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論　文

Cosmopolitanism and Animated Kinography in *Persepolis* and *Sita Sings the Blues*

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DJ Spooky, a.k.a. That Subliminal Kid (also known as Paul D Miller) recently asked, "What happens when you apply DJ technique to historical films?" He asked this question in relation to the work of Dziga Vertov in the 1920s.[1] Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) provocatively asks the question: can there be an *absolute kinography* that transcends national barriers as a means of communication? These two questions offer a useful point of departure for an essential question about the function of film: Is there something particular to film and new media culture that speaks discerningly to theories of new cosmopolitanism and transnationalism? If so, how is such a relationship to be theorized and understood? Like many modernist works, Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* presents a manifesto about its revolutionary new form at the beginning, calling itself: "an experimentation in the cinematic transmission of visual phenomena… directed towards the creation of an authentically international absolute language of cinema – *absolute kinography* – on the basis of its complete separation from the language of theatre and literature."[2]

This absolute and international cinematic language is meant to overcome national borders and linguistic barriers with a visual style of montage that is globally accessible. By its nature *absolute kinography* embodies a cosmopolitan idealism, but one that has been critiqued for its reliance on universalist Enlightenment ideology, and a tendency to undermine the ideal of truly *inter*-national collaboration by means of imperialistic bias. Thus this article asks: is there, and should there be an "international absolute language of cinema"? Can there be an international cinematic language that promotes a sense of global citizenship and transnational understanding without creating reductive standardization? In answering these questions, I examine two animated films: Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007) and Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008). Ultimately, I argue that they embody an *animated* rather than an *absolute* kinography. These films build upon earlier visions of cinematic cosmopolitanism in order to define a

cosmopolitan aesthetics that is sourced in an enhanced spectatorship, with multiple visual styles, and featuring conversations about national and cultural traditions, and marking a continuing transitional state. This *animated kinography* is not based on images alone, as was much modernist montage, but rather on the juxtaposition and reinterpretation of specific historical moments, cultural traditions and visual styles.

1920s Montage and Modernism

Vertov wasn't the only filmmaker or critic in the 1920s to envision the birth of a global film culture. An *absolute kinography* is rooted in modernity and modernist techniques and aspirations, and montage in particular is a style that was developed with the intention of communicating between nations and classes—an idealistic modernist and socialist belief that cultural, national and experiential barriers can be transcended by removing linguistic roadblocks. Silent films were made to communicate primarily without a written language, and *absolute kinography* attempts to separate itself entirely from language steeped in specific cultural associations and societal customs and become globally accessible. Modernist artists and filmmakers during the silent film era—Eisenstein, and contributors to the film journal *Close Up*, for example—keenly felt the potential of film as a way of making connections across cultural barriers. Poet and film critic H.D. wrote extensively on the potential of silent film as a method of creating a kind of international sympathy between nations and promoting a universal education that "will do away with revolutions" (27). British filmmaker Kenneth MacPherson described his filmmaking method as a cinematic "league of nations" (5). And of course, Eisenstein's theories of intellectual (Soviet) montage have been canonized as an essential element in film history. These modernist theories imagine an international kinography capable of creating global tolerance rather than nationalistic propaganda, leading to increased understanding between disparate peoples. Further, they do so at the brink of the most devastatingly nationalistic moment in the 20th century.

Man with a Movie Camera and Cosmopolitanism

Vertov's work in *Man with a Movie Camera* is especially relevant to an understanding of how a global cinematic language might work because it is a movie vital to film history and to the development of montage. His work is also, as DJ Spooky notes, an essential precursor to ideas of digital media and DJ culture in the 21st century. The idea of *absolute kinography* has valences in both modernist and socialist ideology in that it seeks to jettison the restrictions of

local or national dogmas that preach a provincialism that separates and categorizes individuals within a hierarchy of importance based on greater or lesser proximity and difference to the subject in question. In other words, *absolute kinography* as Vertov envisions it embodies both the ideals of modernist cosmopolitanism and of socialist utopia and communicates beyond limiting factors like culture and class.

One need only show the film to a group of students to confirm that it is not entirely capable of transcending the barriers of history, class and cultural expectations about film, however; at least, not without providing some explanation and context. Reality is, after all, the local and specific. *Man with a Movie Camera* in fact documents a very specific moment in time—Odessa in the 1920s. Beautiful and engaging as its images and techniques are, it cannot completely see outside its national or cultural borders. The one incident clearly pointing to a more global presence in the film is an Asian magician entertaining a group of children. What the film does depict is a world that is on the brink of a more pervasive globalism. Thus it offers an understandably rooted vision about what that world looks like. Yet it also suggests that an *absolute kinography* could potentially express a cosmopolitan idealism that articulates conversations between nations.

