider grasp is a challenge for the disciplines that we intended to engage with—the social sciences and humanities, including anthropology and film studies—since they tend to reduce the expressive richness and the conditions of production and reception of cinema and filmmaking practice to the more convenient analytical object of *film*. Academia is adept at isolating research questions and keen at trying to avoid their research object from being uncontained. When interrogating cinema, anthropology tends to isolate the contextual issues and film studies its formal aspects, without—when it comes to our object of research—considering the effects of Indigenous experiences and

³ See Halkin, Alexandra. (2008). Outside the Indigenous Lens: Zapatistas and Autonomous Videomaking. In Wilson, Pamela and Stewart, Michelle (Eds.). *Global Indigenous Media: Cultures, Poetics, and Politics* (160-180). Durham: Duke University Press, for the financing of Promedios productions through the US university presentation tours and sales; and see Wortham, Erica. (2013). Revolutionary Indigenous Media. The Chiapas Media Project / Promedios. *Indigenous Media in Mexico* (177-206). London: Duke University Press, for a precise analysis and chronology of the project.

epistemologies on filmmaking practice. The distinct figurative use of media, the notion of authorship, and the contextual scope of the work, in particular the communities' experiences of trauma and struggle, all make up its different facets—a spectrum which is not considered as a whole by any of the aforementioned disciplines. Our willingness to draw up the cartography of our project, not according to precise cultural spheres but rather according to the affinity between the situations of struggle and the filmic forms that have grown out of them, undercut the long tradition of our home institution, the EHESS, in promoting regional-cultural specialization in anthropological and historical research.

The administrative substructure of research and learning institutions is devised in such a way that if the proposed topic does not fit into a predefined and often narrow disciplinary framework, then the chances of starting or joining the discussion are hampered. In order to get the conversation going, the proposal has to be smuggled into an academic research program under the guise of an existing and institutionally familiar research initiative.

Considering engaged filmmaking practices in the context of the film industry—in our case a film school—also poses challenges. La Fémis, although steeped in the French and European film tradition, and thus somewhat more politically minded and cerebral, still has as its core mission to educate future professionals of the film industry. Only very recently, with the appointment of Nicole Brenez, one of the foremost specialists of militant and avant-garde cinema, as the head of the department of film analysis and culture, did it open its students to profoundly engaged and experimental currents in cinema. It is also

thanks to this opening that we were able to convince the school to invite in its midst the cinema of autochthonous struggles.

From a practical standpoint, the particularities of these two highly institutionalized systems, with their hierarchies, best practices, written and unwritten rules, poses individually manageable but in combination very concrete and often insurmountable obstacles, with the unfortunate result that alternative filmmaking practices are left outside of their scope of objects fully worthy of consideration. The thicket of issues can include such essential questions as how to remunerate the presenting filmmakers-activists who seldom have academic affiliations or how to formalize the compensation for film rights—both of which most academic institutions are unprepared for. Even with available funds, the failure to find solutions to such administrative issues can spell doom to the integrity of the project. The allocation of budget similarly falls within both administrative and ethical concerns. The entirety of our research project's budget was dedicated to covering the costs of inviting the participating filmmakers and activists, remunerating the screening rights, and covering part of the production costs of two ensuing publications. The attached researchers and the administrative staff who worked on the project volunteered their time and attention.

Making Films in Situations of Struggle: How to Talk about It?

During the colloquia, we had the opportunity to observe how the invited filmmakers and activists were successfully able to negotiate and take advantage of the neoliberal Western institutions of cultural production. Inviting them to disregard typical presentation formats of a scholarly event and doing away with strict time slots, they had the possibility to expound on their practices and situations of struggle unconstrained by

the academic modes of expression. The exchanges with Karrabing Film Collective were in this sense particularly illuminating. Formed in the wake of a social and political turmoil that affected the region around Darwin (Northern Territories, Australia) in 2007, the collective, an extended creative and filmmaking family made up of Aboriginal Australians and the anthropologist Elizabeth A. Povinelli, produces films and installations that contrast with conventional and state-sanctioned forms of visual and ethnographic representation.⁴ Through the practice of filmmaking, the members of the collective strive to present the effects of economic and social policies on Aboriginal communities (state racism, a failing welfare system, pressure from extractive industries) to a wide audience, while building bridges between older and younger generations within the community.

Presenting the films as part of a masterclass represents a twofold challenge for the collective, partly joining those underpinning their filmmaking practice. Through giving and sharing the words—oscillating between theatricalization, ellipsis, and internal negotiation—the members of the collective thus evoked the genesis of the films and the sensory universe of their community without revealing their experience of the world in all its aspects and depth, as an ethnographic survey would attempt to do. This meeting with the Karrabing Film Collective was essential for us in helping to think about a cartography of the cinema of autochthonous struggles while respecting what was said and needed to go unsaid by the filmmakers and activists.

