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INTRODUCTION

IN SEARCH FOR THE 'HYBRID REALITY' OF THE VISUAL CULTURES

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Abstract

There is no one unique indigenous visual culture. It is as complex and hybrid as the land of an indigenous community, both its present and historical version, as social relations of any community. This special issue is hybrid. It reproduces the established power relations with the format of presentation, the language of publication or their referential framework. But, also, we hope, it contributes to the ongoing process of decolonisation and deconstructs at least some of the colonial influences.

The contributions that make this special issue – written and visual reflections about different genres of visual representation – complement each other and intentionally or unintentionally transform the issue into the community of voices. They engage in the discussion with textual, visual, aesthetic and analytical forms of representation, bringing some questions to the surface and leaving others behind the stage. Together they remind the readers and selves that the process of decolonisation is not even close to be done.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Colonialism, Hybridity, Land, Self-representation

Brazilian indigenous thinker Ailton Krenak once compared the recent and growing appropriation of audio-visual media by indigenous peoples all over the planet to the struggles for the demarcation of their ancestral lands. In his words, we should “accomplish the hard and challenging task of demarcating a place on the screen, as if shouting the slogan ‘demarcation now’”.¹ This remark raises at least two critical moments to consider when we speak of the decolonisation of visual culture: on the one hand, the screen is not a neutral space but deeply embedded in the colonial world structure that reproduces colonizing practices as much as it itself is colonized. The decolonisation should be done from within the industry, the genre, both its linguistic and aesthetic language. Considering the structural nature of colonialism, decolonisation must be a profound complex and continuous effort towards questioning, deconstructing and decentralizing the practice of seeing, speaking and writing about it. It is not a one-time event, nor is it a one actor’s event. On the other hand, demarcation, Krenak² was speaking about, is about the actual non metaphorical demarcation of the land. Brazilian renowned filmmaker Isael Maxakali insists that “without land, there is no cinema”:³ “If we have land, we will have cinema. We will make images to show. But without land, what will we film?” Decolonisation of visual culture has to start with recognition of being of diverse and complex indigenous, originary, native, primary nations, of their land, of their own voices. The recognition implies not to treat indigenous vision and thought out of the context, as an abstract and homogenous voice, that is continuously romanticized and exoticized by the West in the imaginary, convenient for the West. Complexity of colonialism implies the complexity of decolonisation. Bolivian indigenous and feminist sociologist Rivera Cusicanqui⁴ insists on hybridity as the core of the decolonial practice. The indigenous artists, thinkers, the communities and their lands cannot be represented. They have to represent themselves and they have to be allowed to do so, which means that unless there is an infrastructure in place for the voices to be heard they will not be. It includes the festivals and criteria of inclusion and appreciation, the academic journals and criteria of the acceptance, curricula and school structures, roads and electricity, simple everyday security and everyday routines such as child and household care. For example, the accessibility of portable, lighter and cheaper equipment boosted indigenous film-making initiatives in the mid-1980s all over the world, including in the most remote areas, such as the Amazon. We can mention such projects as *Video in the Villages* (Brazil), *Kayapo Video Project* (Brazil), *Cefrec-Coiab* (Bolivia), *Promedios Media Project* (Mexico), among several others. With the emergence of digital technologies, the number of initiatives has multiplied and taken many other forms. Nowadays, every person with a mobile phone is a potential photographer or filmmaker. We can probably already speak of the second or even the third wave of the indigenous filmmakers, who including have been trained by the indigenous filmmakers or photographers.

The passage of the camera shifts the power relations of representation

crystallized throughout colonial history. However, the hybridity of social reality, as emphasized by Rivera Cusicanqui,⁵ reminds us that “self-representation” does not equal decolonisation. Technology is not neutral,⁶ introduction of the camera to the communities and their everyday lives brings a whole complex of problems. As it was already mentioned earlier, the great divide between “us” and “them” and the tendency to see “them” only as a decontextualized “collective” is one of them. Personal aspects of each filmmaker’s trajectory, dynamics of relationships, distribution of roles in the community, traditions of knowledge distribution, of authorship and circulation of goods are part of the visual culture.

While it is true that no one better than indigenous people themselves can present their ways of life, it is also true that, in this process, they themselves also engage in constant negotiation of these representations. Speaking of “self-representation”, we cannot define the notion of self in a Western binary based tradition. Thinking in terms of I-Other, individual-collective, collective as a collection of many Others or as one individual collective, we continue to ignore the alternative ways of thinking, seeing, practicing, sharing and participating in the world that the indigenous communities might have in favour of our own imaginary world-view.

