

Speaking of Cinema Speaking with Cinema - *Editorial*

Cinema allows us to consider the limits of contemporary critical languages. Child of the centrality of the eye in the western episteme, cinema is part of the privileged frame shaping modernity. It is precisely this occidental formation that makes it important to consider the cultural production of the South of the world as it intercedes with the West. Cinematic, photographic and digital works here draw us into exploring links between ethics and aesthetics, identity and difference, hybridity and displacement. Located on a planetary plane, migration, cultural translation and historical complexity invariably come to the fore as themes that direct these conceptual couplings.

The essays presented in this double issue of *Anglistica*, based on papers given during a seminar on *The other cinema, the cinema of the other*, held in 2005 in the context of the PhD programme in “Letterature, culture e storie dei paesi anglofoni”, seek to respond to such a critical landscape. The cinema of Pier Paolo Pasolini, David Lynch, Kim Ki-Duk, Amir Naderi, Abbas Kiarostami, as well as examples of visual and digital artworks, are examined and linked to cultural and philosophical constellations. Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker, Kaja Silverman and Elizabeth Grosz, Gilles Deleuze and Roland Barthes, not to speak of Freud and Lacan, constantly disturb the distinction between theory and practice and provoke theoretical settings for the analyses. In this manner, the essays seek to respond to the overall intent of the seminar: that of speaking of cinema by speaking with and through cinema.

Given the background of a visual landscape proposing a syntax of interruption, a decentred narration made of intervals, it was fitting, for the concluding event of the seminar, to show Isaac Julien’s works *Baltimore* (2003) and *True North* (2004), and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Night Passage* (2004, co-produced with Jean-Paul Bourdier). The two artists came to Naples for the occasion and their introductions to the films stressed the links to the ongoing discourse.

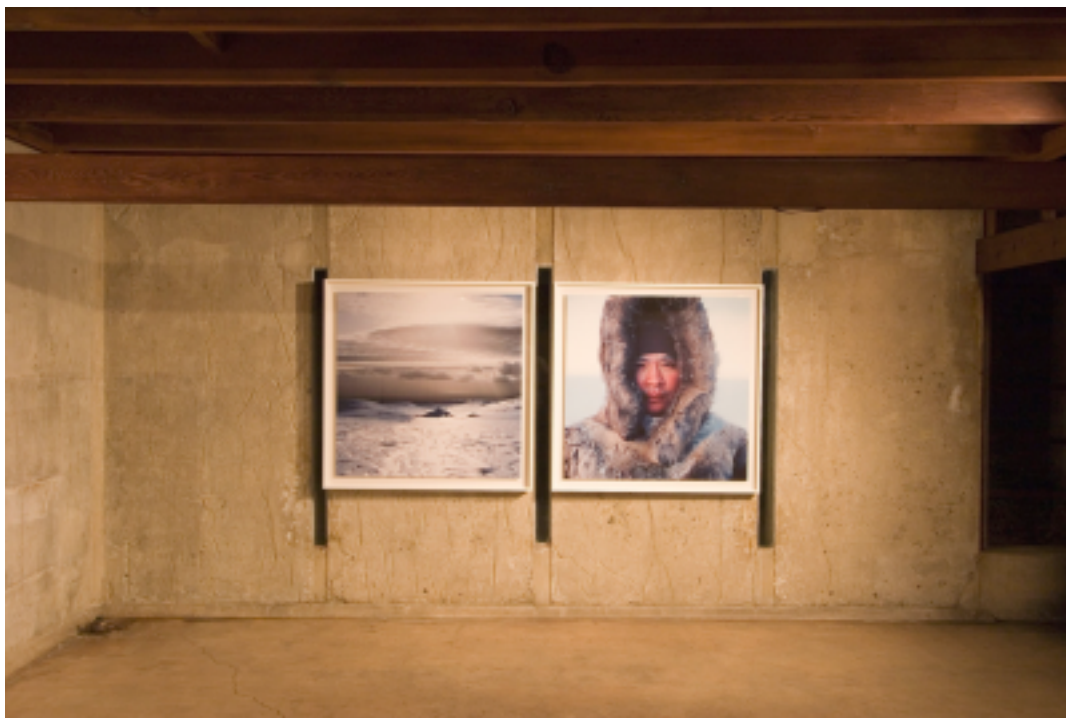
Their cinema deals with politics of identity which might seem antithetical, in one case black and homosexual, in the other female and Oriental, but always transcending the limits of an identitarian discourse, in the search for a poetics erasing the relation between history and fiction and contesting the conventional modes of representing the other. For both artists the films they showed mark their passage to digital technology as clearly indicated by the title of their talks: Julien’s “The digital unconscious” and Trinh’s “Transcultural D-passage”. These two papers appear in the central

