Cinema as Inquiry: On Art, Knowledge, and Justice

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Abstract   This article considers how cinema is not only an apparatus or a means of representation and meaning-making. Instead, it is also a mode of inquiry that entails justice by creating, selecting, and combining audio and visual elements that reveal the workings of hierarchical power and envision new political forms of power and social relations.

Keywords   Cinema. Research. Knowledge. Justice. Failure.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Cinema, as All Arts, is Re-Search. – 3 The Arts of Justice. – 4 The Ends of Knowledge.

1   Introduction

The year was 2011. I was at work on the documentary *War for Guam*, which was subsequently shown on over 500 US public television stations. Focused on the largest island of the Northern Marianas archipelago in the Pacific, the film used rarely seen archival images, contemporary *verité* footage, and testimonies of survivors and their descendants to tell a story generally unknown to Americans: how most Chamorros, the Indigenous people of Guam, remained loyal to the United States under a brutal Japanese occupation during World War II, later to be stripped of much of their ancestral lands by the US Navy. The film also explored the effects and consequences of this critical period on life in Guam. Though the US government eventual-

ly returned a fraction of the land, it more deeply integrated Guam into a global capitalist economy that revolved around US military contracts, military service, and Japanese tourism.

For a year during the editing process, I confronted conceptual and narrative obstacles I could not solve. One involved a section of the film regarding Chamorro responses to US Navy rule. I wanted to establish that the Chamorros had politically resisted the Naval government. Yet the archive did not contain any explicit images of protests or conflict. In addition, regardless of how I organized the footage, I failed to find a place for an interview clip that summed up the scholarly wisdom on the subject: that it was not until the 1970s that Chamorros began to resist Naval political control, particularly on issues related to land tenure, cultural assimilation, and governance.

Eventually, I realized what the problem was. The new ways that we related disparate archival and other materials suggested that Chamorro resistance had started from the moment the Navy touched land on Guam in (or close to) June 1898. This perspective materialized by montage produced another knowledge than what the contemporary interviewees offered. Signifying a longer duration of resistance shifted the colonial image of Chamorros as passive, affirmed that their political history was not simply a result of the US Civil Rights Movement, and enhanced understanding of how these past struggles informed present ones.

In tandem with other experiences, this process led me to a different way of approaching and thinking about what cinema is (or could be) and what filmmakers do. Cinema could be defined not only as an apparatus (de Lauretis, Heath 1980), dispositif to represent the world (Comolli 1980, 122), or means of communication, but also as a mode of inquiry with political and epistemological implications.[1] This understanding of cinema contrasts with hegemonic notions that view film texts as a site of beauty or individual feeling, film pedagogy as the acquisition of technical mastery, and filmmaking as the epistemological opposite of 'real' research. In this last paradigm, only scholars produce knowledge through the disciplined application of the scientific method (principally in the "hard" sciences) and generate conceptual thought.

To further elaborate the notion of cinema as inquiry, I relate seemingly disparate writers, filmmakers, visual artists, and other theorists in fields such as art-based research, anthropology, and visual arts, including John Akomfrah, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jean-Luc

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[1] For nearly two decades, I have taught the "Video as Inquiry" course at Columbia University. Intended for students without formal media production experience, I organize the class around three axes – conceptual, genealogical, and technical. In four months, nearly all students complete meaningful projects. Many become artists and integrate cinema as a research method.

Godard, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Tracey Moffatt. Through this process, I consider how cinematic practice is a form of research that contributes to the production of knowledge and the constitution of new subjects. Moreover, I inquire into how art practice can envision justice through imaginative associations that reconceptualize and recontextualize the relationship between ideas and images, particularly those that hegemonic visuality has buried, blocked, or (as filmmaker Raoul Peck would have it) "silenced" (*Exterminate All the Brutes*; Ponzanesi, Waller 2011). Lastly, I explore how artists of color, working within or in dialogue with decolonial, feminist, antiracist, queer, citizen media, and other forms of visual counterknowledge, enable "new seeing" (Olivieri, Minh-ha 2022, 183).

2 Cinema, as All Arts, is Re-Search

The term research can be defined in many ways, accentuating different aspects and perspectives on the process. One definition that encompasses part of my argument is "systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to […] reach new conclusions".[2] That is, research is a creative and transformative mode of inquiry relying on specific "materials and sources", which become method, medium, and mediation. Cinema as inquiry is then 're-searching', or searching again, which includes temporal and spatial dimensions and the possibility of generating novel forms of knowledge.

