

# CINEMA AS ASSEMBLY

by Mao Mollona

“The roots of the foreign film script climate run very deep. Take the verse from the Bible: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth’. If a script based on this principle were submitted to a Maori panel it is likely it would be rejected straight off because, from a Maori point of view, the command is fascist.” Barry Barclay, *Our Images*.

“Long forgotten or ignored by radical movements as relics of a world destined to disappear, indigenous commons are returning today to the foreground of political action, as an inspirational force and the only clear alternative form of organization to contemporary capitalism.” Sylvia Federici, *Reenchanting the World*.

“One ought to imagine that at the moment the shutter closes in order to reopen again in a fraction of a second – to proclaim a new state, a new border, or a new museum – the people whose lives are forever going to be changed by the act are rebelling and do not let the shutter sanction such acts as *faits accomplis*. Ariella Azoulay, *Unlearning Imperialism*.

The *Cinema as Assembly* project celebrates the power of images in bringing people together and valorizing mutual and cooperative life-forms. Following the tenets of “critical anthropology” (Hage, 2012) and the method of “undoing imperialism” (Azoulay, 2019) cinema as assembly seeks to reconnect the cinematic image with the histories, agencies and voices of the people, objects and social relations that have been erased from mainstream forms of representation and values, as opposed to capitalist value in the singular, and imagine forms of living otherwise; that is, concrete alternatives to the current regime of patriarchal and racial capitalism.

The *Cinema as Assembly* project draws on the legacy of revolutionary cinema – black, indigenous and anti-capitalist – to rediscover and reactivate forms of sociability, activism and “good life” – such as consciousness circles, horizontal decision-making, cooperative labour, self-determination, solidarity economy, and direct action – that have been either erased by state and corporate violence or co-opted into the aestheticization of politics and the domestication of activism by creative capitalism.

The project has four components: (1) a film programme that activates a series of local discussions in collaboration with social centres, and cultural and civic organizations in Madrid, Venice, Milan, Naples, Istanbul, Beyluen, Siuraarjuk, Bissau, and New York (2) a symposium with international filmmakers (3) the production of films, film residencies and visual archives across the nodes of the project (4) the generation and mapping of alternative economies of film production and circulation underpinning our vision of the cultural commons, intended as an inclusive and sustainable socio-economic space.

## **BACKGROUND: CINEMA, CAPITALISM AND INTERSECTIONALISM.**

The story of cinema starts with workers. The film *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory In Lyon (La Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon, 1895)* by the brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière, shows the approximately 100 workers at a factory for photographic goods in Lyon-Montplaisir leaving through two gates and exiting the frame to both sides.

But why does the story of cinema begin with the end of work? Is it because, as it has been suggested, it is impossible to represent work from the perspective of labour and only from the point of view of capital, because the revolutionary horizon of the working-class coincides with the end of work? After all, the early revolutionary art avantgarde, had an ambiguous relationship with capitalism: it provided both a critique of bourgeoisie sociability, whilst also reproducing the commodity form. Even the cinema of Eisenstein, which so subverted the bourgeois sense of space, time and personhood, at the same time, standardised and commodified reality with techniques of framing and editing that moulded images on the commodity form, for instance in stereotypical representations of the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat.

Cinema was born at the intersection of industrial capitalism and empire, when images were endorsed with the animistic power of capturing the invisible. It put objects in motion, froze the proletariat into an alienated and spectatorial consciousness (as described by Lukács) and at the same time, made it productive and docile through techniques of chrono-photography, ergonomics, body mapping and ethnographic film. Early cinema oscillates between mass distraction, mass production and mass extermination, and brings together different modes of representation, social relations and forms of knowledge: documentary evidence, popular entertainment; magics, voyeurism, patriarchal social reproduction; ethnographic nostalgia, scientific violence and propaganda.

