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Destabilizing Histories: (Re-)appropriation in Photography and Cinema

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At the heart of this volume of *Cinergie: Il Cinema e le altre Arti* lies a tension between framing and re-framing. The contributions here focus on both how visual material sutured into an overarching ideological (colonial, war, self-ethnography, etc.) project are laden with inner contradictions, as well as how various artistic re-appropriation strategies aim to refashion this initial discourse. These contradictions often stem from a conflict between image and text, artistic project and official demands, private and public personae, revealing not only the limit of the authorial status of photography and film as documents, but how some of them simultaneously confirm and unsettle (Western) representational practices (Low 2018:12). Re-appropriation, a term which has become ubiquitous in the discourse on art, is understood here as the practice of employing pre-existing film or video so as to construct a new filmic or photographic work, whose creative possibilities we grasp as an "inherently subversive activity" (Evans 2009: 13). Our starting point is that buried within a representation is a fundamental instability as to the kind of history that is being inscribed, and most importantly, whose history is being told; therefore it seems particularly fruitful to untangle how visual media destabilize hegemonic narratives, rather than how they constitute them.

In recent scholarship, the 2017 volume of the journal *Décadrages* investigated montage in relation to compilation films and found footage in order to rethink the political dimension embedded within "paradigms of appropriation and the new juxtaposition of found rushes" (Bovier et. al, 2017: 5). Also, Elizabeth Edwards studied photographic collections in relation to the discourse they are supposed to articulate, predicating that they generate not a "certain knowledge" through realism and indexicality but rather an "uncertain one" as they attempt to embody the desire for reassurance in a fragile world (Edwards 2014: 174-175). Furthermore, while affirming the instability of meaning, Linda Steer's research on surrealist re-appropriation of photographic images distinguishes between two operational levels. The first level of appropriation is the initial acquisition of the film, the image, the audio material, and its integration in ethnological museums, private collections, visual repositories, etc. This act sutures the material into a presumably scientific, anthropological, historical, or fictional project, creating the initial setting for its meaning. "This meaning, however, is not stable, not complete. It shifts." (Steer 2008: 65). The second level is the re-appropriation of visual material through artistic practice which, by default, encompasses the initial appropriation while subverting it. It instigates a radical break with the first flush of meaning photographs and films convey, as it moves towards new interpretative frames (Steer 2008: 70). Though we recognize what Constantin Nakassis calls "a foundational ambivalence within the category of indexicality: between, on the one hand, immediacy and presence and, on the other hand, mediation and representation" (2018: 283), we wish to highlight how the instability or the uncertainty of meaning is a productive lens through which the formulation of history can be studied and re-negotiated. What is at stake in this analysis is the possibility of disrupting what John Tagg calls "the discursive frame" used in order to bestow meaning and function on visual material (Tagg 2009: 235) which is central to the latter's "potentially infinite recodability" (Edwards, 2009: 4).

Destabilizing Histories: (Re-)Appropriation in Photography and Cinema studies the tension between both of these levels which it conceives of in relation to framing and reframing respectively, and reflects on the instability that underlies them, and on the various artistic strategies that bring these uncertainties to light. The selected articles thus zoom in on instances of discursive ruptures and its challenges, as well as on those of recodability and its prospects. Also, instead of focusing on inner contradictions *or* re-appropriation, we perceive these two strategies as intertwined: The belief in the inconsistency of the meaning of visual material is at the heart of the latter's artistic transformations, which in turn, bring further ruptures to light; therefore creating a double feedback loop.

In fact, cinema and photography's function as sources for shaping historical narratives runs in parallel to their ability to provide a "reckoning with history" (Tucker and Campt 2009). They are both the foundational elements of the historical narrative and the agents of its downfall. Our writers demonstrate how this foundational process is burdened by its own internal contradictions, excesses, and coeval competing narratives that cannot be purged, nor should they be. By probing into them, this volume aims at unmasking the very constructed dimension of the narratives which films and photographs are meant to articulate. In doing so, it reveals the various interpretative stakes underpinning visual material that undercut the dominant line and it seeks to historicize the failure of evidentiary and documentary claims, thus complicating photographic and filmic epistemologies and histories. For example: Eduardo Morettin's article reveals the ways in which latent contradictions in Jean Renoir's film *Le Bled* lead to its failure to function as a monument to French colonialism,

thus fracturing Renoir's view of his own legacy and excluding it from subsequent historiographies.

