

## The Post-Militant Image

T.J. Demos

One can readily identify a current in international contemporary film and video today, where artists are bringing critical focus to the colonial past and, more specifically, to the hauntings of that past in our cultural imaginary. In fact, my recent work—including both my recent book *Return to the Postcolony*<sup>1</sup> and the screening series I curated last year at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía entitled “Specters: A Ciné-politics of Haunting”—has explored such moving-image-based practices precisely in relation to those hauntings. My operating thesis has been that it is not only historical colonial violence that has animated the spectres circulating in our present, but also the unfinished project of decolonisation that has troubled or even put the lie to today’s era of neoliberalism. But here, I will reflect on an additional aspect of haunting in the contemporary practice of the moving image, particularly the practice of ciné-politics, and that is the traumatic loss of the militant image, which once possessed the power and purpose to resist military dictatorships, inspire anti-colonial struggles, and convene the energies of solidarity via a cinema at the service of decolonisation.

Numerous artists and filmmakers have indeed recently uncovered multiple hauntings, including of repressive pasts, state-sponsored genocides, and dead zones of eco-catastrophe, as well as of the stranded dreams of unfulfilled promises, of democracy and equality alike. Consider Sven Augustijnen’s “Spectres” (2011), which investigates a Belgian diplomat’s obsessively defensive narrative regarding Belgium’s partial responsibility for the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected leader of independent Congo. The era of post-war decolonisation in Africa was filled with immense optimism for emancipatory futures—futures gradually clouded over by neocolonial financial servitude to world markets and

Western economic interests, all enabled by Western-supported dictatorial regimes. In Lumumba's case, the leader of a newly independent nation who promised radical self-determination, after a century of brutal resource extraction via forced labour and colonial occupation, was himself brutally arrested, tortured, and summarily executed, the continuing conflicted historicisation of which is explored in Augustijnen's film. Such haunted visions in contemporary film hold the power to address such disturbances, doing so in the realm of cinematic appearance, which contradict the act of forgetting and the normalisation of collective amnesia found in much media content and government propaganda these days. In this regard, Jacques Derrida bears continuing relevance, especially where he outlined an innovative analytic method of "hauntology"—a creative play on the philosophical term ontology, unfolding to both the "haunting of being" and the "being of haunting"—which has been useful in sensitising us to current film forms that bear the imprint of errant spectres.<sup>2</sup> To what degree does contemporary film define a ciné-politics?

For the theorist of ghostly matters, Avery Gordon, "the ghost is a crucible for political mediation and historical memory", which calls for "an alternative diagnostics" linking "the politics of accounting, in all its intricate political-economic, institutional, and affective dimensions, to a potent imagination of what has been done and what is to be done otherwise".<sup>3</sup> While the formulation of a ciné-politics is not her aim, Gordon's terms help to set out the practice I'd like to identify, which emerges precisely by joining the "potent imagination of what has been done" to the transformative power of "what is to be done otherwise." Ciné-politics emphasises the political in cinema as much as a cinema of politics, where politics overflows its cinematic container and troubles its palatable aestheticisation. It names a cinema where content molests its form, and where form shapes its content, politically, in the sense that it refuses the aestheticisation of politics in favour of a politicisation of cinema. In such a formulation as this, I'm invoking Walter Benjamin's conceptualisation of aestheticisation as the opposite of politicisation, and not Jacques Rancière's recent theory of the politics of aesthetics—not because I would deny that politics itself has an aesthetics (far from it!), but rather to bring out the fact that cinema remains troubled by its aestheticist containment that often detaches it from the lived realities of social and political struggles, in the same way that art galleries often materialise barriers (architectural as much as economic) to political deliberation, inclusive participation, and engaged social activities.