Like Eisenstein and Vertov, the documentary movement founded by John Grierson in the UK aimed not just at representing the new proletariat but also at sustaining the alliance between the working-class and the state at a time of early construction of what would become Keynesian capitalism. By the 1970s social realist films were under attack from both feminist and black film collectives for several reasons: their voyeuristic distance, rooted in uneven class relations between the filmmaker (often male, white and middle class) and the subjects (often 'the poor', 'the marginal' or 'the working-class'); their victimising approach; their lack of intersectional narratives; and their excessively materialistic and productivist focus on work, poverty and inequality.

The Third-Cinema movement in the global south radicalised cinema, using it as tool of political mobilization against military regimes and colonial powers. Refusing the imperialist forms of the commercial Hollywood films (first cinema) and of the European auteur cinema (second cinema), 'Third Cinema' devised democratic and participatory film processes, a popular and non-elitist visual grammar, grassroots forms of production and distribution, and a powerful realist style that reflected 'allegorically', the condition of underdevelopment and "hunger" (Rocha, 1969) of the global south. Cinema as tool of decolonial freedom, is a way

of unlearning imperialism, of challenging the imperial ways of looking, not just inside the frame of representation, but also with regards to the social relations and power structure surrounding it. An unlearning that for Ariella Azoulay, implies the acknowledgment of what the camera doesn't show.

In 1996, speaking at the British Film Institute, the film-maker John Akomfrah announced the death of Third Cinema, that is, of that political cinema aligned with a socialist, decolonising impulse, but framed within the old modernist space of the nation state and with the industrial working-class as privileged revolutionary subject. The aim of the Black Audio Video Film Collective was to ground image making in the diasporic experience of racism and violent nationalism, through which empire had reconstituted itself in Britain, stirring the documentary tradition towards a multisensory, expanded and prefigurative search for the form of cinema to come (Eshun,) and based on transnational post-cinematic diasporic spaces (Enwezor).

During the 1990s, with cultural globalization or multiculturalism hiding racial ideology through ethnic naturalizations, media projects among indigenous communities in the global south opened new possibilities for the use of cinema. Fourth cinema, as described by Maori filmmaker Barry Barclay, rejects the nationalistic rhetoric of third cinema or the aim of creating a universal popular grammar and insists instead on generating community-based languages and processes, putting at the core of the filmic process the reproduction of indigenous knowledge and culture, to counter the genocidal violence of settlers' states. According to indigenous philosopher Linda Tuhiwai Smith, indigenous activism in the 1960s and 1970s was driven by a sense of outrage and injustice about the failure of education, democracy and research to deliver social change for people who were oppressed and in such she saw a clear parallel with Marxist politics. At the same time, however, she argues, there is a clear differentiation between Indigenous and Marxist positions, these latter being rooted in European history and its evolutionary and teleological idea of progress that do not map onto much indigenous theorising. In the 1990s, Indigenous films made by the community, for the community, were used by settlers' states to co-opt indigenous communities into accepting land privatization and mineral extraction by foreign capital.

Instead of reifying, anthropologically, the categories of indigenous or black cinema, *Cinema as Assembly* is moved by the desire to generate a space of radical decolonial and antipatriarchal imagination mobilises indigeneity strategically, in terms of "visual sovereignty", intended as a creative act of self-representation and of engagement and deconstruction of representations of Indigenous people made by white people. Likewise, *Cinema as Assembly* celebrates the black radical imagination (Kelley,2015) and imagines cinema as a diasporic poetic space, based on relationality, multiple definitions, mediations and remediations.

## **ECONOMIES OF FILM PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION**

The economy of film production in first and second cinema is steeped in competition, vying for scarce funding opportunities, and relying on market-driven exploitation potential to receive support. The studio system grants security to large scale productions but is owner of the copyright and influences creative choices to maximize exploitation. As Gabriel states, "the sole purpose of such industries is to turn out entertainment products which will generate

profits” (188, 2011). In the independent sector, financing usually comes from mixed sources- through public support like supranational, national, regional funds, through tax credits and rebates, through festivals and private equity investments, etc. Each comes at a cost- whether creative or ethical. Independent film always struggles with a scarcity of funding, creating an environment of precarity that affects creative and social aspects of the production. Perhaps most importantly is how time is shaped by this constraint; time that can mean the difference for an actor feeling safe in a new environment on set, bending with the will of nature as the rain and clouds pass, or a gesture of solidarity for a run-down crew. More money for the production means more time that can be procured, more motivation to work together, to stretch hours, patience and the collaborative spirit. If a film set can run smoothly because a project is well financed- what other possible modes of recognition can achieve a similar effect in the context of community-centered and horizontal production processes? What would a solidarity economy of film production rather than a competitive market-driven one look like?