For those already familiar with kinography and modernism, the film remains a revelation of aesthetic technique and structure: the movie certainly communicates across linguistic and national borders in intellectual circles. And while the industrial rhythms and fascination with a mechanized modern life in *Man with a Movie Camera* tend to leave many viewers cold, its playful *joie de vivre* and desire to see into the heart of all things still tends to appeal even to audiences raised on the constant spectacle of action films. Inherent in it is a logic of montage and juxtaposition of perspective that is foundational to a truly inter-national or cosmopolitan perspective. The collage style of *Man with a Movie Camera* works to challenge accepted versions of knowledge, perception and storytelling with the tools of a new visual style made possible by moving image technology. It reflects the spirit of a revolutionary change that permeates early modernist work and the nascent Soviet project. The story being told focuses on documenting an unedited reality that is constantly unfolding, and it espouses openness to seeing new narratives and the possibility of everyday life as a series of strange incidents and varied perspectives. It allows for the freedom to imagine such things as relationships across borders. To see life as dynamic and changing is already to accept the notion that what seems

like natural and concrete limitations may not necessarily be real ones.

DJ Spooky and New Cosmopolitanism

Modernist filmmakers like Vertov may not have achieved this new cosmopolitan goal, yet aspects of their work and theories helped lay the groundwork for a revised cosmopolitan vision, a conversation rather than a declaration of universality, as Kwame Anthony Appiah calls it in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Or a transition rather than a transformation, as Pollack, et al identify in *Cosmopolitanism*. There is, in fact, an interesting correspondence between DJ Spooky's rescoring of *absolute kinography* and the ways in which contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism are re-thinking the problems of hegemony inherent in earlier versions of the cosmopolitan. DJ Spooky's engagement and interaction with Vertov's work is specific to those texts, but it suggests a useful way to re-interpret the broader idea of *absolute kinography*. Spooky is drawn to Vertov because both seek to capture the rhythms of a changing world (one through montage and the other through sound composition). He equates Vertov's documentary impulse with the hip-hop mantra of "keeping it real" essential to "musics of the urban landscape." Spooky identifies Vertov as a kind of VJ, editing with one eye towards realism and the other towards revolutionary social change that overturns traditional ways of perceiving. His approach animates the past by bringing reinterpretation to the fore: creating a new soundtrack for old images.

Re/visioning Absolute Kinography as Animated Kinography

The logic of dialectical-montage that is central to *Man with a Movie Camera* is clearly aligned with modernist and cosmopolitan ideas. In the film, the realism essential to representing the local and specific is interspersed with modernist montage that represents an estrangement of traditional perspectives and captures the fluidity of a newly evolving cosmopolitan citizenship based on film culture. It represents a tendency towards cultural transition and image association while lacking historical depth. DJ Spooky's careful orchestration and reinterpretation of Vertov's work and ideas—primarily through the medium of sound—adds that historical depth and contrast. Such a technique is also useful in understanding how a concept like *absolute kinography* might be recreated as something amounting to a "new" *absolute kinography*. An *animated kinography* is a reinterpretation and expansion of *absolute kinography* in light of new theories of cosmopolitanism as well as new approaches to filmmaking.

Thus, the kind of self-conscious mash-up central to DJ style, when applied to historical films and cosmopolitan ideals (whether within the film itself or in relation to it), allows it to be situated within a larger social "intellectual montage" that embodies a collision of national and historical images and traditions as well as imagistic ones. Reading this historical material in relation to a collage (or DJ mash-up) of materials suggests an *animated* rather than an *absolute kinography*, as its primary focus is not on absolute communication, but on representing the transitory nature of historical, personal, and visual experience.

Re-visioning *absolute kinography* as *animated kinography* also increases its potential as a form of global communication that can transcend local differences while focusing on the transitional reality of local phenomena and moments of experience. In this way, the crucial element of cinematic language in *Man with a Movie Camera* is not its ability to communicate absolutely but its dynamic creation and interpretation of a new way of seeing a world transformed by technology and global migration. *Animated kinography* can thus also be understood as *inter-national kinography*, aligning it with theories of new cosmopolitanism that seek to understand the relation between various nations and peoples as a conversation rather than an imperialistic decree.

