

Ragged Cinema: Twelve Theses on the Making of *Comrades together-apart / Camarades junts-i-a-banda* (Araüna Baró and Archibald, Catalonia/Scotland, 2021)

Núria Araüna Baró and David Archibald

Introduction

Comrades together-apart / Camarades junts-i-a-banda was made by two academics working at distance, one in Catalonia, one in Scotland. The film was shot and edited during the Covid-19 lockdown when we were forced to stay within our borders and, at times, within our own homes. The film combines footage of contemporary political protests and movements in our respective countries and reflects on actually existing colonial processes both within and outwith the higher education system. Using a poor audiovisual aesthetic, the film combines newly shot phone footage of everyday life during this moment. The film takes inspiration from the thinking of Karen Barad, in particular her notion of “cutting together-apart,” in addition to the work of other theorists, including Lucrecia Masson, Isabelle Garo, Walter Benjamin, Octavio Getino, Stefano Harney, and Fred Moten.

There is a long tradition of academics and artists working at distance; however, lockdown conditions forced reflection on how academics and activists might utilize digital technology to simultaneously build theory and practice at distance. Although we had previously worked together in the dialogical form by developing written and spoken presentations, the pandemic fostered novel methods, at least for us: to think, to film, to edit, indeed, to be, together-apart online. In 2010, Remedios Zafra updated Virginia Woolf’s claim for a private space, suggesting that “a connected room of one’s own” allows for expanding creativities and alliances stemming from multiple intimate places.¹ Conscious of its own vulnerability within profit-thirsty, private-owned networks, we

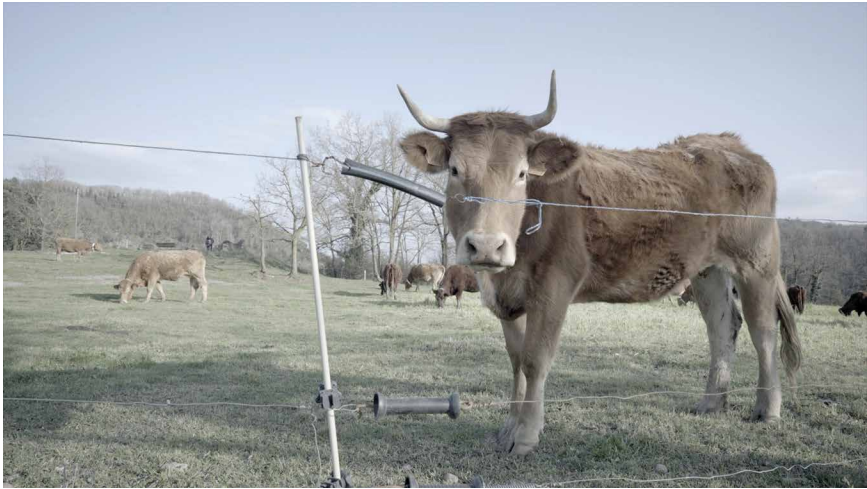


Figure 1. Revolutionary filmmakers should have their feet on the ground but their head in the clouds.

pondered the extent to which this approach might help prize open the door for an internationalist invasion of nodes and the recovery of utopian thinking.

We initially named our approach “Ragged Cinema,” in part after Robert Tressell’s classic socialist novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*; however, as laid out below, our thinking on this title has expanded considerably and remains in-progress.² In the following twelve theses, we reflect on the film’s production and Ragged Cinema’s broader concerns, ruminating on alliancial thinking and alliance building, the current state of academic filmmaking and activism, and the relationship between the dialogical and the dialectical in audio-visual form. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a conversation on how film and television scholars working within a politically committed framework, in practice and in theory, might navigate the contours of the current higher education system.

The film and an earlier version of this text were presented to the 2021 *Screen* conference, which was hosted at the University of Glasgow, and later in that year at The Revelator Wall of Death.

Comrades together-apart / Camarades junts-i-a-banda can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3hVuar9Uqo>

Thesis One

In *Ruminant Epistemology*, Lucrecia Masson draws connections between cows, colonialism, and art.³ Critiquing the supposed breakneck speed and goal-

orientated nature of modernity, and modernism, which celebrates boundless innovation, she advocates an art practice that rejects the logic of productivity and velocity, one which re-uses, which re-cycles, which re-turns.

Thinking imaginatively about what we might learn from ruminative beings, yet cognizant of the limits of what we might call “Monogastric Marxism,” we aim at developing a complex digestive system to absorb images of all kinds, rich and poor. In the process, we place poorness as an obsolete category, whilst rejecting obsolescence itself.