Conceiving cinema and other visual arts in these terms, however, remains marginal. As arts educator, Elliot Eisner wrote, "the idea that art can be regarded as a form of knowledge does not have a secure history in contemporary philosophical thought" (2008, 3). Yet scholarly fields and practitioners have been theorizing and practicing visual art-making as a mode of inquiry for centuries, using a range of assumptions about what knowledge is and how it is produced.

One entry point is anthropology. From the late nineteenth century to the present, anthropologists have related visual media to knowing in several ways, viewing these as technologies to document and analyze cultural practices (or "patterns" in Ruth Benedict's terms) and as a means to disseminate research (Ardévol Piera 1997, 126). A paradigmatic figure who experimented with all these modalities is Margaret Mead, who often with Gregory Bateson, created half a dozen films and thousands of photographs that sought to produce and circulate anthropological knowledge about the peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Equally important, the problematic manner anthropologists represented racialized and colonized people in

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2 https://www.oed.com.

most of this work have led to other conceptualizations of cinema as inquiry. These included focusing on the privileged observer, collaborating with groups that have been the objects of anthropological knowledge, and supporting the work of Black, indigenous, colonial, and postcolonial artists.

In the last few decades, art-based researchers and educators have also argued that artistic practice can be research and can be helpful to research, including into subjectivity, trauma, and creativity. Tracing some of their ideas to Eisner, Julia Marshall and Kimberley D'Adamo argued,

> the artmaking process is increasingly accepted in experimental forms of qualitative ethnographic, narrative, and phenomenological research in the social sciences, psychology, and education. Some artists and art educators are taking idea of using art practice in research a step further and claiming that art practice is research. (Marshall, D'Adamo 2011, 12)

For Marshall and D'Adamo, "artmaking is a form of inquiry" that produces new knowledge by mobilizing the scientific method of observation, collecting, identifying, and analyzing. These encompass "creative, non-verbal ways of understanding" (12), as well as embodied and subjective modes of knowing, such as emotion.

Although often disregarded by scholars outside of film and art history, visual artists have practiced art as research and have generated some of the most insightful theorizations for more than a century. An early example in cinema history is the English photographer Eadweard J. Muybridge (1830-1904), who deployed moving images to address gaps in knowledge about "animal locomotion". Muybridge's first and best-known research project emerged from a bet with the governor of California regarding "whether horses had all four feet off the ground when they ran at gallop" (Worth 1980, 16). (The answer: they do, though not when most people think.) Muybridge reached this conclusion by creating a series of 1877 photographs of horses in motion where he was could 'freeze' each moment.

In the twentieth century, artists have mainly moved away from positivist paradigms but continue to assert the relationship between image-making and knowledge. In 1956, Pablo Picasso stated,

> I never do a painting like a work of art. It is always research, I'm always seeking and there is a logical connection throughout that search. This is why I number them [the works]. I number and date them. Maybe one day someone will thank me for it. (Liberman 1956, 133)

Similar to contemporary art and film theorists, Picasso also defined research as an open-ended process beyond the artist's voli-

tion: "[w]hen one starts a painting, one never knows what will come out. When it's finished, once still doesn't know" (Malraux 1975, 260).

Whereas Picasso did not elaborate on how any particular painting generates knowledge, the ways his production can be considered research are evident in transition works such as the oil painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). Condemned by contemporaries as "mad or monstrous" (Chave 1994), later considered a proto-Cubist 'masterpiece' by art critics, and increasingly the object of feminist and decolonial critique for its portrayal of women and "caricatured" African art (Chave 1994, 599), Picasso conducts research along various axes. In *Les Demoiselles*, Picasso built on his inquiry into the work of artists Paul Gauguin, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Henri Matisse, alongside Iberian and African aesthetic practices (*Artsper Magazine* 2019; Blier 2019, 52). Besides interrogating the formal relationships between form, light, and color, he considered broader sociopolitical questions. These included the limits of European realist representation through a transcultural aesthetics, the ability of a two-dimensional medium to represent three-dimensional movement, the decentering of Western male subjectivity due to women's growing autonomy, and the increased presence of African migrants, objects, and knowledge in Europe.

