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Epistemic Disobedience

Introduction

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Introduction

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- 1 This special issue follows Walter Mignolo's call for *epistemic disobedience* and combines it with MacDougall's work on *transcultural cinema*. The films and texts of this special issue support our hypothesis that more equally balanced modes of communication can trigger transcultural processes of understanding as inter-personal and cultural encounters are negotiated on- and off-screen.
- 2 The decolonial discourse refers to an interplay of theory and practice in order to break continuities of coloniality. Decoloniality insists on a radical transformation that can only be realized through a radical praxis (Ghaddar and Caswell 2018). Film is not just a form of representation. Social relations are enacted in front of the camera and filmmaking itself is a social practice. How does decolonization relate to the production of visual images and films?
- 3 In their writings, Enrique Dussel (1995) and Anibal Quijano (1992) argue that European modernism is not to be localized in the Enlightenment but in the colonial era, and that modernism as a philosophical school of thought served as a legitimization for the colonial project. Therefore, the postcolonial critique postulates that coloniality is more than a historical event; it is an ideology which still has an effect in knowledge production (academic, medial) and in the reception of content and images, as Edward Said already established in the 1970s in his book *Orientalism* (1978). 'Decolonial' Theory calls for attention to the fact that coloniality is not only not over - that is not 'post-' - and that it continues to permeate almost all aspects of our lives: subjectivity, race, gender, language, as well as our epistemologies and pedagogies.
- 4 That's why authors like Walter Mignolo and Annibal Quijano call for the decolonization of the sciences. Annibal Quijano (1992) states that local, site-specific experiences must be considered in order to counter a universal rhetoric.
- 5 Despite this postcolonial and postcultural critique, the dominant discourse on cultural identity often remains holistic and essentialist (see Hall 1990). Visuality especially is an expression and production-site of these discourses (see Ong 1991, Foucault 1994, Minh-Ha 1989). Thus, there is a historical continuity from colonial maps to fiction and documentary films. Visual aspects of culture haven't just attained their central

importance in the so-called digital age. The visual appearances of people and objects and the culturally diverse modes of interpretation affect human perception as such. Staging's of culture always have a visual dimension as well. In this sense, we argue that these representations are not innocent, but highly politicized in producing the *Other*.

- 6 Against the backdrop of postcolonialism, authors like Lane Rayo Hirabayashi and Jun Xing deconstruct the colonial, racist, and sexist views in early and contemporary film, above all in American and Asian mainstream cinema. They reveal alternative forms of representation and introduce pedagogical approaches to heighten awareness of racism, sexism, and (post-) colonialism. In seminars they encourage intercultural understanding and the application of the film medium for a more differentiated perception beyond the stereotype of the 'other' (cf. Hirabayashi and Xing 2003).
- 7 The formulation of identities and belongings represents an ongoing communicative process in which constantly changing borderlines and openings must be negotiated and the cultural repertoire changed and differentiated. As Stuart Hall points out "Cultural identity [...] is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories." (Hall 1990: 225) He proposes seeing identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation.
- 8 In his pioneering work David MacDougall (1998) defines *transcultural cinema* as an audiovisual mode of anthropological representation, that crosses and defies these cultural borders. Visual representation has intercultural as well as transcultural implications. Images, by standing outside the system of 'cultures' and nation-states, create new links based on points of recognition among otherwise separated social groups. Visually based media including film, photography, television, and video - have already significantly undermined stereotypical perceptions of national identity, often in the face of nationalist interests. This transcultural perspective in such visual representations accommodates cultural shift, movement, and interchange.
- 9 This special issue thus deals with the *practices* of transcultural and collaborative filmmaking. The presented works are in one way or the other *epistemically disobedient* (Mignolo 2010) and reflect on these above-mentioned processes methodologically. It is our conviction that full collaboration and transcultural filmmaking are challenging and even impossible, but indispensable as an utopian ideal that one could or should strive toward as a methodological orientation with the aim of evoking real interpersonal encounters and providing decolonial options in and outside of the academic circle.
- 10 The films and articles presented here show that collaborative and self-reflexive filmmaking are key-methods to trigger transcultural processes of understandings, as in the production-process the representation of cultural identities is negotiated on- and off-screen (see Walter 2018). Film here embodies an experience that goes beyond cultural concepts and features aspects of subjectivity. So film is not only a universal language, but a "direct experience of experience" (Sobchack 1990) and triggers pre-semantic processes of understanding before the words kick in. In visual anthropology there is a long history of discussing how to show the invisible (e.g. affective knowledge) and about the mimetic qualities of the film media. According to MacDougall, words are superior in their capacity "of showing us the rules of the social and cultural institutions by which [people] live" (1998: 259), but images are far superior in addressing subtle

issues of social agency, bodily practice, and the role of the senses and emotions in social life.