In Climate-Catastrophe Capitalism, to ruminate is to accommodate lethargy, to put production in a thinkable rhythm. At the same time, we do not fetishize slowness but aim to exploit the opportunities presented by rhythmic ruptures.

As ruminant film-bricoleurs we are aware of our iterations, of the lack of originality of our utterances, which are always already situated between what has already been said and that which is yet to come. Yet, every time we speak, we translate.

Thesis Two

Writing in 2009, Hito Steyerl suggests that the poor image allows us to link the Third Cinema tradition with contemporary modes of production and the circulation of digital images. For Steyerl, the poor image makes possible the blurring of categories such as the thinker, the academic, the author, the interventionist, disturbing strict binaries.⁴

Today, with even basic mobile phones able to shoot in high resolution, the signifier of the poor image has changed. In times of uncertainty, though, the poor image remains fugitive.

Steyerl suggests that the poor image “constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates.”⁵ In developing work in this form, we are interested in what can be gained in translation.

Thesis Three

Karen Barad’s work on diffraction and the notion of “cutting together-apart” has specific resonance for cinema.⁶ Cinema enables a Benjaminian Tiger’s Leap, in our case, from Catalonia to Scotland, from Palestine to Feminism, from past to present, from class to colonial exploitation and struggle.⁷ Re-turning to Masson, to ruminate produces a resistant translation, since rumination requires



Figure 2. Cinema is a machine for alliancial-thinking.

and demands its specific conditions of possibility: a horizontality that reaches towards collectivity and solidarity.⁸ Through montage, cutting together-apart—people, ideas, practice—cinema emerges as a machine for the development of what we’ve termed “alliancial-thinking” and alliance-building.

Thesis Four

In pandemic times, the days are replete with doubt and uncertainty. An uneasiness persists, the future of Climate-Catastrophe Capitalism looms with foreboding. Yet moments arise, here and there, even under lockdown, diverse expressions of protest, connected but apart. Isabelle Garo suggests that “only common struggles will allow the construction of other social relationships, and at the same time a new relation with nature.”⁹ A poor cinema, a ragged cinema, operating outwith the mainstream, celebrates, but does not collapse, both unity and difference. To visualize unity in difference. It allows us to reach towards the impossible universal but to reach nevertheless. Glimmers of resistance and new possibilities.

Thesis Five

In the Global North, universities, governmental buildings, places, streets, museums, statues, modernist art forms were financed and sustained by capitalist



Figure 3. We are toerags, we are on our rag, and we have no problem losing the rag.

accumulation: the material value created by colonial trade and the exploitation of foreign [and local] labor. Catalan modernism also brought the notion of the meritocratic, individualistic, rebel, and independent artist, which resonates in the value given today to the independent scholar. Yet, Catalan modernism was enabled by the sweat of women workers in the textile factories of Catalonia and the soap production houses of La Habana.

In 2018, the University of Glasgow announced the results of its own enquiry into how it benefitted from the slave trade.¹⁰

Art is entangled with capitalism.
The University is entangled with slavery.
Modernism is entangled with colonialism.
The museum is entangled with imperialism.
Slavery
Colonization
Capitalism
Imperialism
A messy dialogue.

Given that the colonial impulse flows from capitalist accumulation, the anticolonial impulse must be linked to a radical, anti-capitalist politics. To decolonize must be to decapitalize.



Figure 4. What value the ragpicker who rakes through the dustbin of history conjuring a constellation of possibility? (*The Owl of Minerva*, *The Tenementals*).

Thesis Six

For some, decolonization is a question of curriculum change; for others, it is a question of land.

Thesis Seven

Discourses of intersectionality have been crucial in drawing attention to the imbricated nature of oppression. At times, though, a performative intersectionality has been appropriated that has erased class exploitation and avoided questions of totality. Of capitalist power relations.

The abstract capitalist state can, theoretically at least, live without racial and gendered oppression. The extraction of surplus value from the working class, however, regardless of their identity position, is nonnegotiable. Yet in all its practical manifestations, to make possible class exploitation, race and gender need to be hardwired into actually existing capitalist formations, at home, at play, and at work. When tackling the unrewarded works of care, assumed mostly by women and migrants, these oppressions are made evident within capitalism's death drive. As Nancy Fraser suggests, while "social reproduction is a condition for sustained capital accumulation (. . .), capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies."¹¹

