

Incision to Incite: Notes on *Broken Tongue* (2013) and the Radical Implications of Collage¹

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«Ce n'est pas la colle qui fait le collage»

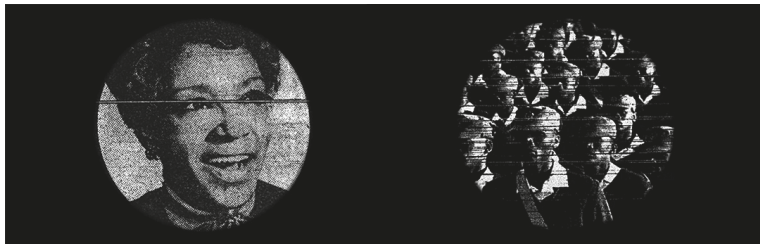
Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting* (New York: Wittenborn, 1948), p. 13.

«Selling yesterday's dreams wrapped in tomorrow's papers»

Lee Hazlewood, «Cold Hard Times»

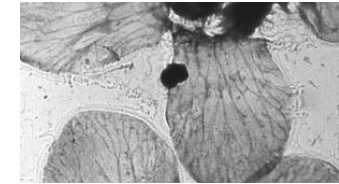
It's not the glue which makes the collage, observed one of its great masters, the German artist Max Ernst. Over fifty years later, William C. Wees would go on to add that neither is it «the slicer that makes a collage film».² The collage-making process juxtaposes pre-existing images, detached from their original use or context, in order to create new narratives that offer previously undetected elements or forms. Often, these elements exist in confrontation with each other. In *Recycled Images* (2000), Wees highlights the greater potential of collage to subvert the ideological narratives behind mass-produced images. They do so, he argues, by confronting the viewer with fragments of reality «within a "frame" that has traditionally signified the separation of art and reality, aesthetic immanence and life praxis».

In Mónica Savirón's three-and-a-half minute film *Broken Tongue* (2013), we are presented with a rapid-fire montage of images juxtaposed to the disjunctive patina of



¹ The title is based on that of a film programme on the work of Kelly Gallagher, titled *Incisions to Incite* on the work of the film-maker Kelly Gallagher at the Blackhole Cinemateque, Oakland, November 14, 2014.

² William C. Wees, *Recycled Images. The Art and Politics of Found Footage Film*, p. 48.



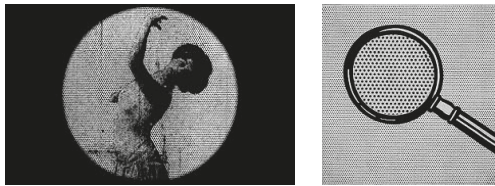
Tracie Morris' conceptual sound poem *Afrika*. The film-maker creates a collage out of the transient imagery of a New York daily, re-filming the images in order to create a new associative narrative that reflects on the origin story of diasporic migration in the US. «*It all started*»– is the film's endlessly circular point of origin.

After *Broken Tongue*'s extended leader, a seemingly corrupted sound file of Morris' poem rumbles indecipherably over the opening title sequence. The white titles are overlaid on sharply-edited images of butterflies or moth wings, which seem to flicker into movement (perhaps in a nod to Stan Brakhage in *Mothlight* (1963)). Where Brakhage shone light through dead moth wings, feeding them into the film projector, Savirón rather isolates images of wings like biological discoveries. Through the circular black frame, these images peep out like grainy discoveries under the lens of a microscope; with the exception of the leader, they are the only notes of colour in an otherwise monochromatic work. (These butterflies are also curiously reminiscent of a stained glass window. Perhaps this is no coincidence: Savirón has compared the editing process to the reflection brought on «by light on broken glass».)³ The circular frame directs our gaze, concentrating our visual field onto the centre of the screen. But this frame is also fragile, with an almost imperceptible flicker that gives evidence to its hand-made processes.