- 11 In this special issue, the filmmakers and authors make use of both words and film in creative and fascinating styles and we are honored to present their work in this context of *epistemic disobedience*.
- 12 In her work *Can Ethnographic Filmmaking Truly Be Shared? Revisiting my Filmic Collaboration with an Invisible Refugee* Tami Liberman challenges the critical subject-object relationship in filmmaking and ethnographic research. Mr. X, an illegalized man from West Africa is the main character of her film. He does not appear visually, but becomes the cinematographer and observer and she, the filmmaker and researcher is filmed by him and becomes a protagonist herself; cultural identity and filmic representation shows itself here as a dialog. In making her authorship part of the film, she critically engages with the singularity of authorship in visual anthropological work. Furthermore, epistemic disobedience evolves through a very simple but convincing move of changing points of view and therefore questioning power relations and revealing the positionalities of both protagonists. Here, collaborative filmmaking does not solely evoke a feeling for the forced invisible migrant, but furthermore places him, through his voice and thoughts, in the center of the filmic process and experience.
- 13 *Image as a weapon* is a poetic encounter of ethnographic filmmaker Sophia Ferreira and indigenous filmmaker Patricia Pinhero Pará Yxapy. Patricia is ethnically Mbyá-Guarani, a school teacher for the children of the village in Ko'enju, where she lives, and is currently considered the most significant woman in Brazilian indigenous cinema. Sophia Ferreira Pinhero is a visual anthropologist who contacted Patricia to do research about her work as a feminist indigenous filmmaker. The short film *Teko Haxy-ser imperfeita* reveals that the relationship between these two artists went beyond research: they consider each other friends. This interpersonal encounter is made visible on-screen through intimate discussions and co-theorizations on topics such as the power of representations, cultural identities, discourses on the body and the emotions. Consequently, not only the camera, but also the film direction itself is shared equally between partners. In this project the anthropologist does not only hand over the camera or aim at more balanced mode of communication. Ethnographic fieldwork and filming focusses here on a dialogical learning experience. The film gives very intimate insights in both worlds without separating them. Film, with its capacities of evoking synaesthetic modes of perception, supports the artists' idea that shared knowledge production and intersubjective images can trigger transcultural encounters and decolonize ways of thinking. The hunting of images, the pursuing of self (self-representation and self-esteem) combined with the use of hunting power, the empowerment of carrying equipment, being in charge of technical knowledge but also production for registration, denunciation, document, and alterity, that is why Pinheiro suggests to view images and image production as a powerful weapon.
- 14 José Alfredo Jiménez Pérez and Axel Köhler focus in their article *Shared video work and writing. Producing knowledge in solidarity* on the concept of *epistemic solidarity*, which in its essence, is a shared work that paves the way for a transcultural understanding of the poetical and political dimensions of First Nation cultures in Chiapas, Mexico. Jiménez Pérez is a media activist, a communitarian communicator (*comunicador comunitario*) based in the Tseltal community Acteal, the place where 45 men, (pregnant) women and children were shot dead by a paramilitary unit on 22 December 1997. He realized the

film *Acteal. Ten years of impunity. How many more?* in order to make visible this massacre to a broader audience and to claim justice, as most of the perpetrators were not charged until today. Axel Köhler is a German anthropologist who has lived for more than 25 years in Chiapas focusing on indigenous media production in an action anthropological framework. Their work is based on a *proactively* shared work process that goes beyond many anthropological discourses on collaboration, as ethnography always implies an (unrecognized) co-authorship. The article shows the difficulties but also advantages of implying an *epistemic solidarity* from a micro perspective. Although the text is incredibly rich in terms of anthropological discourses, it does not get lost in the dialogues but actually settles the concepts in its local contexts through interpersonal dialogues. Additionally, the film and article show that so-called indigenous media is important, as it may unsettle the dominant discourse on indigenous culture through the perspective of those who are represented externally since hundreds of years. Digital media is not considered as a threat to indigenous culture, but a way of strengthening the local culture, as the media is produced by and for the community. Furthermore, the film *Acteal. Ten years of impunity. How many more?* claims the Acteal massacre to be a state crime - a statement which is unheard in state-controlled media.