section of this issue of *Anglistica*, introduced by Marta Cariello's essay to which I do not have much to add. However, a general presentation of their work and career might be useful and allow me to return indirectly to most of the issues raised in the following essays.

The Anglo-Caribbean artist Isaac Julien is one of the most important representative of black art in Europe, co-founder in the 80s of the Sanfoka Film and Video Collective, and a finalist at the Turner Prize in 2001. He has produced films, videos and installations for film festivals and art events at the ICA and the Victoria Miro Gallery in London, at Documenta 2002 in Kassel and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, in 2005; his works have been shown in museums and exhibitions all over the world.

His production moves between the world of cinema and art: his videos on multiple and circular screens may turn into performances. They are used as a way of interrupting narrative linearity and blurring the distinctions between avant-garde mode and documentary practice as well as proposing a non-hierarchical and fragmentary vision of spaces and social geographies. Though touching on questions of black and homosexual identity in many of his works – from the oneiric *Looking for Langston* (1989) on the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes to *Paradise Omeros* (2002) based on Derek Walcott's text, passing through the BBC film on *Frantz Fanon* (1995-6, with Mark Nash) – Julien filters both his theoretical sensibility and his political goals, what I would call a 'Brechtian approach', through a formal aesthetics inspired by baroque imagery. He went from films and documentaries

produced for the conventional spaces of cinema and television to video exhibits placed in art galleries and museums, or even in the open space of the city. He himself speaks of the 'cinematization of video art', a reconfiguration and mutation 'from one technology to another, from celluloid to digital'.



True North Series 2004, installation view, Schlinder House, LA 2005, photo: J. White. Courtesy of I. Julien



True North, billboard installation 2005, Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood, CA. Photo: J. White. Courtesy of I. Julien.

True North, the video shown in Naples, is a meditative work inspired by the true story of the black American traveller Matthew Henson (1866-1955), who accompanied the explorer Robert Peary, the first to have reached the North Pole. The official account of the expedition did not contain any mention of his companion, who from being a servant became part of the surveying crew, also due to his success in dealing with the natives. He was the only one to accompany Peary in the last effort, when they ‘discovered’ the North Pole. Julien follows this shadow claiming her (in the end we will discover Henson is represented by a woman) from obscurity in a reflection on hierarchy and counter-histories: the video contests the notes on the expedition, replacing the rationale of order, stability and achievement with an irrational meandering through symbolic gestures, inspired by shamanic tropes and the inertia of ice. The whiteness of the ice dominates the video as the blueness of the Caribbean Sea did in *Paradise Omeros*, and has the same strength in contrasting the black bodies of the protagonists.

He has since produced an audiovisual installation *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007) that looks at the traces left on Lampedusa by the thousands who have drowned attempting the crossing; some of its images appear in Marta Cariello’s essay. An important inspiration came to him from Derek Jarman’s work, of whom he writes with emotion in the piece appearing in this issue. (While I write he is presenting his latest film *Derek*, directed with Tilda Swinton’s collaboration, at the 2008 Berlin film festival).