The research process and the way Picasso engages and organizes sources until he generates a new form (or conclusion) is evident in the placing of female figures and how the temporal practice of knowledge production appears spatially. Relying on narratives of Egypt as a cradle of world civilization, the first female body on the left appears as a relatively stable Egyptian 'origin', as if chiseled from rock. The visualization of two figures at the center emerges from Picasso's knowledge of Iberian culture, which he places in the middle of an historical evolution. Lastly, the two images on the right spring from a later study and engagement with African art forms. Separated by a torn backdrop suggesting a break, one of Picasso's conclusions appears to be that as a result of modernity, including the expansion of urban life and colonial migrations, female subjectivity, as the city, is devolving into a 'savage' form (Chave 1994).

Irrespective of Picasso's politics, contemporary visual artist Fiona Campbell has productively developed his largely overlooked assertion of art as research. For Campbell,

[a]rt-making is really a research process, an exploration of a meeting of self and world through some form of material or substance. (Campbell 2019)

Campbell further argues that there are two ways to conceptualize how art as research:

art-making as a 'search through a problem space', a cognitivist view, as opposed to it being a 'phenomenon of emergence,' as phenomenologists and other such people consider it. (Campbell 2019)

The cognitivist perspective emphasizes research as related to a problem (to either finding or solving it). Yet, to the extent that both modes assume there is 'a problem', Campbell favors a paradigm of emergence, where the process is not anchored in a directed or sealed self. In her terms:

in creativity, the self is diffused into the emergent space, becomes part of something else that is not all about oneself, and allows something transformative to take place. (Campbell 2019)

This last conceptualization underscores that artistic knowledge production is embodied but not contained by individuals, an important distinction that I will return to.

Not long after Picasso's assertion, ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin proposed a different way to think of art as inquiry: *cinéma vérité*. Rouch and Morin embodied their method in *Chronique d'un Été*, a 1961 field-altering documentary that integrated analysis and research into the text. Structured around multiple questions, including 'are you happy?', the film explores the lives of a group of residents of Paris that occupy different racial, ethnic, gender, and class positions: Landry, a Black student from the Ivory Coast; Marceline, a French Jewish survivor of the Holocaust; Angelo, a French white worker at a Renault factory; and Marilù, a white Italian immigrant. Rouch and Morin, who appear on screen, seek to advance their research on the state of French society, including its tensions and hierarchies, by creating interventionist scenarios as knowledge experiments.

A thorny scene has Rouch instigating a conversation between Marceline, Landry, and Raymond (another Ivorian student) to investigate the effects of racism. Rouch probes Marceline on her racist views toward Blacks, which end with her laughing at the admission that although she is not attracted to Black men, they are "extraordinary" dancers. Morin shifts the conversation to the conflict in the Belgian Congo, asking participants how they see the Congolese anti-colonial movement and whether it "concerned" them. After various comments on the nature of colonial conditions and the conflict's violence, the film links Landry's observations about pan-African solidarity against European colonial rule to Marceline's remarks on Jewish solidarity against antisemitism. Rouch then probes Landry if he knows what the numbers tattooed by the Nazis on Marceline's arm mean and uses his unfamiliarity to enable Marceline to tell her story as a Holocaust survivor. Regarding the camera's presence as a cat-

alyst, the filmmakers aim to produce a 'truth' that can be fashioned only through the cinematic experience, even though, as this sequence suggests, not all truths are equally made visible.

However, Rouch and Morin's understanding of cinematic inquiry as performative is only part of how cinema is (or can be) thought of as research. More critical to my conceptualization is what, in the 1920s, director Sergei Eisenstein called montage. In English, montage is usually translated as 'editing', yet essential dimensions of what Eisenstein (and other filmmakers) mean by montage are lost. Montage, for instance, is not simply adding one shot to another. In Eisenstein's words:

> It resembles a creation – rather than a sum of its parts – from the circumstance that in every such juxtaposition *the result is qualitatively* distinguishable from each component element viewed separately. (Eisenstein 1969, 7-8)

In addition, Eisenstein defined montage as a general artistic method and used examples from film, theater, fiction, riddles, and painting:

> [montage] is […] a phenomenon invariably met with in all cases where we have to deal with juxtaposition of two facts, two phenomena, two objects. (4)

In this formulation, montage is an imaginative act that results in both something different (a new form) and something 'more' (a new knowledge).