In this regard, such a politicisation of cinema recalls the history of militant cinema—what Argentine filmmaker and Third Cinema theorist Octavio Getino termed the "instrumentalisation" of cinema in the service of decolonisation and revolution.<sup>4</sup> Such an instrumentalisation refuses to

let cinema be itself; that is, it insists on differentiating cinema from its reduction to a commercial product or an autonomous medium (as in the so-called "first" and "second" cinemas), although this perspective recognises, too, that cinema in whatever form always involves politics and is political, even when it is otherwise repressed in its discursive reception.<sup>5</sup> Getino's ciné-politics was forged during the late 1960s military dictatorship in Argentina and the social struggles against it, expressed in such films as his and Fernando Solanas's "The Hour of the Furnaces" (1968). This occurred in parallel to the social uprisings against authoritarian governments in the European context, anti-union policies, and neocolonial violence in Vietnam, where filmmaking was also coming into alliance with revolutionary energies. It was in France that now-canonical figures like Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard were inventing ways to bring representation to proletariat collectives and thereby de-specialise film and enable a revolutionary cultural politics from below (as did Marker with the Medvedkin Group); and alternately to establish solidarity with the working class without forfeiting the avant-garde's legacy of representational critique, constructing a cultural politics from the intellectual class (as in Godard's work with the Dziga Vertov Group). "On the one side, a project that sought to transform the inchoate consciousness of 'the People' into the rational cinematic knowledge of their potential liberation," writes Trevor Stark, "and, on the other, a challenge to the structuring principles of culture and to the class division between those who have the power to speak and those who do not".<sup>6</sup> In doing so, both in fact mobilised an earlier Soviet commitment—and in particular that formulated by Sergei Tret'iakov—to the "operative image", one that rejected the notion of a passive and objective documentary inscription of facts, in favour of an active involvement in the unfolding of reality via ciné-aesthetic action and collective participation in production and reception.<sup>7</sup>

The militant image, as theorised by Getino, took aim similarly. Following Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray, one might define it as "any form of image or sound—from essay film to fiction feature, from observational documentary to found-footage ciné-pamphlet, from newsreel to agitation-al reworkings of colonial film production—produced in and through filmmaking practices dedicated to the liberation struggles and revolutions of the late twentieth century".<sup>8</sup> Given that history, where does this legacy lie in today's moving image culture? Where is our ciné-politics of postcolonial critique, activist engagement, and social transformation?

Living in a present reeling from the decline of Leftist social movements, as occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, we confront a situation perhaps more aligned with auteurist film (so-called "second" cinema), especially in the artistic realm. This is clear when considering that for Getino and

Solanas, militant cinema's instrumentalisation depended on not merely organising a screening, but creating a "film event", a screening mixed with rousing discussion situated within the context of a political process. In this context, participants were not distanced spectators but engaged stakeholders in the unfolding of political activity. In their famous essay penned in 1969, "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World", Solanas and Getino describe the necessary ingredients of "weaponised" film, including the "participant comrade", the "free space" of cinematic expression, and the "film" that acts as "detonator". In the right circumstances, watching a film like "The Hour of the Furnaces" would thereby constitute "an act of rebellion".<sup>9</sup> As such, the militant image defies corporate "mass communications ... [which are] more effective for neo-colonialism than napalm".

It is true that today we have also witnessed the re-emergence of collective political struggle in global Occupy formations since 2011, and recently in Greece and Spain, where the conditions of militancy (particularly posed against the neoliberal politics of austerity) appear to be gaining potential in governmental politics, the results of which remain to be seen. As Eshun and Gray point out, "The re-animation of militancy in contemporary artistic compositions and configurations, often emerging from the informal and institutional spaces of contemporary art, answers to a demand to reread the present from the perspective of a past that persists into the contemporary world and necessarily reconfigures its relation to history".<sup>10</sup> And one can point to numerous attempts to "eventalise" cinema, driving toward the goal of re-animating the militant image. This has been accomplished in multiple settings and geographies, including, for example, contemporary zones of conflict (for instance, consider Sanjay Kak's "Red Ant Dream" (2013), and Anand Patwardhan's "Jai Bhim Comrade" (2011), in the Indian context, where screenings have been held in specially constructed environments capable of reaching oppressed and impoverished communities, such as the Dalits in Mumbai and rural Maoist guerrillas in the forests of Chhattisgarh). Or take the engaged documentaries that catalyse anti-corporate extractivism, as in the US, where screenings of Josh Fox's agitational film "Gasland" (2010) were held in the homes of communities organising against fracking and its destructive environmental effects. Or consider, finally, the events of the Otolith Group in London over the last ten years, where screenings of their own films, as well as those of others (such as Harun Farocki and Anand Patwardhan), have been situated within extensive public discussions that comprise spaces of critical pedagogy, theoretical speculation, and political subjectivisation (in a way that continues the legacy of the Black Audio Film Collective and their own construction of modes of politicised reception in postcolonial London of the 1980s).