In this way, *animated kinography* exists in film form as an instability of meaning—one that results from the freedom of movement between different cultural and historical traditions, but which also continually builds new attachments and meanings. It is an "intellectual montage" that enacts a collision between cultural and national traditions and contemporary experience envisioned in its layering and reinterpretation of images. Thus *animated kinography* is rooted in theories of new cosmopolitanism such as conversation, multiple attachment, transition and association. These theories of new cosmopolitanism provide a useful correspondence for thinking about how film can communicate across borders. A central idea to start with is the one Appiah voices in *Cosmopolitanism*: It "begins with a simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association" (xviiii-xix).

At the center of this conversation is the human figure, the new cosmopolitan, an individual who creates a thread of necessary connection across nationalities, historical periods and

cultural borders. This figure makes connections through their physical movement and intellectual flexibility. As Rajan and Sharma define it: "new cosmopolitans… blur the edges of home and abroad by continuously moving physically, culturally, and socially, and by selectively using globalized forms of travel, communication, languages, and technology to position themselves in motion between at least two homes, sometimes even through dual forms of citizenship" (*New Cosmopolitans*). The ideal new cosmopolitan individual uses multiple lenses to frame and reframe their world vis-à-vis their experiences as reflected on in conversations, global contextualization and the multiple attachments they have developed by adjusting to different spaces of existence. Such a figure is thus crucial for establishing an *animated kinography*, though ideally several figures will introduce a true range of perspectives.

The dialogue inherent in the montage of images in *Man with a Movie Camera* also points to a larger conversation that can be had between the film and its spectators. *Animated kinography* suggests that a collage/DJ approach to historical material (as well as history-in-the-making) can provide a model for a new cosmopolitics of film spectatorship and an understanding of what it means to be a global citizen. It also allows for a spectatorial engagement in "multiple attachments," a concept I draw from Pheng Cheah's collection, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. Thus, a basic attachment to *Man with a Movie Camera* requires understanding the film historically as Vertov's vision of a newly liberated Russian proletariat. Building on that involves contextualizing the logic, significance and meaning of the film in a way that animates the subject, the film and its spectators. This requires a comparison of images, cultural perspectives, and historical experiences, while asking viewers to also make attachments to the film from their own networked lives.

While many people don't have access to dual citizenship, or even travel, twenty-first century technologies make the possibility of global communication accessible, and provide the opportunity for an increase of *inter*-national identification and cosmopolitan understanding. In terms of a cosmopolitics of spectatorship, this means the *animated kinography* of difference in film. This might function on a very simple level—as when Vertov shows us a still image of a person and then a moving one, documenting and animating for us a child's reactions to entertainment, familiar to us across decades and thousands of miles. It may also mean searching for contextualization to define the difference and building a web of attachments by adding information to aesthetics.

***Animated Kinography and Cosmopolitanism in* Persepolis *and* Sita Sings the Blues**

Two animated films—released within a year of each other—that reevaluate the modernist ideals of an international absolute cinematic language in terms of both subject matter and technique are Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007) and Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008). They each display a conversation between different national, ethnic and even gender traditions through the juxtaposition of variable cultural perspectives and experiences, embedded in the filmmaker's personal story. Through their animation of different perspectives, *Persepolis* and *Sita Sings the Blues* highlight what Pollack et al refer to as "the terrains of historic and cultural transition." The films juxtapose these different styles, traditions and cultural perspectives in ways that don't mark them as discrete units but often overlap them as intellectual montage—so that, as Eisenstein clarifies, "each sequential element is perceived not *next* to the other, but on *top* of the other." This transnational and intercultural mash-up invites viewers to situate the films within a larger context that embodies a collision of national and historical images and traditions while also engaging in their own "multiple attachments." Thus, a process for navigating *animated kinography* is modeled in the films: intercultural dialogues and visual montage contrasting real events and individual perspectives demonstrate the ability of individuals and societies to intervene in, translate, and reinterpret the stories they inherit.

Satrapi's *Persepolis* epitomizes an approach to this kind of *animated kinography* sourced in a period of extreme cultural transition. Based on Satrapi's graphic novels, it narrates the experiences of Marji (essentially the author) from a child to an adult. She grows up in Tehran during the Iranian Revolution, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the Iran-Iraq war. Because she is so dangerously outspoken, her parents send her to live in Vienna, where she is culturally alienated. Moving back and forth between these countries, and through homelessness and depression, she struggles to define her self in a world where she is culturally estranged in different ways in both countries. The film intersperses her personal experiences with the reflections of her family and larger historical events.