Equally significant, Eisenstein was among the first to consider that the ultimate goal and power of montage goes beyond the text; it must activate spectators:

> The task that confronts him [director] is to transform this image into a few basic *partial representations* which, in their combination and juxtaposition, shall evoke in the consciousness and feelings of the spectator, reader, or auditor, that same initial general image which originally hovered before the creative artist. (30-1)

Moreover, Eisenstein described filmmakers as "researchers" who, rather than linking images "in a chain" (as fellow theorist V. Pudovkin suggested) produce concepts from "the collision of two given factors" (37).

Building on the work of Eisenstein (and others), French director Jean-Luc Godard moves the concept of cinema as inquiry into more complex directions. According to Godard, montage encompasses two dimensions. The first is what happens within the uncut frame – the spatial relationships that are filmed, or montage "in space" (Godard 1956, 30). The second is what most theorists generally mean by mon-

tage and refers to the linking of two uncut sequences together, what he described as montage "in time". For writer Steven Pressfield, this ability to connect is key to individual

> talent: the innate power to discover the hidden connection between two things – images, ideas, words – that no one else has seen before, link them, and create for the world a third, utterly unique work. (Pressfield 2002, 8)

For Godard, however, this process is not about personal genius. Instead, following Merleau-Ponty, it requires choosing two or more things (events, facts, images), and combining them to lay bare "the link of the subject to the world, of the subject to others'" (quoted in Witt 2000, 39). Whereas Eisenstein proposed a connection between the director's mind and a viewer's emotions, Godard emphasized that montage goes beyond this dyad. Even further, Godard understood montage as a practice capable of transforming subjectivity:

> It [montage] was something that filmed not things, but the relationships between things. That is, people saw relationships; first of all, they saw a relationship with themselves. (Godard 1980, 175)[3]

In part due to the praxes of anticolonial, Black, feminist, indigenous, queer, and other social movements, the concept of cinema as inquiry is increasingly developed by multimodal artists of color. A significant figure is Trinh T. Minh-ha, who describes her practice as a "cinema as research and exploration" (Olivieri, Minh-ha 2022, 177), focused on raising "the basic questions of existence as generated by a certain situation, a certain community, and applicable across cultural contexts" (178). Although Minh-ha's work is in critical dialogue with canonical European and US production by men, her work is not primarily grounded in these cinematic histories and philosophical traditions. This different formation has considerable consequences: it shifts the knowing subject and her questions while reconceptualizing the relationship between subjectivity, embodiment, politics, time, and aesthetics.

> If my films are different from other filmmakers' works that I love, it's mainly because of the way one engages basic notions such as, among others, those of the individual and the communal or of the external and the internal. These need not be binaries. (182)

In addition, Minh-ha's concept of cinema as research encompasses more aspects of film practice than cinematic montage, including the

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3 If not otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

invisibilized labor of cultivating an audience, which is often more challenging for women and people of color:

> What happens in an encounter is an in-between that belongs to neither self nor other. And film itself is a form of research, albeit a research in every single step taken with the processes of film-making and building audiences: writing, shooting, editing, music composing, public debate, and more. These are all based on materials that do not pre-exists but come with heightened attention as body and mind go on the alert in the encounter. (182)

In other terms, "[a]s research, the film is still a groping in the dark, waiting for the form to manifest itself to the maker-cum-viewer" (183-4). For Minh-ha, a cinema of inquiry thus requires not only montage in space and montage in time, nor solely filmmakers and spectators. It also needs what I term 'montage of publics'; that is, social encounters that multiply textual and extratextual links beyond the screen.

3 The Arts of Justice

The capacity of the visual arts to produce knowledge, reconstitute subjects, and relate spectators raises the question, "To what ends?" Art-based researchers such as Eisner believed that the arts' main task is evoking emotion, which in turn could generate the needed "empathy that makes action possible" (Eisner 2008, 3). Not coincidentally, he uses the social impact of Picasso's (1937) *Guernica* – an anti-war painting depicting the Nazi bombardment of a small Spanish town – to illustrate how viewers "are moved in ways that art makes" (Eisner 2008, 9).