To be sure, most often film screenings in the art and cinema context bear little resemblance to the collective revolt of historical militant cinema. Even recent films like Göran Olsson's "Concerning Violence" (2014)—which joins historical documentary footage of anti-colonial rebellions in Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Guinea-Bissau, and Burkina Faso with a soundtrack comprised of passages from Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (first published in French in 1961) as read by Lauryn Hill—typically screen in theatres (like the Rio Cinema in London, where I saw it). Such screenings occur in complete detachment from the animated politics of collective reception. Still, these films do advance the erstwhile commitment to documenting violence, struggling against repression, refusing to forget, and striving for a better world. As such, the current ciné-politics of decolonisation—at times designating a decolonisation of memory, of artistic practice, and of research methodologies—offers a critical antidote to pervasive amnesia. It creates a space where the militant image can be revisited, even if it can only be best described as existing uneasily in an era of the post-militant image, one where the politics of aesthetics typically occurs in environments that fail to satisfy the "cinema event" of revolutionary engagement.

Still, current film of this sort depicts relational geographies and inter-temporalities between North and South, East and West, connecting uneven cultural, financial, and environmental states, and contributes to a ciné-cultural knowledge that refuses to sit securely within neoliberal logic and its unsustainable economics and ecologies, violent militarism and sociopolitical inequalities. In this sense, mobilising an aesthetics of the spectral defines an imperative to recognise our debt to the oppressed of the past, and to support the prefigurative practice of equality and international solidarity in the present and the future. The question remains, as demanded by the spectres of militant cinema—which appears in the practices of the Otolith Group, Sven Augustijnen, Vincent Meessen, Karen Mirza and Brad Butler, Oliver Ressler, and Mathieu Abonnenc, among others—as to how to connect screenings to social movements, to escape from the fortress of the film auditorium and the ghost house of the museum, as much as from the distanced and non-partisan criticality of the academy. How to create a contemporary ciné-political event? How to reanimate the terms of collective reception, one of pedagogical intervention and social participation, in the widest sense of the militant image, put to task in the service of contemporary decolonisation, not just a ciné-aesthetics of individual contemplation within privileged artistic institutions? The legacy of militant cinema confronts us with these questions, asking how we can reengage its politics, and its aesthetics—not only to live with ghosts, ever more justly, but also to decolonise the future, inventing a world we can newly believe in.

- 1 T.J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).
- 2 See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 3 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 18.
- 4 See Octavio Getino, "Militant Cinema: An Internal Category of Third Cinema", *Third Text*, 25/1 (2011).
- 5 See Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World", in Michael T. Martin (ed.), *New Latin American Cinema: Theory, Practices, and Trans-continental Articulations* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).
- 6 Trevor Stark, "'Cinema in the Hands of the People': Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film", *October*, 139 (Winter 2012), p. 147.
- 7 See Sergei Tret'iakov, "The Writer and the Socialist Village", *October*, 118 (Fall 2006); and Devin Fore, "The Operative Word in Soviet Factography", *October*, 118 (Fall 2006).
- 8 Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray, "The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography; Editors' Introduction", *Third Text*, 25/1 (2011), p. 1. For Getino, Marker provided one model of militant cinematic practice.
- 9 Solanas and Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema", p. 50.
- 10 Eshun and Gray, "The Militant Image", p. 12.