ROBERT STAM

Keywords in Subversive Film/Media Aesthetics

with Richard Porton and Leo Goldsmith

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If not otherwise noted, Robert Stam wrote all of the remaining portions. While the vast majority of the material is completely new, the text revisits some issues raised in Stam's earlier texts, but now within a new lexicon format and with altered emphasis, developing similar ideas but using different filmic examples, or using similar examples but within different purposes. Chapter One, "An Aesthetics of the Commons," revisits some of the issues raised in a different way in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994). The chapter on the carnivalesque revisits issues raised in *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin*,

Cultural Criticism, and Film (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1989). The chapter on political modernism revisits issues raised in Reflexivity in Film and Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), and so forth. Some of the materials that constitute Chapter Four ("The Transmogrification of the Negative") formed part of a chapter titled "Palimpsestic Aesthetics: A Meditation on Hybridity and Garbage," in May Joseph and Jennifer Fink (eds.), Performing Hybridity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), but are here abbreviated, altered, supplemented, and reframed as part of a larger argument and with different films as illustrations.

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Introduction

Keywords in Subversive Film/Media Aesthetics offers a conversational journey through the overlapping terrains of politically engaged art and artistically engaged politics, a journey with many watering holes and rest stops and off-ramps where travelers can take stock, catch their breath, and plot their own course through the contents. The book's somewhat unusual hybrid format combines a book-length essay on politics and aesthetics with an embedded lexicon of definitions, explications, and illustrations of almost a thousand concepts bearing on radical aesthetic strategies in film and the media. It foregrounds aesthetic interventions that generate an intellectual surprise or shock of social recognition by shifting the parameters of commonsense by interrogating regimes of power and privilege. These strategies offer an intellectual jolt, what Deleuze calls an intellectual "shock" or "vibration," in synaptic thrills that challenge the reigning order and thus catalyze a sense of social possibility.

This book combines various kinds of concepts and terms: (1) terms already well consecrated in relation to cinema (Brechtian distantiation, situationist détournement); (2) less-known film-related terms that deserve wider circulation (cinematrix, surrealismo); (3) terms drawn from other arts, disciplines, and movements (audiotopia, anthropophagy), and, finally, (4) a substantial portion of coinages and neologisms such as our own candomblé feminism and potlatch strategy. (To facilitate understanding, the initial entry concerning a given concept or strategy will appear in bold, with all subsequent mentions in italics.)

The volume aims to provide a theoretical toolkit for strategies germane to the analysis and even the practice of radical art. The book can be

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approached in at least five ways: (1) read straight through as a narrative essay advancing a larger argument; (2) read selectively by chapter, each of which is devoted to a specific stream of radical aesthetics; (3) read in a more focused way using the subheadings as signposts for specific themes; (4) dipped into as a lexicon of concepts, with the index of terms as a guide; or (5) sampled for more in-depth analyses of films such as *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* (1964), *Les stances à Sophie* (1971), *Even the Rain* (2010), *Offside* (2006), *Shortbus* (2006), *Nostalgia for the Light* ("Nostalgia de la Luz," 2010), *The Act of Killing* (2012), and so forth. Readers are encouraged to swan in and out of the text, to graze from concept to concept, to make their own intellectual leaps and pirouettes.

The volume will adhere to a few fundamental principles. First, the approach will be pan-artistic, that is, it will draw on all the arts, on the assumption that cinema has been endlessly enriched by its dialogue with the other arts. Second, the approach will be pan-mediatic, with examples taken from the widest possible spectrum of audio, visual, and digital arts and media: fiction film, documentary, television, music video, filmed performance, cable TV satire, sketch comedy, Internet parodies, and social network activism. Defying essentialist definitions, cinema's famed "specificity" consists precisely in its being non-specific and hospitable to the most alien and heterogeneous materials. The word "film" here serves as a synecdoche for the whole spectrum, what Jung Bong Choi calls the "cinematrix," a term which locates cinema within broader industrial, geopolitical, and socioeconomic matrices whereby the production, distribution, and reception of texts produces social-artistic meaning.1 The cinematrix has less to do with cinematic specificity than with interfaces and connectivities moving across various arts, media, and nations.

Rather than privilege feature films as the ontological quintessence of the "real film," *Keywords* regards all audio-visual moving-image materials as legitimate platforms for subversive art. The book expands the definition and range of "radical political film" in a digital age where the feature fiction film has become a "bit" in a larger mediatic stream. "Political film" today might mean not a feature fiction or a documentary but rather a music video such as "Somos todos Ilegales," a Colbert performance at the White House, a quickie YouTube protest spot, a web-based interactive site such as Eyal Sivan's Montage Interdit, or an open-access user-generated database such as Actipedia. And, now that virtually everything ends up being filmed, almost any text can be reconfigured and remediated to become a political film. The Internet brings tremendous advantages for both creation and dissemination. While 20 years ago most of the kinds of

films mentioned in this book could have been seen only at art cinemas or film festivals, or in cinema studies courses, many are now available at the click of a mouse.