The present issue is hybrid. It is not above the power relations and continues to reflect them with the format of presentation, the language of publication or their referential framework. Yet, with this special issue, we hope to deconstruct and challenge at least some of the colonial influences. The issue brings together academic and visual essays, an artistic portfolio and a short film review. The contributions that make this special issue complement each other and intentionally/unintentionally transform the issue into a community of voices similar to a forest, prairie, mountains, paramo, selva or a coastal line - indigenous lands. They engage in the discussion with textual, visual, aesthetic and analytical forms of representation, bringing some questions to the surface and leaving others behind the stage. This is how hybridity works: a form, an intention enhances the argument. They can only address, however, some aspects of the immense diverse and complex universe of this world’s indigenous visual culture. With this special issue we want to contribute to the ongoing process of decolonisation and remind us that it is nowhere close to being completed. With its contributions the issue calls for the revision of the norms of academic publishing or of what is considered aesthetic quality and excellence as a step towards recognising the wrongs done by colonialism, without which the world will never be healed.

We open this issue with Alessia Marzano’s article-in-depth conversation with Sámi artists Elina Waage Mikalsen and Joar Nango about their own artistic practice. The article critically revisits the concept of “colonizing gaze of authenticity” fostered by colonial Western modernity to appropriate the discourse of the indigenous decolonial resistance. The article, being a hybrid itself harmoniously, brings together the form of representation and the content to speak

of the hybridity as a necessary alternative to Western neoliberal mind set aiming at exclusion. This argument is strengthened with the following powerful reflection by Joeri Verbesselt's article "This dying goat is a school: On mediating indigenous knowledge and images as a white artist-academic". The article explores and experiments with different styles of storytelling to question one's positionality as a white academic and learn from and together with indigenous cultural practices. In "The Touchstone of Vision: Remembering the Indigenous Gaze Through Decolonial Collaborations", Astrid Korporaal revisits the Dutch and Surinamese Maroon film *Stones Have Laws* (2018) as an example of decolonisation through transcultural collaboration. The author explores the tension between the documented content and the medium itself innate to the image and between the image as document and as medium, and engages in the discussion of the postcolonial notion of the *returned gaze*. With her hybrid article "To dance in the dark", Helen Starr draws attention to the diversity hidden in the meaning of "the image" if we go beyond the perspective of the Western visual culture. The essay discusses interactive animations of the decolonial, feminist, Indian artist Kinnari Saraiya to present the worlds of indigenous Carib and Indian poetics. The hybridity of the writing style expands the argument of the article through the aesthetic means.

The two visual essays of the issue challenge the textual representation and expand the meaning of the visual towards a more sensorial approach to the visual culture. The visual essay by Bianca Salvo in a more traditionally analytical way revisits Marie Louise Pratt's artistic project "The Contact Zone". The essay questions the documentary objectivity of photography and the "biased and defective gaze" it might present. Spring Ulmer's visual essay "An infidel's interpretation of the Islamic state mother and child case" builds solidarity with earlier photographic arguments about the precarity of migrant mothers. The essay plays with different modes of expression and challenges the power dynamics "associated with image taking and consumption" as an essential effort of challenging the social power dynamics. To follow up, Amanda Fayant's review of a short film "Dancing the space inbetween" (2015) discusses the aesthetics of pain and suffering of Canadian indigenous nations. In a delicate yet powerful way, the review accentuates the hybridity of indigenous visual aesthetics. By doing so, the essay indicates how the dominating visual culture should transform its norms in order for the indigenous voices to be heard and become part of the visible reality, an acknowledged part of the global visual culture without the constant need to prove the right to be.

Finally, the two artistic portfolios summarize and complement the discussions of this special issue: the photographic series "Yāmiy" by photographer, filmmaker and writer, Sueli Maxakali, and the photographic series "Matérialité" by the visual artist Mohini Chandra. The series of photographs "Yāmiy" by Sueli Maxakali introduces the readers to the fascinating universe of the relationships between Tikmũ'ün women and the yāmiyxop spirits who come to their villages to sing, eat and dance. Through images that purposefully divert the eye, blur the

figures and escape the colonial frameworks, we are provoked to see, almost not seeing. In this way, Sueli invites us to approach the sophisticated art of the gaze as practiced by Tikmũ'ũn women. The series "Matérialité" by Mohini Chandra addresses and questions the museums' role in the development and reproduction of the colonial imagination through the norms of the visual culture based on the logic of representation. Bringing together found and appropriated images, the author emphasizes the critical potential of the productive collaboration between the form, the content and the background story of the imagery.

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- 1 Krenak, *Cinema de índio*, 153.
 - 2 Krenak, *Cinema de índio*.
 - 3 Maxakali, *Cosmologias da imagem*.
 - 4 Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*.
 - 5 Cusicanqui, *Sociología de la imagen*; Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*.
 - 6 Klein, *Post-digital, post-Internet*, 27-45.