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We Fight Because We Care. Toward Doing Cinema of Care

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> *How many times have I been told, when filming in the Maori world, that, if we got it wrong, someone would die? Somebody on the crew. Somebody in the local community. We once had taonga. We once had guardians, we once had keepers… What we have now – if we are to believe what we hear – are owners. What we have now are properties.*
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> Barry Barclay, *Mana Tuturu*, Auckland University Press, 2005, p65

There have been multiple film manifestos, such as ones for an imperfect or militant cinema, or for a women's cinema as a counter-cinema. They have all been formulated by filmmakers not only with a theoretical-reflective, but also formal-practical and directly cinematographically transformative claim.[1] What does not yet exist, however,—and what we are currently working on—is the *postulate* for a cinema of care, or a healing cinema, or of a

cinema that sees to things and looks after them, not least with regard to the contexts of films, cinematic experiments and those actors' networks that belong to it. A cinema of care should intervene in the relationship between the spectator and the given-to-be-seen. It concerns itself with reversibilities and introduces *reciprocity* where the laws of representation have accustomed us to those problematic and often criticised processes of substitution and objectification we have learned to counter with empowerment, the critique of power relationships and representation politics—or alternatively by claiming a right to opacity or by pointing out untranslatability. Currently, under the aegis of planetary capitalism, cinema in the form of a franchise, on one hand, and indigenous or local cinema, on the other, are pitted against each other as opposite poles at their furthest extremes. Conversely, the primary rule in the cinema of care is to invest in a mutual relationship and the so-called *à part entière* (full, unrestricted, whole, literally: in its share of the whole), or what in vernacular English could be referred to as "in your own right": it is a matter of reconsidering (not least in the sense of V.Y. Mudimbe's *reprendre*[2]) the relationalities and interdependencies between seeing and the given-to-see or been seen, hearing and knowing, understanding and experiencing. It is about nothing less than "contractually" renegotiating the terms of our sensorimotor's existence. How we have appeared or come across in cinema has never been neutral. Cinema's image repertoire and grammar—we know this primarily from the history of feminist, as well as Black film criticism and theory—were predominantly heteronormative and structured in terms of White biases. Let us just recall the famous scene from Frantz Fanon's visit to the cinema, waiting for himself… In 1952, he wrote in *Peau noire, masques blancs*:

> *I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim.* [3]

From the wide and varied history of the experience of seeing oneself made into an object remote from one's own presence, since the mid-20th century progressive, feminist, queer, BIPoC, cultural studies-influenced approaches to film theory have all been primarily concerned with seeing, looking, cinema audiences of every hue, spectatorship. And obviously also filmmakers, art and cultural producers focussed on how other, less violent, less hurtful, less degrading, less offensive images could be shaped and disseminated and all primarily steered by the question: How can we instigate another way of seeing and receiving? The cinema of care aspires to accentuate those approaches in a slightly different manner; instead of commencing with what is given to be seen, namely film, it starts with cinema as the totality of cinematic and cinematographic facts in their interplay or—perhaps more aptly for today's multiplied audio-visual configurations and contexts—with audio-visual assemblages (*agencements* in French). Historically, cinema has invariably entailed perceiving oneself in the place of another, of experiencing oneself differently, as someone else. Fatima Tobing Rony, for instance, has described such a dismembered gaze as a "third eye" that escapes from one's own body.[4] The cinema of care project sets out to deeply probe such a reflexive and diffractive capacity with regard to everyday care-giving vis-à-vis re/creating life. Contrary to the all-too-often underestimated and correspondingly feminised and racialised immanence of care-taking, this form of cinema concerns itself with nothing less than processes of attention, mindfulness,