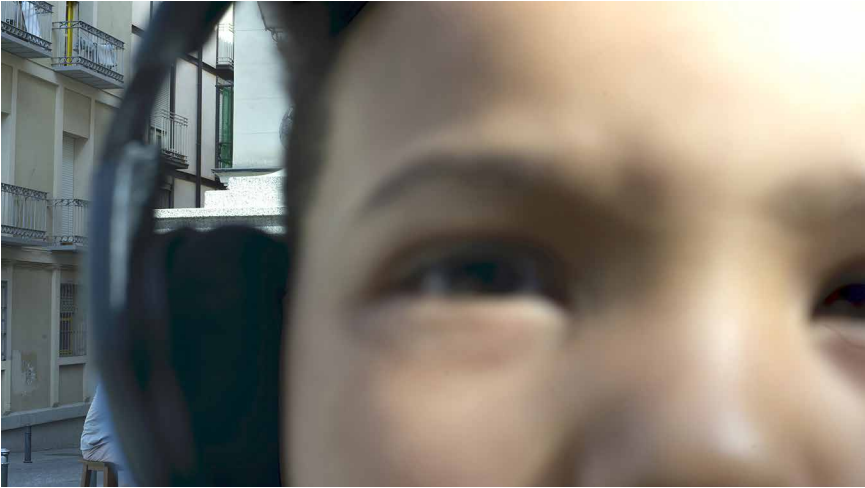


Figure 5. Nobody expected the Spanish Revolution.

That academics hail predominantly from middle- and upper-class positions has contributed to the minimization of class analysis in the university. In recent years, however, increased levels of working-class students entering the system, the intensification of neoliberal managerialism and oppressive regulatory frameworks, and university cuts and closures have fostered a certain proletarianization of higher education, creating potential for the development of structural, not performative, intersectionality.

Thesis Eight

The relationship between higher education and colonialism is beyond the realm of ideas. It is material. Given that universities in the Global North benefitted from imperialism and colonization, they should not benefit from decolonization. Decolonization should not be appropriated to increase universities' positions in explicitly colonial-thinking league tables. We need scholarly discourse and practices, moreover, that abandon colonial paradigms. "World-leading," "discipline-defining," et cetera, are trapped in an imperialist mindset. Yet we refuse the parochialism of national thinking and embrace internationalism, always mindful of CLR James's injunction to think Beyond a Boundary.¹² Beyond the field. To refuse the discipline of the discipline.



Figure 6. We are interested in what can be gained through translation.

Thesis Nine

In postrevolutionary Russia, Eisenstein championed the dialectic, to synthesize on screen image, sound, and meaning. The dialectical cinema is born in flames. We endeavor not to extinguish the fire. Yet, in the construction of art and alliances, in the spirit of Bakhtin, we embrace the gap, the void, the surplus of the dialogical. We aim to let the absence breathe, to become other, to reach beyond patriarchal certainty and drift into the un-knowable: to recognize but not fetishize the role of ignorance and the unconscious in ongoing artistic and creative academic production.

The only thing that is constant is that the last synthesis never comes.

Thesis Ten

Octavio Getino suggests that practice should be a generator of theory.¹³ For us, cinema is a laboratory, a space for creating, not displaying or performing theory. In film studies, audio-visual essays have, in part, helped to dismantle the false binary between the critical and the creative, yet the status of the moving image itself remains uncertain. We reject the discipline's critical orthodoxy, one that, although it takes audio-visual materials as its object of study, in its accumulation of academic capital, worships at the high altar of the written word.

In the dialogical spirit underpinning our work, we welcome the anonymous peer reviewer's feedback on our initial draft:

As you point out, the “poor” cinema that in so many ways mirrors your project, is not new. Famously, filmmaker Paul Leduc pointed out after Third Cinema’s heyday that the big feature length productions of Getino/Solanos and others (a “cinema of dinosaurs”) were replaced by local forms of community and participatory video making; these being a “cinema of salamanders!”

As salaried academics working in the Global North we are cautious of unproblematically linking our work to the rich tradition of activist political cinema from the Global South. We also recognize that Third Cinema is open to critique: for instance, Isabel Seguí offers an account of some of the invisibilized women’s labor in *Oppositional Cinema*, furthering the intersectional critique of social movements already underway.¹⁴ Moreover, we are aware we are also operating in radical political filmmaking traditions closer to where we reside. During the Spanish Civil War, for example, the Glasgow Clarion Club Film Society produced short films that promoted the left-leaning Republican cause, whilst in Catalonia the anarchists brought cinematic production into collective ownership, and, decades later, during the so-called Transition period, Helena Lumbreras founded the *Colectivo Cine de Clase*.