Moreover, the use of pre-existing visual material to construct a new filmic or photographic work can indeed be traced back to experimental cinema and to the international avant-garde, however, it is re-appropriation's challenge to the discursive frame and not the continuity or concordance with it that is of particular interest for our volume. By investigating how artists re-appropriate (anthropological, scientific, or historical, etc.) photography and film footage, and how they re-read them against their own original trace, as in against the very object whose presence they inscribe, this volume centers on how images are deployed against the history they are thought to depict. By unpinning the significance projected unto the material, these acts of re-appropriation reveal *whose* history is being suppressed and how another history can be accounted for.

For example: Cecilia Järdemar's article about her collaborative project with Congolese artist Freddy Tsimba and Swedish artist Anna Ekman reflects the transformative power of art conducted within a symmetrical context to use a pile of glass-negatives's to both counteract narratives about Sweden's presumed colonial innocence and to tackle questions of restitution of photographs to their rightful communities.

Indeed, the critique of colonial and neocolonial histories as well as their resulting violence guides several of our articles. These historical asymmetries account for the extraordinarily large photographic, cinematic, and audio archives in ethnological museums, university collections, etc. (Geary 1988), and their supposed "truths" about the world. Yet, it is not enough to "know" that a film or a photography collection played an important role in colonial nation-building; what our contributors share is an investment in the relationship between archive and memory that Hal Foster (2004) has long theorized about, and the desire to recalibrate it through various modes of intervention. For example: By choosing an enigmatic glass-slide negative which is challenging to interpret, Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez demonstrates how Runa Islam's installation *Emergence* uses an unstable index to challenge the Western gaze. Another method is the material alteration of filmic footage through montage and juxtaposition expressed in Martínez-Bonilla's analysis of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's videos that elucidate the entanglement of Italian fascism and colonial history.

Yet, building national identities through the making visible of desired communities and and through the anthropological typification of human beings seen as Others are not exclusively extroverted projects, but rather ones that are often accompanied by an inward gaze within a dialogical construction constituting the Other in relation to a Self that is idealized, imagined, or "civilized". Paola Prestes' examination of Herbert Duschenes' amateur films reveals how in the midst of the creation of a family fiction with the artist's son at its center, discrimination and race relationships come to the surface through the presence of the ill-at-ease unnamed domestic worker in the frame. Moreover, Hemen Heidari's research about Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* (Iran 1991) discloses how the director's creation of a self-image through the use of various filmic materials cannot be disassociated from the collective memory of power and of religion in Iran hinting at internal discurisve struggles visible in the materiality of the film itself. Giuseppe Previtali's article predicates that the reductive understanding of ISIS' visual productions as "barbaric" gravely misses the counter-narrative embedded in them, and that is conceived of as a bigger subversion of the Western representation of war than what traditional readings assume.

Consequently, we have decided to organize the articles in pairs. Each individual text either presents the instability of visual material in relation to the economy of meaning and its discontents, or demonstrates how artists use visual material to create alternative narratives through transformation. Together, they zoom in on instances (past or present) of renegotiation of the relationships between Self and Other, understood in its various historical manifestations; such as colonialism and its asymmetries, the rapport between masters and servants within the same household, the visual legacy of war, etc. in order to assert that instability has always been integral rather than contingent to the image.

Starting with "Cinema and Colonial Exhibitions: *Le Bled* (Jean Renoir, 1929) and its historical horizon", Eduardo Morettin analyzes a lesser-known work by the French director. The fact that most readings of Renoir's filmography start either before or after *Le Bled* is indicative of the silence around its relationship to French colonial ideology. Expected to present the touristic parts of Algeria, Renoir shot most of it in the desert and through the story was more-suited to the travelogue genre, the film was inspired by American Western movies. Despite the thematic consistency with the *Exposition du Centenaire de la Conquête de l'Algérie 1830-1930*