In addition to the competitive economy of film financing, the same question exists in terms of the economy of power relations in filmmaking. A production is in many ways at its core, a collaborative process. Each crew member offers something invaluable and unique to the production. Yet this collaboration is rigidly vertical in nature; it can be likened to a military chain of command with the director in auteur cinema and producers in the studio system at the helm. An auteur is celebrated for their uncompromising position and unique vision and style. The wish of the auteur is to wrest the film free from the grip of studios or even producers in order to be sole owner of the film. A sense of entitlement permeates the set and establishes a rigid relational order in both first and second cinema. What would a solidarity economy in terms of relationality that is based on practices of collective and creative commoning look like in this context? How can inherent power contradictions be revealed in order to break down the apparatus of these relations to allow for something else to emerge? How could the idea of copyright be reconceived to reflect these relations? Can we imagine the cinematic commons as an internationalist relational spaces of production and circulation of images based on anti-authorial forms of making, owning and circulating images? (Nagib, 2021). *Cinema as Assembly* brings to the fore a specific DIY, community-based, relational and amateur ethics that breaks with the alienated professionalism of commercial and auteur cinema.

The economy of film distribution also relies on market-based logic and notions of exclusivity. It is at this stage of a film’s life that it becomes commodity and profit takes precedent over access. To pay back investors, filmmakers must seek distribution where holdback periods can affect theatrical circulation or sell to platforms like Netflix, Amazon and HBO whose criteria are aleatory and entirely market oriented. The broken nature of distribution is tightly intertwined with the problems of financing- film sales is a buyer’s market, leaving little to the filmmaker or producers in terms of recoupment or net profits. Often to carry out theatrical runs, distributors rely on support from public funds or festival grants to ensure the film’s exhibition. Films can premiere at an A level festival yet never be distributed nationally in its country of origin. While the director and producer may wish for the film to be circulated as widely as possible, the economic logic of film distribution dictates exclusivity as a key position. Further, commercial distribution turns the film into a passive commodity for

consumption and voyeuristic leisure. The fields of experimental film and artists' film, tend to reproduce the market logic of mainstream film industry in the form of the unique copy. (Balsom) But the diffusion of digital technology in the film and art industries also fostered alternative modes of circulation, informal economies and solidarities with the 'poor image' (Steyerl). What could film distribution based on these informal economies and fugitive solidarities amongst subaltern people and images look like? What type of audiences can be born from spaces designed around community building and engagement beyond the screening itself? Rejecting the idea of film distribution as singular event, *Cinema as Assembly* considers alternative forms of cinematic distribution – traveling cinemas and community projects organized by women and people of colour from working class background, labour organizations, public spaces – as sites of contestation and creation of new worlds. It also considers how to feed and sustain distribution in the global south, through processes of translation, subtitling, and infrastructural development.

*Cinema as Assembly* seeks to respond to and challenge the dominant forms of the economy of film production by shifting the focus to horizontal processes of community or territory-based filmmaking and visual sovereignty; by bringing people together through collective improvisation, cooperative labour and activism and by focusing on the process itself over the output.