The story—which focuses on Marjane and her family as they are subject to revolutionary changes and oppressive cultural regimes in Iran in the latter 20th century—details how they are exiles. For her family this means being forbidden access to their own cultural heritage within their new national identity. For Marji this fluctuates between exile-at-home and the alienation of being a stranger in a strange land in Austria. Thus, the story necessarily moves from one

cultural perspective to another, and points of view and experiences sometimes differ wildly within the same society and background. The story contrasts narratives of identity by following Marji's family and friends as they negotiate being cosmopolitans in a fundamentalist world and struggle to understand both their national and transnational modes of being. Marji's transition from child to adult also explores her straddling of two very different national cultures. To illustrate this, Satrapi constructs the narrative from multiple, fallible sources, incorporates conversations between herself and others (with representatives of Christian, Islamic, and Marxist traditions), and features an array of perspectives resulting from the clash of cultures and political regimes, including fundamentalist, racist and "cosmopolitan" viewpoints.

In telling the story of her developing sense of self, Satrapi also references the cultural, political, and social struggles taking place in Iran and Europe while she is growing up. Thus, her personal experiences reflect a number of smaller conversations happening within the broader social transitions and upheavals of the 20th century, which pit cosmopolitanism against fundamentalism. As a figure moving between these disparate cultures and social and political influences, she becomes the locus for an *animated kinography* that features a continuous conversation about identity. In addition, by emphasizing the dynamic and fallible nature of storytelling, and its historical and transnational reverberations, the film asserts the transitional nature of individual understanding and how that inflects cosmopolitan ideals.

Satrapi also utilizes the aesthetic legacy of 20th century art and animation in order to express a cosmopolitanism of multiple visual styles. She draws from both realist and expressionist traditions, including a black and white silhouette style that resonates with Lotte Reiniger's 1920s animation, 1930s expressionism (both of which reference modernist visual style), 19th century puppetry as both style and political commentary, and contemporary pop culture representations like Bruce Lee, the Bee Gees, punk and Godzilla. Each of these styles brings with it not only diverse visual approaches to material, but a specific cultural understanding as well. Further, styles are contrasted with each other to create a greater depth of possibility—as images and ideas not merely next to, but on top of each other—as Eisenstein's intellectual montage suggests. Thus, there is a realistic sensibility to the war scenes, which is joined to a bleak expressionism that results in the subject matter resonating as both realistic destruction and psychological terror. Puppetry is used to highlight the fact that our versions of history are performative "stories" that are subject to interpretation. This cutout style is further

combined with the look of silhouettes, which invoke a fairy tale sense of both exquisite beauty and gruesome consequences, and echo with Reiniger's animated legends. Finally, the pop culture references introduce the clear effects of a globalized and inter-national culture, which allow Marji to help define her own ideas and perspective in contrast to the fundamentalist society she lives in.

The animated nature of the film also allows for disparate elements of the real and the imagined to be integrated together into a single story. This layering of effect can be demonstrated in a sequence that showcases different visual styles (realist and expressionist in particular) and the ways in which the historical and personal overlap in the creation of an artistic image. In this sequence we move from the local setting of Marji's war-torn neighborhood in Tehran to the internationally recognized image of *The Scream*—Edvard Munch's classic expressionist depiction of human terror. The sequence begins with a rapid zoom into the city as if we are the missile about to shatter Marji's neighborhood. Through her eyes we see fragments of daily life and the remains of a building falling in on itself. As she walks away with her mother she suddenly sees into the heart of the debris: a stark white human hand stands out against the dark background and in a reverse shot we see Marji's horrified face. The camera first pulls in to her face and the hand, but with the recognition of the object, the camera pulls back suddenly and we see her face recede into *The Scream* before being swallowed up by darkness. It is the contrasts of the scene—the expressionism depicting realism and the clear visual connection between war-torn Iran in the 1980s and 19th century Norway—that show us how the reinterpretations inherent in *an animated kinography* can create a filmic cosmopolitanism.

In a similar way, *Sita Sings the Blues* creates complex intercultural dialogues and visual montage in the structure of its narrative, ideological and aesthetic world. The film recounts the epic Sanskrit poem *The Ramayana* as told by three narrators who in turn tell the story, change their minds, and interrupt each other to present different versions of the story, creating a conversational and reflective narrative that corrects and expands as a dialogue rather than merely reciting one version of an inherited story. It promotes an *animated kinography* in the way it focuses on this conversation and encourages both intercultural connection and a dialogic reevaluation of inherited stories and national understandings.