circumspection, even protecting and healing (bearing in mind the Old German expressions, such as in *Obacht halten* or *Behutsamkeit* derived from the Middle High German *huot* for headwear as well as for canopies and coverings), so that the dispositive between seeing and being seen, just as between hearing and seeing, can be recreated and maintained. In the cinema of care there are no images
that were taken or captured. Conversely, in French one says *ces choses me regardent*, by which is meant those matters that are one's business — and nobody else's. That phrase alludes to a place where one is looked at by the outside world. From there, the cinema of care hands back and restores images. It is in the service of a third or obtuse meaning (*sens obtus),* which Roland Barthes associated with the filmic par excellence, to the effect that it can neither be described nor represented, but rather comes to the fore where language and meta-language cease to function. Accordingly, the filmic has little to do with the majoritarian practice of meaning and signification, but rather with that state of suspension between image and description, between definition and approximation, which proves to belong to tomorrow's politics as a cinematic emergence of concern and maintenance.[5] Hence, what is cinematic has never to do with content, but rather a con- and trans-figuration, a productive dynamic interlocking of heterogeneous elements, which we would like to designate as a cinema of care.

If we involve film history in this process, we do so in a movement away from citation—that kind of movement of repetition that refers to and affirms disciplinary authority—toward recitation, and thus toward a repetitive performance in order to regenerate differences. In cinema, there have always been multiple agents who bring with them multiple repertoires and their own respective

corpus in order to fabulate i.e. engage in poietic practices. Against such a backdrop, cinema is not simply a physical location where a film is projected in public. Cinema is anything but a transparent medium; rather, it insists on its own process, which invariably consists of a multiplicity of voices and images, of tempi and densities. Moving further away from artistic individualism, it also encompasses a speculative and reparative watching and listening implied in what is being received: risky and erotic.[6] A cinema of care equally refers to all those gestures in film work that deal with how pre-filmic reality and diegetic worlds interconnect, including the perception and theorisation as reality of film. And yet, is that even feasible with cinema? For example: ...I Care Because You Do.[7] Or: We fight because we care.[8] Do the moving film images and sounds look as much at us in the cinema space as we, as spectators, look at them? Is this achievable? Cinema as an eye-contact experiment? Neither reciprocity nor full participation are entirely possible. Both are contradictory word assignments: Reciprocity implies the similarity of the Latin *recus* and *procus*: one could go backwards and forwards concurrently, or at least follow the same path, descriptively, while every full-fledged and independent share, for instance as *à part entière,* includes an extraneous part, regardless of whether one becomes aware of it or not.



Yet what if, in the wake of someone such as Brian Massumi, we were to actually reconceptualise how film and the spectator interact in cinema as a perceptual event and as an immanent relation with all its potential dis/continuities? How then could the historical institution of cinema, of all things, become the starting point for a healing instantiation of sensorimotor existences? E. Ann Kaplan, the filmmaker and film theorist, has spoken of "healing imperialized eyes." Referring to Toni Cade Bambara's reflections on Julie Dash's 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust,* she observes: "Easing

the pain of having had to endure the imperial gaze is most needed for those whose bodies were damaged by the camera."[9] And indeed, it is not just important, but even quite fundamental to recognise and think that the film's success story begins historically *as* and *through* the experience of hurtful divisions, ruptures and separations. And yet, it is precisely the splitting dismembering of spatial and temporal continuities (also subsequently in relation to the a/synchronicity of visual and sound duration) that in the first instance enabled participation, in the sense of sharing and sympathy, in cinema. Cinematic space is divided: a space of partitions, of fragmentation. I watch from out in the dark, while I'm not seen. There, becoming visible onscreen, where one is no longer or not yet. Invariably, film is also divided in the scenographic sense, between *champ* and *hors-champ*, within or beyond the frame, the world's visible and the non-visible field as represented by film. Narrative cinema only emerges from splits and disaggregation– primarily as a joke or a gag in cinema's early days—as a humorous punch line that invariably occurs at someone else's expense—those others who are in the frame and who don't see us spectators, but yet who also don't see *there*, in that frame, i.e. in diegetic space, what we, as spectators, can see. Social hierarchisation categories have always played a key role in this, notably in film's early days—including race and non-normative gendering. The film, *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903) represents a particularly striking example of this phenomenon.[10]

A white woman and—–judging by her attire— her African-American domestic servant sit side by side on a train. A white man sits behind the white woman who is reading. When she drops her handkerchief, he picks it up, and starts flirting with her, or as we would probably say today, sexually harassing her, by holding her hand and so on. Once the train enters a tunnel, the screen goes

black. After a short while as the darkness lifts, we see that the man has in the meantime leant forward, but the black and the white woman have switched places: Apparently, the man had dared to try and kiss the white woman while the train was in the tunnel. As soon as daylight sheds light upon his deed, he pulls back in horror. The two women burst into laughter.