T. Minh-ha, filmmaker, anthropologist and feminist writer of Vietnamese origin, has directed seven films (some of them co-produced with Jean-Paul Bourdier) that have received awards and acknowledgments in various festivals, including the Sundance, and thirty retrospectives, one of them at Documenta 11. Her art crosses different languages and media; her scripts are an encounter of poetry, anthropological analysis and narration and occupy the space between writing and visibility, cinema and music, documentarism and fiction. The films she directed in Senegal (*Reassemblage*, 1982; *Naked Spaces*, 1985), in Vietnam (*Surname Viet: Given Name Nam*, 1989) and China (*Shoot for The Contents*, 1991) are on the threshold between images



from *Reassemblage*. Courtesy of Women Make Movies, www.wmm.com.

and writing, avant-garde languages and anticolonial denunciation; her own books are invaded by still from her films, and the films by her writing. In *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, a film describing female subjection in Vietnamese society, the faces of the women she is interviewing are written over. For her women's writing is linguistic flesh, organic matter, 'nurturing writing' (*nourricriture*), and draws its corporeal fluidity from images of water and other female fluids, 'a flow of life, of words running over or slowly dripping down the pages'. She insists on the necessity of speaking 'close by' the observed object, she herself becoming an object, a sign among others, without ever presuming to speak for the others. This position, recalled both by Iain Chambers and Marina Vitale in their essays, is in antithesis with the presumed 'neutral' observer of classical anthropology. Not by chance the book containing her interviews and film is called *Framer Framed*: the observer is observed, puts into focus and is herself focussed.

From a cinema in black and white, closer to documentary, though even there she would insist on the unstable border between what is real and what is not, Trinh turned to narrative more decidedly, a move marked by colour as in *A Tale of Love* (1995), *The Fourth Dimension* (2001), and *Night Passage* (2004); the latter is the history of a voyage in time interrupted by many stops and encounters; every encounter opens on an intercultural space, offering an experience of a spatial-temporal dimension as seen fleeting from a train window, making the desire for narrative linearity problematic and transforming the audio-visual space into a series of interrogations, interruptions...

Her most recent films are *Bodies of the Desert* (2007) and *Colorlust: The Other's Bones, Flesh and Blood* (2008).

* * *

All the issues and problematics mentioned so far are proposed in Iain Chambers's introductory essay to the issue. He raises the question of the ethics of looking and listening as crucially connected to the ethics of speaking with the other. Cinema follows the itinerary of memory, a state of becoming both in its subjective look and in the nature of its own language. His insistence on the fleetingness of the image, "a cinema of the interval", on the (in)visible, the (in)audible, the (un)seeable leads to a poetics that is also a politics of the image. Chambers speaks for another cinema that goes beyond the screen/ projector/ audience as fixed and



from *Surname Viet*. Courtesy of Women Make Movies .

breaks the boundaries of narration and space as elaborated by Godard and other filmmakers. He introduces the theme of the mobility of cinematic language as indivisible from the modern-day media, and of its move into the gallery space, anticipated by Chris Marker, and extended in the contemporary works of Chantal Ackerman, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Isaac Julien – a theme further elaborated in some of the following essays.

Rey Chow, in her essay on the contentious relationship between film and cultural identity, gives an overview of philosophical thought and cinema, from Wenders and Benjamin to psychoanalytic interpretations of its fantasies and unconscious memories. She makes reference to the immense visual archive moving between past and present, involving the revisioning of indigenous cultural traditions in the ‘other’ cinemas; in disagreement with Kaja Silverman’s notion of suture, Chow insists on the active rather than passive role of the recipient who, potentially, turns into a producer. She specifically opposes the filmic significations of identities who have a transcultural appeal to the constructions of fixed national, sexual, cultural identities.

The ‘documentary turn’ is discussed in the two essays by Mark Nash and Marina Vitale, who both write, in different ways, about documentaries where truth is not dependent on ‘realistic language’. Vitale refers to 1930s documentary cinema in England, placing it in dialogue with the recent ethnographic films by Trinh T. Minh-ha and Harun Farocki, who both oppose the classical anthropological tradition of film based on the ‘dream of a total and objective representation’. Nash connects the development of documentary forms, starting again from the 1930s, to contemporary moving image art, particularly in a gallery context. He makes reference to the conference ‘Experiments with Truth’, held in New Delhi in 2002, showing that most of the artists in the ensuing exhibition wish to avoid any connotations of the documentary as it is normally experienced, by denying the hierarchy between truth and artistic forms, ethics and aesthetics. In agreement with Julien’s positions, both these essays tend to show that the construction of the image is never, as Godard underlined, an innocent, transparent reflection of truth.