Recycled images like these suggest the movement of time, and sweeping revolutions and developments in mass media communications. Originally sourced from January 1st editions of *The New York Times* (dating all the way back to the paper's inception in 1851 and up until the film's completion), this detail provides the film's conceptual framework but also determines its materiality. The archival process, which took around a year to complete in the New York Public Library, involved the use of both analogue and digital processes. Images were selected from scratched microfilms of the newspaper, and then scanned and printed on ordinary library printers. The pho-

³ Email correspondence with the film-maker, 28th December 2014. As others, unless otherwise stated.

to copies were stuck in notebooks and finally filmed on black-and-white 16mm film. The final imagery has a grain and texture that reflects the different material transformations they've been put through. By flattening our sense of the progression of time and history, each image has a curious uniformity. The grain also reinforces the mass-produced elements of the printed image. I'm thinking of the Ben-Day dot printing process made famous by Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, as well as the rough-and-ready immediacy of 1950's pulp comics.⁴ These images both reference and reflect on movement, of people or ideas. Images of typewriters, flyers, hand-bills, and the juxtaposition of hand-written texts and typed memos, appear to reference revolutions in the printing and distribution of texts. «*Typing is so twentieth-century*», one of the images decries. The broken tongue of the film's title is also the film-maker's own, as a Spanish native: «someone who came to the USA with a different mother tongue, without knowing the language».



Though images flicker past us impossibly, we may start to pick out motifs, creating our own internal narratives in the unfolding of the film. The eye reappears in different guises, as camera, as microscope, through the circular aperture of the film frame. It's also echoed in the circularity of the poem, and the recurring image of the globe. We are propelled through the movement and speed of the film's editing, shown images that reflect on the impact of developments in transportation on Western expansion in the nineteenth century. An image of the locomotive («Born in 1851») reminds us of the instrumentality of the railway on opening up America to travel (for labour) and facilitating communication between the South and the North. Economic expansion is suggested through images of stocks and shares. Though maps of the world

⁴ A technique dating back from 1879, the Ben-day was named after the illustrator and printer Benjamin Henry Day, Jr.

might conjure up whole landscapes of geopolitical power, a tiny detail on a person's hand localises where its impact lies. We travel quickly from the macroscopic to the microscopic in the flicker of a film frame. «*Dreams for sale!*» Railway lines map out lines of flight, as groups of soldiers wait impatiently for war. Armies, guns, war crimes. History: weighing heavily; images: flying lightly. Welcome to an incomplete history of American expansion.

«*It all started*»

Each image in the film works in contrast to the pitch and duration of the soundtrack. Morris' poem is in a process of endlessly stopping and restarting. Words trip up over themselves, like a record caught in an endless groove. With its disjunctive patina and stuttering rhythm, we feel pushed forward and propelled, only to stop sharply at the tracks. Each word is stripped down to its acoustic and rhythmic forces, down to sound of individual syllables, echoing the way in which Savirón fragments the film according to editing rhythm of each fragile black-and-white image.

«*when we were brought here*» - *Afrika* was the result of a team-up between Morris and the electronic percussionist Val Jeanty. Jeanty had used a sample of the celebrated Trinidadian actor Geoffrey Holder's comment that «It all started when we were brought here as slaves from Africa». Holder's imposing Afro-Shakespearean baritone was striking, and Jeanty first used it as a sample, with Morris adopting it as the basis for her vocalese. When it came to Morris' solo performance however, she was unable to find the recording. The file had been corrupted. Instead, she used Holder's words as the basis for her poem. «*It all started*»— except, of course, it doesn't start at once, but again and again. Repetition becomes ironic, an impossibility.

Savirón's film tries to translate the disjunctive quality of Morris' sound poem into cinematic form. According to the film-maker, this process was inspired by a course she took in modern and experimental poetry at the University of Pennsylvania, to try and «translate poetic tools into cinematic language». There she educated herself in the writings of conceptual poets such as Morris, Erica Baum, and Charles Bernstein, poets who used other mediums (such as music, photography and painting) to create their own poetry. Hearing Morris' spluttering beautiful sing-song reminds me also of Laurie Anderson's sound experiments, and of Jane Arden and Jack Bond's use of sound in *Vibration* (1975). *Broken Tongue* disassembles images and words only to suggest new combinations, new ways of formulating historical narratives. This is the cut-up as revolutionary weapon.