While this prank seems to be at the man's expense, it is nonetheless based on racial difference and racist degradation of the black woman.[11] Interpreted historically, it could be argued that the predominantly white audience, who had paid to see this film of less than one minute, was apparently *not* really interested in knowing what actually *happened* in the tunnel, as the film's title *What happened in the Tunnel* would suggest.[12] This visibility was of less importance than this white man's embarrassment who is punished with a kiss, which he supposedly experiences as unpleasant, for having taken too many liberties in trying to steal a kiss from a white woman.

By today's standards, this film strikes us as a metafilmic commentary. In the off-camera of cinematic visibility, in the tunnel or even in the cinematic imaginary, what happened to that man was clearly not unpleasant for him: the feel and taste of a kiss. The difficulties and his subsequent sense of rejection only arise for the white man once that kiss becomes visible. Yet, what that kiss means to the black woman— both on- and off-screen— seems, in contrast, much more difficult to decipher and imagine—despite, or perhaps because of, the mischievous and direct look she quickly gives to the camera after the prank has taken place. In this short film, her experience is only revealed as an effect of her *de-placement* as a faulty, mistaken and false identity. She is excluded from the cinematic imaginary by the white heteronormative imaginary dis/order and thus submerges, despite or precisely because of her gaze

piercing the fourth wall, as one might say, into a deeper tunnel than the one we see onscreen—as a pitch black image—into a blacker darkness than represented by the gap which, in film-historical terms, becomes the editing cut and affords cinematographic time its sense of flow. In reflecting over a form of cinema that heals those eyes trained on sexualised and racialised hierarchies, on a cinema that might repair the acquired pleasures of looking and the (not only) visual economies of maid and mistress, it strikes us that we need to return to these foundational film-historical connections of desire, sexual difference and *racialised* punchline that come into play in this film. Furthermore, this notably includes the visual production of *race* against the historical backdrop of surveillance practices and technologies.[13] The figure of the domestic worker strikes us paradigmatic for the structuring of this field, both material-semiotic and imaginary, how she emerges as an image, disappears into the *hors-champ* as an afterimage; within this dynamic she is arranged as a precarious and risky position of socially devalued care work as a consequence of international and sexual division of labour, the global history of in/dependence, in/equality, violence, subjugation and servitude.

Even if the cinema of care comprehends solicitude and repair practices in the extended sense of a social and symbolic crisis of re/production between humans, but also between humans and extra- or non-human worlds, the point is not to underestimate the existence of the constitutive deeper tunnel as a starting point and emanating space, especially in its own epistemic practices and aesthetic economies. The speculative fabrications of the cinema of care thus remain in close dialogue with the history of the image-repertoire of care: it focuses from a historical perspective on the relations of gendered and racialised positions of housework, care and concern for children, the old and the sick, for non-sovereign