## **CINEMA as COMMONS**

Commons are worlds in movement. They are communities that create forms of life in common and that together produce, share and are continuously transformed. The term 'commons' can signify three things: (1) a pool of natural and/or human resources, (2) a community of people with reciprocal and sharing relations and (3) acts of working together towards the reproduction of the community (De Angelis, 2017). It is only when these three dimensions come together that we have real commons. 'Commons' also implies specific forms of participatory governance (collective monitoring and conflict resolution, self-determination and nested levels of authority) reflecting the practical urgencies, the grassroots knowledge and the embodied skills of the commoners. In spatial terms commons are neither private nor public – neither collective nor individual. They are relational thresholds and spaces of radical openness reflecting the autonomy of the collective. Affectively, they refuse ideological forms of identification and belonging and the cynicism or 'cruel optimism' of capitalism. They demand fugitive attachments, precarious affects; silent, sensuous and embodied knowledge production and continuously shifting and co-evolving relations.

The aim of the *Cinema as Assembly* project is to explore and valorise the social relations, economies, and temporalities that exist at the edges of the technological apparatus of the camera, and to connect with histories, people and entities who have been systematically excluded from the colonial machine of cinematic representation. *Cinema as Assembly* is a proposition of contestation and reparation against art conceived as a space of white privilege, capitalist speculation and neocolonial appropriation. Breaking the ossified enclosures of the cultural industry and veering away from monetized and hierarchical processes of production, distribution and consumption of images associated with capitalist leisure - the other side of

the ideologies of scarcity, competition and self-interest – *Cinema as Assembly* explores economies and practices that thrive on solidarity, mutualism and reciprocity.

The project goes beyond the notion of aesthetics or the cinematic event, – the shoot, the screening, and the mass entertainment – and engages with images in terms of enduring relationality, kinship (César), fugitive attachments (Harney and Moten), and diasporic and indigenous sovereignty (Raeja, Povinelli). It interrogates cinema before and beyond the act of filming, in terms of trans-generational movements, cine-geographies (Eshun and Grey; and César); nomadic imaginary (Gabriel); and more than human dwelling (Povinelli and Wachowich).

*Cinema as Assembly* is conceived not as a practice of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial critique, but as a process of decolonial and post-capitalist imagination, which takes radical alterity as the condition of the present. The commons is not the return of the colonial project of an ethnographic urge to salvage primitive communism. Rather, it is an invitation to use the anthropological imagination to prefigure and bring into existence utopian life projects, radical worlds, and alternative modes of instituting. Anthropology shows that the institution of the commons is universal and cross-cultural and that although commons have been endangered throughout history by colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism, they have nonetheless resisted, and not only on the basic logic of survival or sustainability. On the contrary, they have developed powerful ontologies of beauty, excess, and luxury in countering the dehumanizing and violent logic of capitalism. In fact, lurking in the background of the bourgeois ideologies of artistic beauty, possessive individualism and economic progress is a dry and desolate landscape in which most people put up with a destitute, dull and ugly existence. With the notion of cinema as commons we want to reclaim an aesthetic and political vision of plenty for the future.

Elsewhere I have argued that there is an invisible canon underpinning indigenous, black, and communist radical imaginaries, based on practices and imaginaries of self-determination, dignity, horizontal decision-making, co-production, respect for the earth, and the ethics of living a good life. I have called this revolutionary canon “the horizon of the commons”. In fact, *Cinema as Assembly* resonates with the vision of Fourth cinema laid out by Maori filmmaker Barry Barclay, as a form of gathering (*hui*) and communal assembly which entails, at the same time, collective knowledge-production, reciprocal exchange and a cosmopolitics of connectedness.

*Cinema as Assembly* is based on:

### 1) **MUTUAL ECONOMY**

Cinema as assembly is a form of co-production of knowledge and reciprocal labour (Tikanga). In it the filmmaker acts as guardian or mediator, rather than as author. Besides, it is the commons and not the filmmaker, who owns the film, and this form of ownership is as much spiritual as it is material. Living images cannot be detached from place, stored, archived or sold. Thinking about cinema as a commoning of living knowledge, implies a different understanding of law and property, than that of possessive individualism. Images as living knowledge are a form of anti-property. Barry Barclays asks: if film is a stage, rather than an authorial output, why make people pay? What are the economies of film production and circulation that sustain the cinema of the commons? If the mutual, cooperative and relational labour implicated in cinema as commons also ecologically sustainable, what is the

broader political ecology of art commons? What are the relationships between cinema as common knowledge and the commons as immaterial copy-right regime?