For many modern artists, art's contribution to politics is to challenge dominant epistemologies and assumptions about society. In Picasso's well-known terms,

> You have to wake people up. To revolutionize their way of identifying things. You've got to create images they won't accept. (Malraux 1975, 260)

Godard would likely agree. However, he also suggests that in addition to destabilizing hegemonic knowledge, cinema as a mode of inquiry is linked to envisioning justice:

> There's a shot before, and another one after. And between the two, there's a physical support, that's cinema. We see a rich person and a poor person and there's a rapprochement, and we say: it's not

fair. Justice comes from rapprochement. And afterward, weighing it on the scales. The very idea of montage is the scales of justice. (Godard, Péretié [1987] 2022)

Cinema as inquiry then also encompass a complex process that invites spectators to act as collaborators in pursuing justice.

That cinema and other visual arts documents also make them an archive of past collective struggles and thwarted possibilities. In this sense, art may articulate a 'prophesy', and support structures of feeling and ways of being that are historically present but suppressed by the coloniality of power and knowledge (Quijano 2007). In this regard, the potential for justice may be most significant in the hands of artists who mobilize montage as part of a range of countervisual practices to affirm "the right to look" in defiance of hegemonic visuality (Mirzoeff 2011, 473). These texts generate knowledge and facilitate social connection by inventing forms, activating memory, and creating or restoring the links between people and places that have been deleted, destroyed, or distorted by the apparatus of the visible, including the mass media, monuments, museums, and similar manifestations of hegemonic visuality.

A fruitful example of how montage can produce 'just knowledge' is the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1987). Basquiat hardly spoke on how his visual works generated knowledge. In fact, he avoided questions about his approach and the role of concepts in art-making. He also rarely used the word 'justice' to describe his practice. Yet his works contain extensive notes referencing sources, methods, and questions about justice. Through 'montage in space', Basquiat juxtaposed images, words, and symbols, to create a dense sensorial archive that revised, related, and recontextualized Black, Caribbean, indigenous, and other knowledges, affects, and memories. In the process, Basquiat produced critical and complex anti-colonial knowledge regarding the unjust politico-symbolic order that resulted from the conquest and settlement of the Americas and the extension of the European imperial project to Africa (Negrón-Muntaner with Ramírez 2017).

The above is evident in most of Basquiat's visual texts. In some cases, Basquiat visualizes the problematics of justice as montage. In "Created Equal" (1984), an image of a black man's head is framed by chains and placed below the phrase "WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS", written three times, then followed by "1776" and the crossed-over phrase "~~ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL~~". A similar impulse is present in *Native Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari* (1982). In this work, Basquiat juxtaposes the image of a Black male figure carrying a box labeled "ROYAL SALT INC©" beside a sketchier image of a white man carrying a firearm, annotated with allusions to colonial and racial capitalism. Intervening the visual elements through collage, crossing over words, smudging, copying, improvising, and

making use of lines and arrows, among other strategies, Basquiat directs the reader's eye to consider alternative associations that disrupt knowledge that has become so naturalized that it appears as "empirical truths" (Farris Thompson 2011, 38).

A comparable intervention using montage in space and time is John Akomfrah's 2013 film *The Stuart Hall Project*, about the eponymous cultural theorist. Methodologically, Akomfrah employs montage to

> connect apparently disconnected things, events, times and space into a kaleidoscopic image that mirrors Hall's theorisation of the black diasporic subject. (Harvey 2022, 84)

Specifically, Akomfrah relates the music of Miles Davis, Hall's television appearances and speeches; family photographs and home movies; footage and photos of everyday life, written text on screen, newsreels, and documentary photography on various geopolitical and cultural junctures. These include the post-World War II migration of Caribbean people to Britain, the Vietnam War, the Black Power Movement, the Hungarian uprising, the Cuban revolution, Paris 68, and the rise of Rock and Roll, among others.

As Basquiat, Akomfrah links diverse images to better understand the relationship of history and subjectivity and the workings of empire. He also suggests how through the nexus of empire, war, and transportation technologies, people have become conjoined in newly (inequitable) ways. This understanding is present in the many shots of trains, helicopters and airplanes that often accompany the connection of geography of distant and distinct places. Montage similarly allows Akomfrah to underscore and expand fundamental dimensions of Hall's thought. Just as film's associations are often unexpected, montage embodies Hall's observation that "the only interest in history that it is not yet finally wrapped up. Another history is always possible. Another turning is waiting to happen". Consistent with Hall's view that "every time, I have to teach it in a different way, or read it in a different way, and I see something that I have not seen before", montage is a way of seeing anew that is both method and politics.