bodies and subjectivities. In the cinema or in the post-cinematic audio-visual assemblages (*agencements)* of care, the project pursued is neither didactic nor enlightening, neither cathartic nor entertaining. It will without doubt no longer be a cinema in which one (or *they*) has to wait for their own appearance as the image of an offending stereotype before the main film begins. Conversely, the cinema of care will by no means be a place where it will be impossible to participate, to share experiences and where mutual sympathy manifests itself. In it, the deeper tunnel stands less for a constitutive pessimism than for relations in a circulatory condition and a promise hitherto unresolved in cinema. With regard to possible interpretations of *What happened in the tunnel?* we want to underline the difference between an explanatory mode (What *happened* in the tunnel?) and a questioning mode (*What* happened in the tunnel?), between a "racist joke" and a "joke on racist culture."[14] The cinema of care wants to open up the tunnel for the *What?*, for that probing mode, and that entails opening the cinematographic body and the embodiments of cinema for new post-cinematographic connections of care. Hence, the tunnel, this interval from which narration emerged, becomes a passageway and a bridge on which new intense connections are forged. Instead of being a place of obfuscation, it becomes one of ecstatic constellation, an event. The cinema of care is one of anticipation and speculation, where the extra-filmic and diegetic worlds overlap, just as much so as the fictional and historiographic character of cinematic time. The care ethic that underpins the basis of filmmaking (for example, its ethical contract with protagonists) is that the filmmaker and the films alike cause no harm; they do not inflict suffering or injury, nor cause unhappiness. This care is in the foreground and— pursuing the experimental, revolutionary and movement-political cinematic practices of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, which both understood and practised film as a mediator

of and in processes that create new subjectivities— the question of whether cinema could ever become a remedy instead of being used as a medium. As such, cinema aims less to be viewed than to be made in processes of existential territorialisation, so that the potential for change in the sensorimotor existences involved and their position in the film work arises. The division between *champ* and *hors-champ*, between on- and off-screen, which prevents outright saturation through meaning, as well as the relationship between seeing and being seen, play a key role assembling cinematographic coexistences as a cinema of care. These cinematic intervals become the motif that opens up to the heterogeneity of cinematic signs, which also include a-signifying semiologies such as textures, gestures, rhythms, atmospheres, and so forth. Where the transition from one sign to another occurs, there is a *nuit d'encre infinie*, a night of endless ink, as Félix Guattari described it.[15] Cinema will become a place of conducting, co-evolving multiplicities.

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[1] Cf. Julio García Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema," 1969, Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", 1973, or Guy Hennebelle and Daniel Serceau, *Cinéma militant*, 1974.

[2] Cf. Y.V. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, where he develops the concept of *reprendre* with regard to practices in contemporary African art in the sense of a "rewriting" in threefold ways: "taking up an interrupted tradition (...) in a way that reflects the conditions of today", "an evaluation of the tools, means, and projects", and "a pause, a meditation, a query on the meaning of the two preceding exercises." (154)

[3] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks,* Pluto Press, 2008, p 107.

[4] Fatima Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, Duke University Press 1996.

[5] Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning. Research Notes on Some
Eisenstein Stills. For Noredin Sail [sic]", in: Roland Barthes, *Image - Music – Text*, London: Fontana Press 1977, pp 52-68, here p 64, 63.

[6] In this regard, see for instance Donna Haraways speculative fabulations, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwicks "reparative reading" or Anna Gibbs' research approach of "fictocriticism."

[7] Cf. Aphex Twin, *…I Care Because You Do*, studio album 1995.

[8] Slogan sprayed on a wall in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin, 2020.

[9] E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other. Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, New York & Londing: Routledge, 1997, p 219, p 222.

[10] *What Happened in the Tunnel*, United States, Edison Manufacturing Co., 1903, 30 sec., production, camera: Edwin S. Porter, Gilbert M. Anderson, Thomas A. Edison, Inc.; Paper Print Collection (Library of Congress).

[11] Cf. Linda Williams, "Of Kisses and Ellipses: The Long Adolescence of American Movies", in: *Critical Inquiry*, volume 32 (*2006*), pp 288-340, here pp 295-296.

[12] Cf. Jane M. Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press; Jane M. Gaines, "What Happened to the Philosophy of Film History?" in: Film History, Vol. 25, No.1-2, "Inquiries, Speculations, Provocations (2013), pp. 70-80.

[13] Cf. Catherine Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema*, New York University Press, 2015.

[14] Cf. Stephen Best, *The Fugitive's Properties. Law and the Poetics of Dispossession*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, here pp 266-67.

[15] Félix *Guattari*, "D'un signe à l'autre," *Recherches*, no. 2 (February) 1966, pp 33-63.