- 15 In a similar framework of epistemic disobedience and co-theorization, Thomas John presents us the article *Never silent sights. Experiencing, transforming and experimenting with affective relationships in a local environment of racialisation and marginalisation*. John also conducted fieldwork with indigenous media artists in Chiapas, Mexico. However, John realizes shifting perspectives differently. He himself becomes the object of representation as the internationally renowned artist Xun takes nude images of the anthropologist John. The article and photos make us rethink the interconnection of ethnography and coloniality. In their performance, the anthropologist becomes the naked 'native', while the 'native' person reflects the dressed 'civilized' person. Needless to say, this is an excellent example of changing perspectives which illustrates that coloniality is not an event of the past, but a structure that is reproduced also in the present. However, this metaphorical bracket is only used as an entrance to the world of the local artists Xun Betan and Juan Chawuk. Through the work of these great artists, contextualized through ethnographic vignettes and co-theorizations, it is possible to experience indigenous life worlds through postcolonial lenses; above all, as the reader always experiences the problematic issue of anthropological (field)work, the importance of self-representation and the affective relationships between the artist and researcher.
- 16 In *The Voice of the Sierra Nevada: Intercultural communication and de-colonial strategies in the Arhuaco filmmaking and collaborations* Agata Lulkowska examines the relations between the subject and the camera as a medium. The article shows how ethnographical work is a discipline of relationships, to follow relationships and build up yours owns as an ethnographer. She reflects on the process of gaining agency through filmmaking and the consequences of exporting the fruit of such work to international audiences located beyond the original contexts of where the film was created. The case study of filmmaking from the Arhuaco community from Colombia which emerged as a response to violence and displacement, shows how The Arhuaco's prolific auto-representation strategies have served as efficient strategy of decolonisation, an effective intercultural communication, and an open dialogue crossing cultural divisions.

- 17 In *A collaborative filming method with characters and crew: Reflection on the making of the short documentary film Ghetto PSA* by Rosella Schillaci, Jean Rouch's approach of 'shared anthropology' and 'ethno fiction' influenced the film work on Ghetto PSA. The film portrays the daily life of Jacob, a young Guinean man living in Italy. It is a film about him reflecting on his own identity and music as an important way of expressing it. Schillaci proposed to Jacob to make a 'hybrid' film that was half written and half improvised. The film contributes to a different approach of shared or collaborative work. The main protagonist became engaged in producing music for the film as well as choosing activities and scenes and deciding on interview sequences. Rosella Schillaci describes and discusses the process of this collaboration. However, regarding the general production of the whole film, she points out the asymmetrical relationship between Jacob and her as a filmmaker, especially the differences in knowledge about filmmaking. Here the challenge was to find a sort of 'communicative meaning' for the protagonist (Jacob), and the filmmaker (Schillaci) but also for the viewers. For this project, the canvas was a list of selected main scenes of the film. In this specific collaboration it was the necessary tool to find a 'meaningful narrative structure' and an aesthetic approach to convey these meanings. For the character, it was through this instrument that his perspective could be 'truthfully' respected. It was important that this process was long enough to incorporate all the preliminary research, the fieldwork and the agreement with the characters about what to shoot.
- 18 The following article *Through Prisms. Practice-based Research on the Intentions of Collaborative Filmmaking* by An van Dienderen and Natalie Gielen deals with the production process of the film *PRISM*, which includes the hypothesis that photographic media are technologically biased and favor Caucasian skin. The film *PRISM* is a collaborative film that explores how filmmakers with a non-Caucasian skin color address this issue. The filmmakers worked with the system of *cadavre exquis*, a surrealist game that was invented in 1925 to enhance subconscious and playful art creation. *PRISM* creates multichronotopic links between different geographical and cultural groups with the aim of putting the decolonial call by Mignolo for epistemic disobedience into practice. Written in 2019, the article has become even more relevant, given the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests that erupted against police violence and structural racism in the aftermath of the brutal police killing of George Floyd in the United States of America on 25 May 2020.
- 19 The last article of this special issue is *Provoking Film/Complicating Hierarchy. An ethnographic film script* by Theresa George. In 2014 and 2017 Theresa George accompanied the filmmaker Philipp Hartmann and his small German-Brazilian team to the Sertão in the northeast of Brazil. In this desert-like region they gathered the material for an experimental documentary about the meaning of water – its uses, politics, symbols and (his)stories. The filmmaker's role in the team may be best described as a 'film set ethnographer' whose notes and observations were supposed to help reflect on the journey, the film process, and eventually inspire the script and film work itself. Ethnographic vignettes and film sequences render visible this interpersonal relationship in a highly post-colonial situation.
- 20 Enjoy the films and texts.

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Films

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