



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 *Ngati* to the Cannes Film Festival in 1987. 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 epistemic privilege (Shohat & Stam, 2013, 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, if not political, sovereignty!” (2010, p. xv) 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 knowledge(s). Victor Masayesva, Jr.’s visual representations are firmly placed in the philosophy of his Hopi knowledge and his Hopi/Indigenous gaze, which provides audiences with a small glimpse into the complexities of the Hopi worldview.

Victor Masayesva, Jr. is a master at presenting the relational and reciprocal qualities of the Earth, Sun, Moon and the universe and how they relate to his Hopi way of knowing, seeing, doing and listening. He shows his audiences how the interrelationships and cycles are intricately weaved into the Hopi’s day-to-day activities, including the series of ceremonies that the Hopi uphold to perpetuate life on the planet. When there is a slight understanding of Hopi knowledge, the layers of nuanced visuals bring a deeper meaning to the beauty of these profound relationships.

In Masayesva’s latest production, *Waaki – Sanctuary* (2019), those interrelationships and cycles of the Nahua, Mayan and Hopi are reinforced as we see how they uphold their responsibilities to the Earth, the lands, the waters and all other seen and unseen beings. This film shows their strong relationship to the corn as a central character in all their cultures. *Waaki* is given a deeper meaning when you understand the stories. There is a synergy, an exchange of energies between the story, the viewer and the details of the visuals that have a sensual quality when viewing the film. The close-ups of the hummingbird being tenderly held in a hand, or the eagles being fed, or the time lapsed moving clouds, and most of all watching the corn grow from a tiny little sprout to fields of full grown plants being harvested

for ceremonial and community use represent some of the intimate relationships the Hopi have with all these beings as they are all part of their Creation stories.

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, *Waaki* presents Hopi knowledge with a self-assured visual sovereignty.

Dorothy Christian



MACAYA



Waaki - Sanctuary (2019)



Itam Hakim Hopiit 04



HOPiIT 01



Ritual Clowns 05



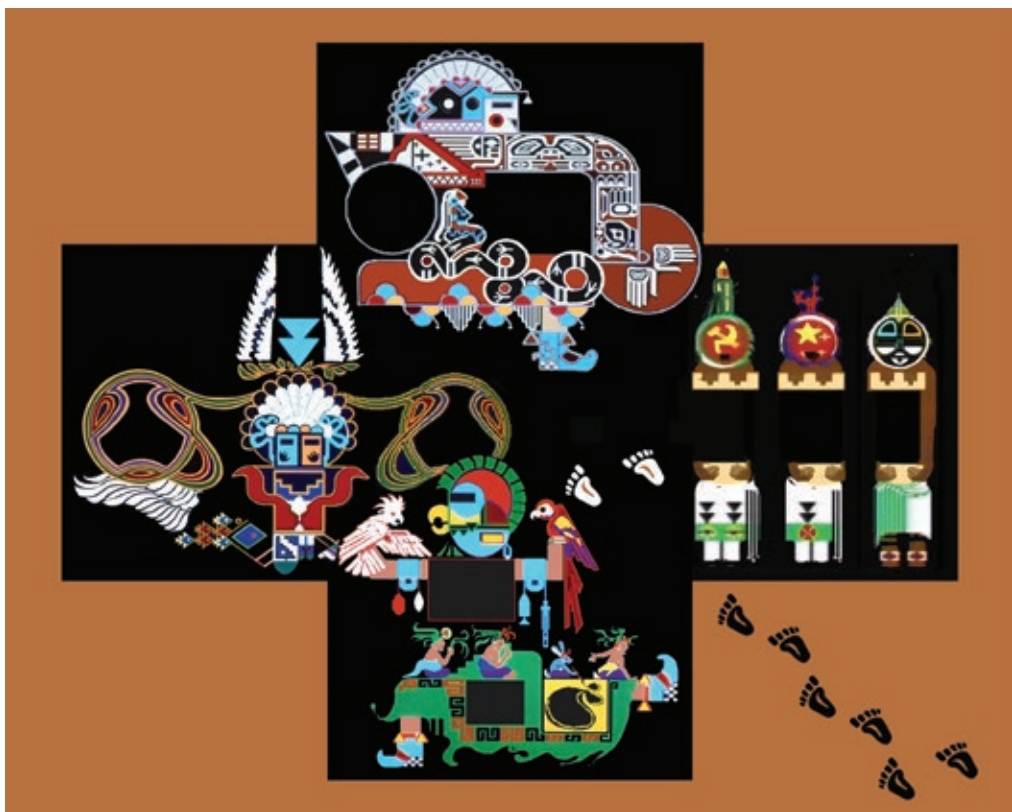
HOPiIT 03



HOPiIT 02

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4 Directions

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

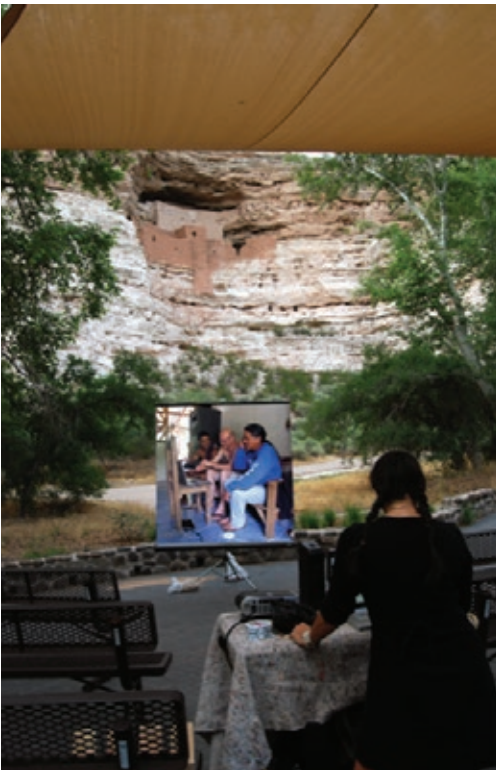
Artscape Sandbox

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.



Crew Montz



Itam Hakim Hopiit 02



Ritual Clowns 06

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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 Art through the Media Arts Section, the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council.