Akomfrah thus deploys montage to investigate how and why expanding linkages between subjects enables just relations. In the process, Akomfrah opens a path for audiences to reconceptualize and to see the global nature of racism, displacement, and coloniality in their own lives and in the lives of others. Through signifying "affective proximity" (Akomfrah, Eshun 2017, 42), Akomfrah configures some of the ways that a montage of publics may lead to justice: he links himself to Hall, to others in the African diaspora and most of the world's peoples. And he invites viewers to do the same.

If Akomfrah's montage seeks justice by affiliation at a world scale, visual artist Tracey Moffatt considers how women take justice into

their hands every day. In Moffatt's 1987 experimental short, *Nice Coloured Girls: Captains*, three Australian indigenous women "cruise" through Kings Cross to pick up a "captain" (a drunken white man). The film's plot revolves around the young women's goal for the captain to pay for their night out without providing anything in return. The story, however, is not a realist drama. Instead, through the "counterpoint of sound, image, and printed text",[4] the film connects the enduring coloniality of the present with the colonial rule of the past. Further, by producing counterknowledge regarding colonial histories, the film imagines justice as freedom from hierarchical power.

An instance of Moffatt's method involves the juxtaposition of a soundscape referencing a rural Australian environment, and the voice of a white actor reading passages from the diary of colonist Lieutenant William Bradley recalling the first settlement. The knowledge formed by this juxtaposition is amplified and anchored by the film's resolution: even though the 'coloured girls' engage in illegal acts such as stealing and taking advantage of the drunken captain, in contextualizing these transgressions in the broader history of white settler colonialism and colonial sexual exploitation, the narrative does not punish them. The narrative instead restores the women's status as autonomous beings and removes the requirement of being submissive to the (colonial) law as a prerequisite for being free of violence.

Moffatt's later film, *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1990), also illustrates montage as justice but offers a different way forward. A partial remake of the 1955 feature drama *Jedda the Uncivilized*, *Night Cries* tells the story of an Aboriginal woman raised by a white family who dies after becoming involved with an Aboriginal man. Again, deploying a non-realist aesthetic, the film investigates the toll visited on a middle-aged indigenous woman (played by scholar Marcia Langton) taking care of her white adopted mother (Agnes Hardwick) in an isolated house in the desert.

An emblematic sequence to consider the relationship between montage and justice features the daughter consuming an apple and looking out barred windows while reading a brochure for the "South Molle Island Resort". After the mother gives up on trying to eat, the daughter feeds her at the same time she gazes at the family photographs, underscoring the ways visuality constructs a family narrative. The daughter then takes the mother to the outhouse and lights a cigarette in a surreal landscape that contains seemingly disparate objects: an animal skull, a wheelchair, and a bucket that the she uses as a seat. By associating these objects, the scene exemplifies hu-

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4 Women Make Movies. Catalogue, 2022. `https://www.wmm.com/catalog/film/nice-colored-girls`.

man fragility and the unequal impact of race and gender hierarchies on care while refusing to segregate or oppose Aboriginal and settler forms of knowledge in a simple binary. As scholar Janet Watson has suggested, montage facilitates the creation of "intersections of imported artefact and local meaning are sites of ideological contestation" (Watson 2008). In this process, Moffatt's work is a generative instance of art as research of emergence (Campbell 2019), where the outcome consists of questions about what constitutes justice rather than self-evident adjudication.

Art as inquiry then joins images, contexts, and spectators into the work of knowledge production or the ongoing collective project to "know together" (Monaco 1977, 164). This recalls Godard's notion of montage as ethics and the pursuit of what he termed "con-science" fiction, which requires one

> to be conscious of our selves as existential beings, to be aware of the environment in which we exist, is to have 'conscience' – an ethical sense of relationships and actions. (164)

Fittingly, the etymology of 'conscience' includes the notion of "a knowing of a thing together with another person". It also encompasses a "sense of fairness or justice".[5]

4 The Ends of Knowledge

Undoubtedly, cinema can be understood a mode of inquiry and a form of (and for) justice. Yet, it has limits. Although cinema can reveal, connect or reframe, not all can be created, found, or be connected. Moreover, the fact that pieces need to be associated inherently suggests a border, a loss, and an epistemic trauma that may not be known may or be can be addressed. In film theorist, Jacques Aumont's terms,