In the section ‘Beyond the Visual’, both Silvana Carotenuto and Fiorenzo Juliano analyse the space between poetry and cinema respectively in Abbas Kiarostami and Pier Paolo Pasolini, who in their different ways produce a ‘cinema of poetry’. Carotenuto examines Kiarostami’s poetical works and his activity as a photographer alongside his abstract, intense cinema, and links these three aspects of his art in her imaginative discourse. As to Juliano, he sees in Pasolini’s film *Medea*, and in his vision of the Mediterranean as a space for a new geopolitics, a reference to the relationship between tradition and modernity, a theme ever-present in his cinema, locked as they are in ‘an open mutual interrogation’. The primitive,

as for Rey Chow, is for Pasolini a space where the symbolical is political. Medea's power of magic represents a radical otherness, an archaism in which symbol and ideology cannot be separated. The article pays attention to the complex relationship that developed between Pasolini and Maria Callas during their work together, and to the autobiographical aspects of the dyad Medea-Maria, where the personal is linked to the comprehension of the culture of the other.

Serena Guarracino, in her essay on "The Frenzy of the Audible", goes back to the fundamental issue of the audible and the inaudible in cinema, by discussing the function of voice and sound both in documentary and experimental cinema and by tracking the importance of the cinematic 'sonorial' in its narrative and technical function. In partial antithesis to the concept of the primacy of the visual over the verbal, Guarracino attempts to construct a poetics of 'listening' to cinema, giving space to its phantasmatic voice.

The four last essays in the issue analyse films by well-known film makers such as David Lynch and Kim Ki-Duk, alongside less well-known examples of collateral activities marking the move of cinematic language to the open space of the art gallery or to more diffused cultural planes. Bianca Del Villano focuses on the analysis of Lynch's enigmatic *Mulholland Drive*, a tale playing on the theme of split female identities, constantly moving back and forward in the uncertain area between dream and reality. The paper gives a psychoanalytic reading of the film, connecting the theme of subjectivity to a reflection on cinematic narration. Stamatia Portanova's article analyses two films by Korean director Kim Ki-Duk, linking them to an idea of time as 'becoming' from a Deleuzian perspective. Celeste Ianniciello, in her *Filmscapes of Antagonism*, outlines the complex transformation that cinema undergoes in its interrelation with the cultural hybridization and contaminations of the modern multidiasporic world; she first follows the 'voyage' of Bollywood movies to Northern Nigeria through the Hausa culture video productions, and then refers to the films of the Iranian filmmaker Amir Naderi.

Finally, Cristina Nisco examines Ingrid Mwangi's visual works (photos, videos, installations, and live performances). As an African/European woman artist, Mwangi interrogates and intervenes on the structures of subjectivity through body performance, in response to normative discourses enframing her African and European identity in institutional and official portraits. This essay, in a way, closes the circle on the recurrent theme of the mobility of cinema. Giuliana Bruno in her *Atlas of Emotion* (2002) aptly reminds us that the Greek word *kinema* connotes both the motion and e-motion of the cinematic journey, such as, among others, the one that has removed cinematic language from its closed domain via art and the architectures of sound and vision. One of the examples of this move, in my opinion, is given by Julien's 'cinematization of video art'.

I remember the emotional jolt I experienced in the African pavilion of the Venice Biennale 2007, when, in the open well-lit space of the gallery, I saw one of Mwangi's videos, *Masked* (2000). The face of the woman on the screen was totally covered by her black thick hair constantly changing shape and texture without ever revealing what was underneath – the video was, without beginning or end, running on in a circular way, the face never showing itself, the mask never taken off, unresponding to the spectator's desire. On the same occasion, I was drawn from the open space of another pavilion to an enclosed, dark alcove to watch a filmic installation by the African American artist Kara Walker: her silhouetted images representing the cruel and violent history of slavery and of its emancipatory process in North America were moving from one end of the room to another, and on to the ceilings and the doors, taking in – object among objects? subject among subjects? – the shadow of the spectator.

Back to cinema, back to a different cinema.



Ingrid Mwangi, *Cutting the Mask* 2003.
Courtesy of the author.



Kara Walker, *8 Possible Beginnings* 2003.
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co Gallery.