## **2) PEDAGOGY OF UNLEARNING**

The First living knowledge underpinning the cinema of the commons is based on radical imagination rather than visual evidence. Besides, it is moved by a sociology of absences (de Sousa Santos) that is, by a desire to connect to and valorise the ghosts, the untold stories, the censored paths, the unnamed victims converging at the margins and the edges of the image. Living in knowledge is knowledge in movement, folk, oral and anti-monumental. Likewise, there is an active process of unlearning through de-instituting and developing and enacting the economies based on community ownership and democratic governance and creating new institutions that are not defined by formal conditions but rather a commitment to transformation (Demos, 2020).

## **3) ARCHIVE OF THE PRESENT**

The origin of modern cinema is inscribed in the history of imperial ethnography and industrial capitalism; in the staging of uncanny encounters with indigenous ghosts, proletarian masses and commodity/fetishes, and in the material extraction of silver, copper and labour from the colonies. Contemporary commercial cinema reproduces the linear temporality of the colonial archive, enclosing and neutralising the present in-between a memorialised past and a glorified future, made of catharses, resolutions and revolutions. Barclay's notion of 'archiving-in-the-present' challenges such imperial temporal logic expanding the present into the ancestral past and into futures that are already present, already in the frame. Cinema as assembly expands the notion of reciprocity in time, considering images and visual archives as forms of transgenerational and trans-cultural exchange and "kine-kinship" (Cesar)

## **4) SOCIAL GATHERINGS**

Film as commons is based on reciprocal, collective and circular processes, in which the capturing of reality through images is preceded by collective conversations that go into the creation of the film script and is followed by a collective conversation at the moment of the film screening within the community. In this circular process the boundaries between filmmaking and film distribution/reception are blurred and according to Barclay, film is not so much a product but a stage for communal assemblies. In Barclay's films, the very film process intercuts with real assemblies by the community (hui), which he often films from a distance of 20 or even 50 meters with 300 mm. or 600 mm. lenses. Moreover, the film screening is not an artistic event, but a specific modality of gathering mediated by images, in which conviviality is as important as judgement. Cinema as gathering considers images in terms of sovereignty and self-determination. First, it 'talks in' and then it 'talks out', contaminating the outside with its relational logic. The social gatherings provoked by cinema as commons, can take multiple forms: toxic sovereignty that is, as recuperation, care and nurturing for the more-than-human world against the logic of extractivism of settlers states and mining

corporations(Povinelli); South-to-South solidarity (Cesar and Gabriel); decolonial and anti-imperialist actions (MTL and Azoulay); historical reflection (Pekunlu) and the building of political autonomy (Arcos).

## **5) ONTOLOGY OF MOVEMENT**

The cinema of the commons is the medium of the movement necessary for the world to be made anew, all day, every day. In Maori ontology, humans are *Tangata whenua* that is, extensions of places, which convey and extend the agency of land, forest and water. Likewise, for Barclay cinema is Taniwha, that is, the medium through which ‘things pass’ and people are reconnected to places. If cinema shapeshifts and moves across different material and immaterial mediums, it must be accessed in multi sensorial ways and not only visually – in terms of resonance, attunement, listening (Campt) care, support and holding. An ontology of movement also inspires experiments of film screenings aimed at producing visual literacy in rural areas (Rotha), re-territorializing the filmic experience (De Clerq, 2019) or creating temporary autonomous zones and profane rituals (Markopoulos, 1975) through the constituent power of images.

### **WORKING GROUP:**

Elizabeth Povinelli  
Philip Rikz  
Jasmina Metwaly  
Zeyno Pekunlu  
Nancy Wachowich  
Maya Scherr-Willson  
Filipa César  
Nitasha Dhillon and Amin Husain (MTL Collective)  
Ariella Azoulay  
Denise Ferreira da Silva  
Natalia Arcos  
Amilcar Paker  
Chema Gonzalez (Reina Sofia)