In a globalized age, meanwhile, the identity of the enemy is no longer quite so clear. Given the disenchantment with political movements based on the capture of state power, the word "revolution" has lost some of its charismatic power. While on one level contemporary struggles are against visible, or at least visualizable, abuses—wars of aggression, police brutality, sexual harassment, and so forth, on another level they are against the algorithmic features of an economic system. The enemy today is less likely to be a concrete, identifiable figure such as a factory boss, à la They Don't Wear Black Tie (1981) or Tout va bien (1972), or a colonial army, as in The Battle of Algiers (1966). The enemy now takes a more diffuse, abstract, and quasi-ungraspable form, encapsulated by words such as "privatization," "neo-liberalism," or "financial capitalism." With the digital revolution, meanwhile, it is difficult to see beyond the infinite riches offered to the Internet's consumers, in order to discern the underlying power hierarchies, the ownership structures, that possess and profit from the platforms and channels that constitute its infrastructure.

Third, Keywords in Subversive Film/Media Aesthetics takes on board the history of theorization of the relation between aesthetics and politics developed by a wide array of writers. Against the longer backdrop of the theories of canonical figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel, we will invoke some familiar names such as Bertolt Brecht, Fredric Jameson, Jean-Louis Comolli, Herbert Marcuse, Teresa de Lauretis, David James, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jacques Rancière, Judith Butler, Ismail Xavier, Henri Lefebvre, Nicole Brenez, Édouard Glissant, and David Graeber. But, rather than offer potted summaries of their thought, the book mobilizes (and sometimes amplifies or criticizes) their concepts in conjunction with our own concepts, using filmic examples as trampolines for our conceptualizations of emancipatory artistic possibilities.

Fourth, this book eschews the tyranny of the present by showing that the "new" often remediates the old. Although not a work of history per se, the book integrates historical understanding in its overall structure, in its individual chapters, and in the elaboration of specific concepts. It traces carnivalesque "social inversions" back to Greek Dionysianism, for example, and Kubrick's satire in *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* (1964) to Juvenal and Jonathan Swift via early 1960s "sick comics" such as Tom Lehrer. Fifth, the book deprovincializes the discussion in disciplinary terms by drawing on philosophy, literary theory, political theory, performance theory, and other relevant

disciplines. Sixth, it deprovincializes debate in cultural-geographical terms through a *polycentric* approach which envisions an egalitarian restructuring of intercultural relations within and beyond the nation-state.² Within a polycentric vision, the world of cinema has many dynamic fields of power, energy, and struggle, with many possible vantage points. Therefore *Keywords* draws on theories and strategies not only from Europe and the United States but also from Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the indigenous world. Rather than starting from the center and venturing out into the periphery, we begin in the first chapter from what Faye Ginsburg calls the **periphery's periphery**, that is, the films of putatively "primitive" aboriginal people.³

In its option for the polycentric and the marginalized, Keywords distances itself from Eurocentrism, that is, the view that enshrines the hierarchical stratifications inherited from Western colonial domination, assumed to be inevitable and even "progressive." ⁴ Eurocentrism does not refer to Europe in its literal sense as a continent or a geopolitical unit but rather to an intellectual orientation rooted in colonial power, an interlocking network of buried premises, embedded narratives, and submerged tropes, that perceives Europe (and the neo-Europes around the world) as universally normative. Eurocentrism could equally well be called "coloniality" (Anibal Quijano), "European planetary consciousness" (Mary Louise Pratt), "the colonial mindset," "Euro-hegemonism," "Western hegemony," or the "occidental worldview." 5 Cherokee author Thomas King calls it the "unexamined confidence in Western civilization." For the coloniality/modernity project of Arturo Escobar, Enrique Dussel, and Walter Mignolo, coloniality forms the inseparable dark side of modernity, just as postcoloniality forms the dark side of postmodernity.⁷