⁴ On the instrumentalization of anthropology by the (neo)colonial policies of the Australian state and its use in connection with Aboriginal Australians, see Povinelli, Elizabeth A. (2002). *The Cunning of Recognition. Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Indigenous Epistemologies in the History of Political Cinema

The other objective of this ongoing project is to be able to reconstruct a visual history of autochthonous struggles. In doing so, we wish to rethink the conventional chronologies of an 'autochthonous cinema', challenging the distinctions made starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s between films made *by* autochthonous people themselves and films made *about* them by anthropologists or filmmakers, or even those "nearby" as proposed by Trinh Minh-ha.⁵

Two lines of inquiry traverse this historical research. The first consists in observing the links between contemporary practices such as those of Karrabing Film Collective and those, historical, of internationalist cinema, i.e. "a corpus and a tradition that have not yet been considered as a whole [and] that have been nourished by filmmakers taking their cameras to help people who are fighting for their freedom".⁶ The second line observes the flipside in order to better understand how the experiences and knowledge held by Indigenous communities feed into political cinema. Among the different struggles discussed over the course of the four colloquia, the one touched upon by Nicolas Défossé, a filmmaker and doctoral student at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), is particularly eloquent. As a volunteer with the Mexican-American association Promedios de Comunicación Comunitaria / Chiapas Media Project, he participated from 2001 to 2008 in audiovisual training for Indigenous organizations in south-eastern Mexico, engaging in the struggle for the defense of their territories and

⁵ Chen, Nancy N. (1992). "Speaking Nearby": A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 8(1), 82-91.

⁶ Brenez, Nicole. (2012). For an Internationalist Cinema. Interview by Ryan Wells. *Cinespect*, March 2012, <http://cinespect.com/?p=3090>.

their rights (the Mixe, Zoque, Mayas, and Chiapas).⁷ Among the videos produced by the collective, under the direction of the Zapatista civilian communities, *La tierra es de quien la trabaja* (2004) reflects the appropriation of video as a tool by the Zapatista support bases. The film centers on the unannounced visit to a local community by Chiapas State Government officials. The community, learning of their intention a few days in advance, prepared a well-organized event and a careful plan to film it in order to establish a balance of power through the very use of the camera. The Zapatistas staged all the sequences in the center of the village, reversing the habitual scenography of such a situation, putting the political representatives under midday sun's metaphorical spotlight, subjecting them to a series of questions formulated by the members of the surrounding villages who formed the general assembly of the Zapatista communities.

A few years later, Nicolas Défossé worked as the cinematographer on Alèssi Dell'Umbria's feature-length documentary, himself an activist and author of several books on popular movements in France and Mexico. Shot in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, *Istmeño, the Winds of Revolt* (2015) presents the struggle of the Zapotec and Ikoot communities against one of the largest wind farms in the world, expected to eventually reach 5.000 wind turbines.⁸ To this end, a series of federally supported legislative reforms had paved the way for the privatization of the electricity sector

⁷ On the genesis of Promedios de Comunicación Comunitaria / Chiapas Media Project, its status within the structure of Zapotec communities, its financial set-up between the USA and Mexico, see the accounts by Halkin, *Outside the Indigenous Lens*, and Wortham, *Revolutionary Indigenous Media*.

⁸ The film is distributed as a book-DVD set (2018). The book includes a chronicle of the filming and invaluable descriptions of the long history of the struggle of autochthonous communities against the colonization of their land by large landowners.

for renewable energy multinationals. The film begins with a confrontation between political representatives and members of the surrounding villages. Adopting a position similar to that of the Zapatista filmmakers, Nicolas Défossé places himself with the camera at the center of the interaction, turning the act of filming into an asset for the affected communities in their power relations with the politicians. A few years apart, these two experiences show how filmic forms and practices that accompany and document autochthonous struggles in southern Mexico are the result of a 'contact culture'⁹ formed through encounters and exchanges between struggling communities, and filmmakers and political activists from the global North or dominant social groups.

Conclusion

The film history of autochthonous struggles is both a political arena, where forms of film curation and programming are *invented*, along with a field of research, which reshuffles the maps of film genres and practices defined by categories based on the identity of filmmakers and (video) artists. Rather than opposing these predefined categories, we were interested in how the experiences of autochthonous communities—their political and traditional knowledge, and their relationships to images—reconfigure established forms of filmmaker-audience interaction and definitions of the history of political cinema. With this project on the cinema of autochthonous struggles, we were led to rethink the cinema as a 'contact zone' between the former settlers and the colonized or, at

⁹ The concept of 'contact culture' (*culture de contact*) was formulated by Henriette Asséo to reflect the many exchanges between the artistic avant-garde of the dominant social groups and the Romani families in Europe from the beginning of the 19th century until the late 1930s. Asséo, Henriette. (2010). Figures bohémiennes et fiction, l'âge des possibles 1770-1920. *Le Temps des médias*, 1(14), 12-27.

times, even the neo-settlers and the neo-colonized, while carefully considering how political struggles and filmic forms contribute to the constitution of a 'contact culture' shared by autochthonous peoples, activists, and filmmakers.

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