where it was supposed to be featured, Morettin studies how *Le Bled* failed to operate as "colonial enough", as he unpacks its inner contradictions and its ultimate failure to meet ideological demands. In doing so, he ascertains that colonialism was never a monolithic project, but was rather dependent on negotiations between State and artist, leading at times to ruptures between them. By looking into the breaks *Le Bled* inadvertently articulates in relation to colonialism, we can better grasp the discursive fragility of the latter. Maria Gourieva's article traces the circulation of Antoin Sevruguin's photographs in Finnish/Swedish author Ivar Lassy's *Behind Lattice and Veil: Open-Minded Reports Of My Persian Encounters* that creates orientalist, lyrical, and ethnographic stories around the depicted women. Often describing their physical appearance at great lengths and meticulously studying their gestures, Lassy lumps all Persian women together, considering them mere observers of history who are in turn, observed by him. Gourieva employs the idea of "the shell" to conceptualize the ability of a photograph to appropriate and contain various meanings when it migrates between contexts. She argues that re-appropriation and the multiplicity of interpretation are central to the history of photography. Still focusing on Sevruguin's legacy, this time in a contemporary context, Juan Carlos Guerrero-Hernandez unpacks artist Runa Islam's re-appropriation of one of his enigmatic glass negatives which a priori resists a clear historical frame for her installation *Emergence* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. By surveying Islam's strategy to project, freeze, develop, and loop the glass slide, the author shows us how she suspends the ruins of the Orientalist gaze and invites the spectator to take the time to confront it rather than to dethrone it immediately. Guerrero-Hernandez's text embodies the two main postulates of this volume: The inconsistency of Sevruguin's image as well as Islam's transformative action. Moreover, in "Re-writing history / Re-constructing memory: Uses and re-uses of archival and found footage in Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's *Barbaric Land* (*Pays Barbare*, 2013)", Mariana Martínez-Bonilla studies the various methods artists Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi use such as montage, tinting and slowing down the original reproduction speed of the images in order to articulate an uneasy connection between Italian fascism and colonial history. Her article reveals the subversive potential of re-appropriation and its capacity to weave difficult continuities between past and present, that otherwise risk remaining silenced.

Moving from collective memory to personal history, narrating one's own life story is no easy task as Paola Presetes' in-depth look at Herbert Duschenes' amateur filmic work while exiled in Brazil demonstrates. In fact, while focused on his son as the main protagonist of his home videos, Duschenes' eurocentric gaze seeps through the cracks as the distressed and unnamed domestic worker makes her appearance, thus questioning the innocence and playfulness of the situation. Prestes' article reveals that the stakes are high when studying amateur and exile films, since they intertwine both a collective and a personal view that is at its most intimate, still deeply political. Furthermore, Hossein (Hemen) Heidari's "Archival re-appropriation and discontents of self-cine-identification in Iranian cinema" scrutinizes Mohsen Makhmalbaf's movie *Once Upon A Time, Cinema* (Iran, 1991) in which the director refracts his own biography in relation to early cinematography in Iran (1900) and in the post-revolution Islamic Republic (1979) by appropriating archival footage from various periods. The phantasmal style of the film relates to the country's history both on the level of materiality and of story-telling, exemplifying the challenges of crafting one's own Self-image outside of any national framework. Also, focusing on Zoya Akhtar's movie *Gully Boy* (2019), Damini Kulkarni's investigation demonstrates both the risks and the potential of re-using popular digital content, taken away from its 'original' context and placed into a commercial Bollywood narrative: The danger of erasing the former's subversive potential runs in parallel to the allowing of a spatial imaginary in which counter cultures and marginalized voices are integrated into the dominant discourse. It invites us to think about re-appropriation less as a wholesale emancipatory endeavor and more as an activity with its own paradoxes and negotations to straddle.

The relationship between various collective histories is at times antithetical as Giuseppe Previtali's article "This is How We See the War. Counter-narratives of the Conflict in Contemporary Jihadist Visuality" shows. By centering on the visual productions by the Islamic State that are often considered "archaic" and are thus not questioned at their most disruptive, Previtali's authorial position is radical in its assumption that there are indeed coeval approaches to the depiction of war and violence existing outside of the Western representational systems and that actively challenge it by creating their own counter-narratives. To this, Cecilia Järdemar's cooperation with Congolese artist Freddy Tsimba and Swedish artist Anna Ekman offers an alternative. Through their joint project, they give voice to the story of the entanglements between Swedish and Congolese colonial histories by simultaneously problematizing the actions of Swedish missionaries in the African continent and

taking into account the demands and the necessity of repatriating photographic material to their rightful owners. Lastly, my interview with artist Tal Adler and curator Anna Szöke regarding their artistic research and curatorial work on the skull collection of Vienna's Natural History Museum reflects on the deeply contentious nature of human remains as well as photography collections in the archives, while seeking to gain insight into the process of artistically-transforming and curating such a heritage along with the various pitfalls of such an endeavor. Placed at the end of this volume, the interview serves to question the limits and the ethics of artistic re-appropriation and of exhibitions.

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