A key aspect of this **deprovincialization** is the embrace of emerging social actors and subjects of discourse who are creating cinema for the first time. Classically the objects rather than the subjects of representation, these groups, traditionally the *sans part*—"having no part," in Rancière's sense —are now taking part. Stated differently, they exemplify the artistic practices that Deleuze and Guattari call "minor," referring to literature written in a minoritized language (e.g., the Jewish literature of Prague) which bears a historically fraught relation to a dominant language. Minor writers live in a language which has an oblique or eccentric relation to the dominant, major language, which they reinvent from within. Minor practices are necessarily political in that each individual story "takes on a collective value" and is inseparable from a "collective enunciation." Minor cinema, in this sense, is not only cinema made by minoritized people, but also cinema made in "minor" genres or

formats, in a minor, dissonant, key, or that engages minor, disreputable, emotions, with an often combative relation to the dominant film discourse and language. David James speaks of "avant-garde minor cinema" to refer to a "rainbow coalition of demotic cinemas: experimental, poetic, underground, ethnic, amateur, counter, non-commodity, working-class, critical, artists." 10

At once a work of aesthetic theory, film history/analysis, and political critique, Keywords in Subversive Film/Media Aesthetics aims to provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary radical film/media aesthetics. Shamelessly eclectic, omnivorous, even anthropophagic, Keywords transfers Godard's dictum about film—that one should "put whatever one likes in a film"—to a book on radical aesthetics. To paraphrase a well-known Chinese aesthetic theorist, it "lets a thousand aesthetic flowers bloom," running the gamut from the experimental avant-garde to the left populist mainstream, moving from Maya Deren to Michael Moore, from Chris Marker to Patricio Guzmán. Throughout, the book foregrounds isolatable strategies rather than the nuances of authorship and the sinuous folds of narrative. The entries are not entitled "Godard" but rather "distanciation," not "progressive films about social rebellions" but rather "festive revolutionary practices," not "positive images of women" but "Medusan optics." The book is less interested in auteurs and canons than in fields of mediatic energy and the creation of new constituencies open to radical thought and praxis.

Within our rather ecumenical view, radical politics promotes an egalitarian, democratic, and non-authoritarian society that seeks the common good and heightens the sense of human and social possibility, as opposed to a reactionary politics that normalizes power hierarchies based on the mutually impacting relations of political economy, class, gender, race, empire, religion, sexuality, nation, or any other axis of social stratification. Although some analysts claim that changing class compositions and the digital revolution have rendered the old left-right polarity obsolete, a fundamental division remains. As long as the capitalist system and the racialized division of international labor generates and amplifies social inequality, a strong divide will separate those who defend that system as normal and acceptable from those who seek to reverse it or at least try to combat its abuses. A coherent left defends worker and civil rights and social entitlements gained through centuries of struggle, now threatened by neo-liberal privatization, and sees education, health, lodging, water, public transport, and childcare as public goods, all part of the commons that should be available to all. Our non-finalizing egalitarian synthesis draws on anarchism, Marxism, feminism, ecologism, left populism, critical race

theory, border theory, queer theory, radical indigeneity, and many other currents, broadly favoring equality over hierarchy, freedom over authoritarianism, public over private, and the *commons* over *enclosure*.

In a refurbished version of the laissez-faire philosophy of Adam Smith, Thatcherite neo-liberalism sees the autonomous self-seeking individual as the foundational unit of the social world. Such a view delegitimizes all radical social transformation, proclaiming that "there is no alternative," while doing everything in its power to make that claim a reality by eliminating actual alternatives. Indeed, the right's virulent rejection of all things common and public (public schools, public radio, public television) goes hand in hand with a rejection of utopian alternatives. Radical art, by contrast, communicates a sense that another world is possible. If there are no alternatives, subversive art asks: Why do we keep imagining them? Responding to those who say there is "no outside to capitalism," David Graeber argues that the commons are always already "inside" capitalism. As evidenced by the constant outbreaks of protests and rebellions in Tunis, Cairo, Madrid, Madison, Istanbul, Tehran, and São Paulo, global capitalism has in some ways never seemed so discredited and vulnerable. At the same time, the hegemony of neo-liberal policies and the stranglehold power of banks show that capitalism remains dominant. At the same time, capitalism seems to be at the height of its arrogance and at the end of its rope. Yet, for Graeber, revolutionary thought

can never really go away, because the notion of a redemptive future remains the only way we can make sense of the present: we can only understand the value of what surrounds us from the perspective of an imaginary country whose own contours we can never understand, even when we are standing in it.¹¹

Despite the well-known Oscar Wilde quip from "The Soul of Man under Socialism"—"a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth glancing at"—commentators from various political perspectives often use the word "utopia" pejoratively. For orthodox leftists, utopianism is a frequent subject of derision because blueprints of future societies are viewed as fanciful and superfluous compared to political economy and the critical dissection of capitalist reality. (Marx derided the writings of his utopian socialist forebears—for example, Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier—as reactionary idealism.) Yet, other leftists such as Tom Moylan point to critical utopias which offer glimpses of alternative social arrangements. Although the anti-authoritarian left finds it difficult to point to actually existing societies that embody its tenets, anarchists and radical