> Considered coldly […] editing is nothing more than the reiterated production of these visual and mental traumas, showing us events cut off from their causes and consequences. (Aumont 2014, 11)

No less significant, montage relies on what is or can be rendered visible, which is "only a small part of the visible" (Comolli 1980, 141). Equally constraining is that relatively few people have access to the practices and technologies of image-making, which in turn have their limitations as the commodified product of colonial and capitalist power, which favor particular perspectives, geographies, and forms (re-

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5 https://www.etymonline.com/word/conscience.

alism). Recognition of knowledge is also not a given; it depends on power relations mainly congealed in legal, media, and academic institutions, and the reproduction of narratives that sustain social and other hierarchies.

To the extent that most films and visual texts tell stories, inquiry entails symbolic and political violence. Although stories provide access to some forms of justice and truth, they contain or suppress other forms. This disjunction speaks to the core paradox of narrative: a story can provide insight only by selectivity and specificity, which cannot encompass it all. Knowledge production, including storytelling, is intrinsically related to power, which orders and serves desires and is always at risk of extracting the performers' and spectators' emotional and political investment. In this regard, no narrative is innocent, neutral, or individual.

Accordingly, the kind of knowledge or truth cinema may produce is provisional, and contested. For instance, *Chronique*'s filmmakers (like Picasso) raised questions and engaged Black and women's archives. At the same time, both disallowed African knowledge and reinforced the hierarchy of European knowing subjects. Pursuing knowledge is also not necessarily the most capacious method of engaging with questions or the world's inequities. In Minh-ha's words,

> We don't always have to operate with the knowing mode, approaching a subject as if we have to know all about it, and have that knowledge be unquestionably wrapped up for the spectator. A non-knowing mode, which is not ignorance, allows us to wander, wonder, and start afresh. This has been a constant in my work, while challenging history, his-story or Western historicization in its linear accounts of events has been a recurrent thread in my films. (Olivieri, Minh-ha 2022, 187)

In addition, as writer Sven Lindqvist has compellingly argued, what prevents transformation may not necessarily be a lack of knowledge: "[w]hat is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions" (Lindqvist 1997, 1).

Speaking to the current digital juncture, Aumont states that the proliferation of images that cannot be connected curtails the ethics of montage and the method of cinema as inquiry (Aumont 2014, 63-5). Yet even if cinema as inquiry becomes the praxes for proportionally fewer artists and thinkers due to the web and the ascent of interactive media forms such as video games, it will remain a life-or-death endeavor for many. At a moment where knowledge is commodified, the volume of misinformation increases, and a handful of institutions control digital access, cinema as inquiry may be more urgent than ever. In this context, cinema's most deeply political dimension may rest in acknowledging that not all the world can be rendered visi-

ble. Therefore, cinematic practice must assume rather than deny the lack, use its knowledge of the gaps, and turn the traumas of the cut into more equitable and just forms of relation.

In other words, as I have learned in my films-in-progress *Paraíso* and *Valor y Cambio, the Movie*, what I have termed "decolonial digging" remains a fundamental pursuit. For Godard, digging is a permanent disposition of curiosity needed for cinema as inquiry. But I would suggest that digging can likewise be thought of as method to activate subjugated knowledge. This conceptualization is close to how Afro-Latino historian and theorist Arturo Alfonso Schomburg used the notion of "digging" in his classic essay "The Negro Digs Up His Past" (1925) where he linked the knowledge of Black history to present possibilities. Digging, however, is not just a method through which subjects can excavate buried knowledges. It is a way to claim justice as is the literal case of Patricio Guzmán's 2010 film *Nostalgia for the Light*. In this text, Guzmán tells the stories of Chilean women who, with small shovels, dig in the vast desert of Atacama to find the bones of their loved ones who were murdered by the Chilean military. Associating the women's search with the search for life in the universe, Guzman's digging is method, politics, and ethics.

Ultimately, approaching cinema as inquiry entails a commitment to dig, relate, and connect in ways we cannot completely understand and never master. Like every political and artistic practice, cinema is always unfinished and involves imperfect 'attempts' where filmmakers cannot help but fail. But sometimes, we fail beautifully, at least for a moment, and this alone is worth sharing.

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