The story features Rama and Sita, who are happily married and comfortable as rulers in their society. But Rama is exiled, and Sita is first kidnapped by a demon king and then betrayed by her husband who refuses to believe in her innocence, even unto her final plea for the earth to swallow her up if she has remained pure (it does). This classic story is paralleled with the animator's own, as she begins by being happily married in San Francisco, but is abandoned by her husband after he takes a job in India. Heart-broken, she finds an ally in Sita as she reads the *Ramayana*. This parallel makes the already dialogical story both inter-national and transhistorical in a way that demonstrates how personal identity can be shaped and strengthened by cross-cultural connections.

In telling the classic Hindu tale of Rama and Sita, Paley draws from a fascinating range of aesthetic styles: classic Indian paintings and drawings, contemporary Indiana pop culture representations, Fleischer-style 1930s Hollywood animation (especially *Betty Boop*), Indian shadow puppets (who also resemble Reiniger's silhouettes), and contemporary Squigglevision. The film juxtaposes these different visual styles and traditions (and individual perspectives) of storytelling in a way that doesn't mark them as discrete units but overlaps them in a way consistent with intellectual montage; for example, while the story is being told in one style of animation, we see it enacted in another, and when characters disagree or revise their story, we see that enacted visually as well.

This montage of image, culture, and history is clearly demonstrated at the beginning of the film in a sequence that showcases the different visual styles, the construction of dialogue and disagreement in storytelling (with visual cues) and the use of 1920s blues music (sung by Annette Hanshaw) to help create a historical reverberation with the story. The sequence begins with the narrators telling the story of Rama and Sita, as they struggle to set up the characters, location and narrative direction of the tale. Their discussion is represented by shadow puppets, and interspersed with re-enactments of the story as represented by various artistic styles. These artistic styles range the centuries, which emphasizes the historical dimension of a story that has been told and retold. This transitions into an animated style that mirrors the 1930s, which is accompanied by a blues song sung by Annette Hanshaw. While the animation is based on 1930s styles, it is also uniquely contemporary as well, which marks it as a cosmopolitan interpretation of tradition. In addition, Sita's lip-synching to Hanshaw's songs clarifies the interconnected nature of female experience across decades and continents.

This sequence lays out the kind of hybridity of interpretation key to telling Sita's story. Her story is reflected through various cultural manifestations (the generational artistic and popular representations of Sita and Rama's images) as well as the constant awareness of the story as constructed from multiple, contradictory sources. Sita's story is adapted by and shared with the filmmaker as an expression of female solidarity. Her story is also translated through the music as the experience of multiple women, an inter-cultural and trans-historical cry of frustration with the role of faithful and duped wife. Especially telling is the focus on the skipping (broken) record—a motif which begins the film and is repeated here. Sita's cry of "I cannot live without you…" is an example of history repeating itself as yet another woman declares her dependence on her man.

Thus, the film's *animated kinography* articulates a covert feminine conversation between generations and nations against a social structure that pushes acceptance and defeat. The film's focus on the animation and music of the 1920s and 1930s especially reinforces the ideas of modernist montage and transition. What is perhaps most engaging in the film in terms of the positioning of historical dialogue is how the animation becomes a series of visual and historical puzzles which are yet united by common human experience and which invite the viewer to connect and participate. The inter-national nature of the film focuses on the potentially powerful reverberation between American and Indian women as they attempt to establish their own identity while navigating the pleasures and dangers of love.

Thus, to reiterate and respond to the initial question: "What happens when you apply DJ technique to historical films?" DJ Spooky himself asserts that "Collage [then] becomes the mode and the method." I would add to this that what is created in the use of an *animated kinography* is an approach that fosters inter-national conversation and a cosmopolitan citizenship sourced in spectators who are encouraged by the film itself to constantly question inherited stories and points of view. Thus, unique to the 21st century re-interpretation of modernist montage is the augmentation of image collage with the juxtaposition and reinterpretation of specific historical moments, cultural traditions and visual styles.

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Notes

1 DJ Spooky especially works with the films *Kino Glaz* (1924) and *Enthusiasm* (1930).

2 The complete announcement in the film: “Attention viewers: This film is an experiment in cinematic communication of real events, without the help of inter-titles, without the help of a story, without the help of theater. This experimental work aims at creating a truly international language of cinema based on its absolute separation from the language of theater and literature” (Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*).