I first saw *Broken Tongue* in a programme of experimental film held at the Artist's Film Biennial in London's ICA last year. Curated by Greg De Cuir Jr. under the title

Avant-Noir, the programme was a rallying cry for range and multiplicity in the field of contemporary moving image. The film and video works screened engaged primarily with Africa and the African Diaspora, and while there was a wide range of ideas touched on, I found the presence of collage and reassembled “found” footage particularly striking. Alongside *Broken Tongue*, the programme also included a screening of Christopher Harris’ celebrated *Reckless Eyeballing* (2004) and Kelly Gallagher’s *Pen Up The Pigs* (2014).

RECKLESS EYEBALLING (CHRISTOPHER HARRIS, 2004)

Christopher Harris’ celebrated fourteen-minute work *Reckless Eyeballing* (2004) is a powerful example of how “found footage” and imagery might be repurposed to rewrite radical narratives. (In its subject matter, Göran Olsson’s *Black Power Mixtape* and *Concerning Violence* are commercial examples of a similar concept). *Reckless Eyeballing* examines the racial implications of The Gaze implicit in a number of ‘found’ footage and archival images of African-American activists and ‘outlaws.’ The film contrasted images of Angela Davis (through, for example, re-photographed flyers of the FBI’s ‘Wanted’ posters) with that of Pam Grier in her ‘Blaxploitation’ film output. These images implicitly suggest how the cinematic portrayal of African-American ‘outlaws’ has traditionally conflated sexuality with danger (cf. *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*). The gaze is present in multiple ways, and at every turn; quick to eroticise, it’s also quick to condemn.

The film’s title alone conjures up the deeply problematic pre-Civil Rights Era slang phrase for the allegedly desirous glances of black men towards white women.

The background of all this, of course, is Laura Mulvey’s theory of the Male Gaze, and its famous omission of a racial context. What is the nature of Foxy Brown’s look? Or as Michael Sicinski asks: «Can she look back, or will she too be pinned and mounted by the gaze? Or, is there a place for an African-American female spectatorship, an active subject position inside visual culture?». ⁵ The film involves a number of technical processes that suggest the



⁵ Michael Sicinski, “Between Two Eyes: Four Emergent Avant-Garde Film/Videomakers for the New Decade,” *Cinema Scope magazine*, 47.

interchangeability of racial identity. Through the manipulation of the light-sensitive emulsion of high-contrast black and white film stock through solarisation, the racial context of the bodies of numerous outlaws that appear in the film is destabilised, made protean. From positive to negative, from black to white and b(l)ack again, the film stock reworks the politics of racial identity.

PEN UP THE PIGS (KELLY GALLAGHER, 2014)

Kelly Gallagher’s new collage animation *Pen Up The Pigs* (2014) directly addresses the political implications of collage. Her films, which include *Pearl Pistols* and *The Herstory of the Female Film-maker*, explore radical left-wing histories using everyday objects and materials such as glitter, newspaper and cut-out images from magazines. *Pen Up The Pigs* is no different – pink glitter, fluffy cats and cute pigs enact of chain of association that directly inculcates modern-day institutional racism with the implications of mass incarceration, implicating the latter as a modern form of slavery.



Pen Up The Pigs explicitly exploits the radical potential of collage, juxtaposing seemingly inconsistent images in disruptive ways. These collages involve the use of paper cut-outs from a wide variety of sources, which are then animated on a multi-tiered system of glass panes. In *Pen Up The Pigs*, footage of thinkers including Assata Shakur and Angela Davis is placed next to provocative chromatic collages of cats, pigs, and policemen enacting violence. The imagery is undercut by Gallagher’s use of bright and colourful home-made or sourced materials (like glitter and sequins).

Flowers blossom and roses unfurl, as nature appears in all her cloying, sticky beauty. The images act in correspondence with those of people engaged in struggle, of the real victims of white supremacy. «Every time someone in the film fights back against oppression or speaks out against racism, flowers blossom and bloom and gesture towards the new life that is born and created out of struggle». ⁶

⁶ Tom Mclean, “Animation with a Mission,” *Animation Magazine*: <http://www.animationmagazine.net/people/animation-with-a-mission/>