DAWSOMA: MAKING MEANING

Victor Masayesva, Jr. Retrospective imagineNATIVE Festival 2019

Essay by Dorothy Christian
In 2018 when I was at imagineNATIVE, I screened as many global Indigenous films as I could. I said to Jason [Ryle], outgoing Artistic Director, “FINALLY people are catching up to what Victor Masayesva, Jr. has been doing and saying for all these years.” Since 1965, Victor Masayesva, Jr. has infused Hopi sovereignty in his visual narratives, both in his photography and film work. He has been telling stories from his Hopi knowledge base that is embedded in his language and in the ancestral territories that the Hopi have traversed. Clearly, he is the “controlling intelligence” (Lewis, 2006) in his visual representations. This is what I speak of as the “Indigenous gaze,” a perspective that Maori filmmaker Barry Barclay brought forward when he spoke of celebrating and exploring Fourth Cinema (Barclay, 2003a, 2003b). Barclay was the first Indigenous person to get his film Ngei to the Cannes Film Festival in 1967. In one of his public lectures, Barclay critiqued how First Cinema represented Indigenous peoples. In his analysis, he expanded the discourse to the next level for Indigenous visual storytellers/filmmakers by encouraging us to think about how the narrative would change if the camera were onshore and was being directed by an Indigenous Director when the colonizers arrived. He said, “(that Indigenous filmmakers) may seek to rework the ancient core values to shape a growing Indigenous cinema outside the national orthodoxy. I hope that, in the not too distant future, some practitioner or academic will be able to stand up in a lecture room like this and begin a talk on Fourth Cinema which begins at this very point, rather than ends on it (Barclay, 2003b).”

Starting at this point, I have merged two concepts: Manuel & Posluns’ Fourth World (1974) and Barclay’s Fourth Cinema thus affirming a Fourth World Cinema. Plus, I adopt Barclay’s “talking in” approach, which means addressing other Indigenous filmmakers by assuming an Indigenous knowledge(s) base, that is Indigenous ways to knowing, seeing, doing, and listening. However, this creates a tension with the mainstream film discourse which does its analysis of Indigenous visual stories within a theoretical framework that does not recognize Indigenous knowledge systems. While I do not wish to delve into the history of the privileging of Euro-Western epistemologies in film discourses, it is necessary as an Indigenous theorist to acknowledge the epistemological privilege (Shohat & Stam, 2015, p.48) that conducts its analysis through the lens of Euro-Western standards of filmmaking.

It is important to point out that this analysis focuses on the “exteriority” of our films which means only looking at the surface elements of the film that Barclay identifies as, “the rituals, the language, the posturing, the décor, the use of elders, the presence of children, attitudes to land, the rituals of a spirit world.” (Barclay, 2003b, p.1) Thus Euro-Western film theorists often present a skewed and superficial analysis of our Indigenous visual stories/films because rarely do they consider the “interiority” (Barclay, 2003b) of the visual stories. The “interiority” refers to the philosophical underpinnings that shape and inform the choice of aesthetics. As a visual storyteller and Indigenous theorist, I can intuitively feel when the interior/exterior aspects of our cultures are in every nuanced layer of the film. This is what affirms the sovereignty of the narrative because the story is coming from within the culture and in the language, without explanation and without apology. This is what caught my attention at the 2018 imagineNATIVE film festival.

There are some Euro-Western theorists who have touched on looking beyond the “exteriority” of Indigenous visual narratives. Ginsburg (1994) speaks of “embedded aesthetics” in a “discursive space” when referring to Indigenous media. She is pointing to the Indigenous cultural knowledge that exists within our societies and Nations, which is at the core of our visual representations. Also, Columpar recognizes the imperial/colonial relationship that Indigenous visual storytellers have to contend with, and she says that our filmmaking is “the initiative to produce COUNTER cinematic traditions predicated on representational, not political, sovereignty” (2010, p. x). She understands the reciprocal and relational qualities that Indigenous peoples have with the land (2010, p.11-18) and how these attributes are reflected in our films.

These facets of Fourth World Cinema that Columpar and Ginsburg discuss are grounded in Indigenous philosophies that are based in culturally specific knowledge systems that reflect the epistemologies, which provide a wholly different perspective than Euro-Western philosophies. While I do not wish to delve into the history of the privileging of Euro-Western epistemologies in film discourses, it is necessary as an Indigenous theorist to acknowledge the epistemological privilege (Shohat & Stam, 2015, p.48) that conducts its analysis through the lens of Euro-Western standards of filmmaking. There is a level of closeness that shows the deep love for all of Creation. In this production, Masayesva deviates from his usual practice of only presenting Indigenous voices by utilizing the scientific knowledge of some non-Indigenous experts/scholars, which I surmise is because of the critical state of the planet due to climate change. When thinking of visual storytelling as a form of knowledge production, Wakiwi presents Hopi knowledge with a self-assured visual sovereignty.

Dorothy Christian

References


Leuthold, S. (1994). “An Indigenous aesthetics? Two noted videographers: George Burdeau and Victor Masayesva.” Wicazo Sa Review, 10(1), 40-51. Leuthold, S. (1998). “An Indigenous aesthetic: Native art media in the language, without explanation and without apology. This is what caught my attention at the 2018 imagineNATIVE film festival. There is a level of closeness that shows the deep love for all of Creation. There is a level of closeness that shows the deep love for all of Creation. There is a level of closeness that shows the deep love for all of Creation. There is a level of closeness that shows the deep love for all of Creation. There is a level of closeness that shows the deep love for all of Creation.
**Victor Masayesva, Jr. Retrospective: Dawsoma: Making Meaning**

Screening - Thursday, October 24, 2019 - 1:00pm
TIFF Bell Lightbox Cinema 2

**Worn Trails/New Trails: Footsteps**
Panel - Friday, October 25, 2019 - 1:00pm
Artscape Sandbox

*Dawsoma* a reflective 88-minute program of three films by Victor Masayesva, Jr. curated by Dorothy Christian. It includes his first work, *Hopiit* (1982), *Ritual Clowns* (1988 and 2013) and *Waaki – Sanctuary* (2019), his most recent film - all of which present complex interrelationships between humans, the plants, the food systems, the animals, the birds, the ceremonies and the cycles of the Earth, Sun and Moon within the universe. Victor Masayesva, Jr.’s visual stories have carved a path for generations of Indigenous filmmakers to truly tell their/our stories from a visually sovereign stance. Following the screening, the audience will have an opportunity to ask questions of one of the most influential story keepers/makers in the global Indigenous screen world.
Bios

**Dorothy Christian.** Cucw-la7, PhD is from the Secwepemc and Syilx Nations of the interior of BC. Currently, she is Associate Director, Indigenous Initiatives at Simon Fraser University. Before graduate studies, Cucw-la7 worked for the national broadcaster Vision TV to bring Indigenous stories from across Turtle Island and Mexico to the Canadian screen culture.

**Victor Masayesva Jr.** (born 1951) is a Hopi filmmaker, video-artist, and photographer. Born on the Hopi Reservation of Arizona, and growing up in Hotevilla, Masayesva’s artistic career reflects his active participation with the Hopi community, his body of work promoting Hopi culture and worldview.
We acknowledge the traditional territories of Indigenous nations worldwide and their continuing connection to the land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures and to the elders both past and present.

Operating as a distributor, a mediatheque and a resource centre with an emphasis on the contemporary media arts, Vtape’s mandate is to serve both artists and audiences by assisting and encouraging the appreciation, pedagogy, preservation, restoration and exhibition of media works by artists and independents. Vtape receives operating funds from the Canada Council for the Arts through the Media Arts Section, the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council.