In *Insurgent Empire*, Priyamvada Gopal coins the term “reverse tutelage” to describe how activists resident in metropolitan centers learned from those actively resisting empire at its dark heart.¹⁵ In developing the flow of radical and revolutionary ideas that have oscillated arrhythmically across The Red Atlantic, we operate in a practical spirit of exchange and alliance, whilst cognizant of

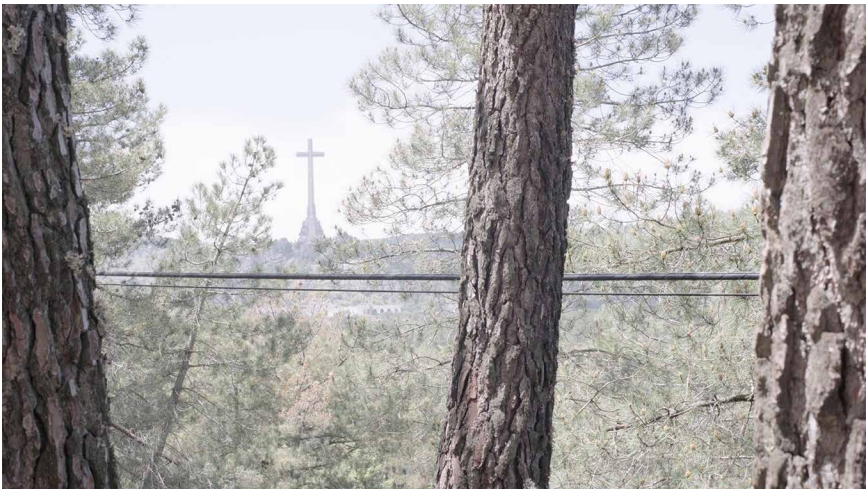


Figure 7. The role of the critic is not to write on or over cinema but to write with it.



Figure 8. We have a duty of care to the revolutionary past in all its vitality and fragility.

power differentials. We reach towards these historical and geographical points of possibility and solidarity with an open hand.

Thesis Eleven

To decolonize the university means moving beyond its own walls; not in a colonial Scramble for Impact nor in a move to penetrate international markets, but to move forward with modesty for a dialogical exchange in an expanded space.¹⁶ At home and abroad, within and outwith the walls of the university. In streets, in bars, in clubs, in trade unions centers, in youth centers, in community halls, in cinemas, in walls of death, in collectives: spaces of learning, an undercommons, which in the spirit of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney reject the harmful professionalization of education and aspire to build oppositional solidarities.¹⁷ The truly universal.

Thesis Twelve

The term “Ragged Cinema” is utilized to identify with the working class, socialist outlook of Robert Tressell’s classic novel. In keeping with the fluid, intersectional approach underpinning our thinking, moreover, we re-appropriate the usage of rags as a term associated with women’s menstruation and mental status—we are toerags, we are on our rag, and we have no problem losing the rag. The name also recognizes the ragged, rough-around-the-edges nature of

our work. As this is developing we are alive to the affordances of “ragged” as a concept, including developing a ragged methodology for filmmaking and producing ragged academic outputs that challenge standardization and metrification in the neoliberal university, and make visible the false certainties of the classic realist essay.

Although we seek to mobilize a ragged cinema, we are keen to move from rags to riches. But the riches we seek are communal.¹⁸

David Archibald teaches Film and Television Studies at the University of Glasgow.

Núria Araüna Baró teaches in the Department of Communication Studies at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili. Under the banner “Ragged Cinema,” they are currently utilizing work-in-process performance screenings as a method for editing *Repair*, a feature-length, zero-budget film on sites of memory and the Spanish Civil War, and developing work on activist filmmaking, particularly the affordances offered by the dialogical form.

Notes

1. Remedios Zafra, *Un cuarto propio conectado/A connected room of one's own* (Madrid: Fórcola Ediciones, 2010). *A connected room of one's own* is the only book by Remedios Zafra translated into English. In Spain, she is well known for her work on creative labor, social networking sites, and cyberfeminism, such as *El Entusiasmo* and *Frágiles*.
2. Robert Tressell, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (London: Granada, 1965).
3. Lucrecia Masson, *Epistemología rumiante* (Valencia: FEA Feminismo, Estriás, Autogestión, 2017). Retrieved from: <https://issuu.com/pensarecartoneras/docs/rumiante>
4. Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *eFlux Journal* 10 (2009). Retrieved from: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>
5. Steyerl.
6. Karen Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart.” *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 168–187.
7. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253–264.
8. Masson, 13.
9. Isabelle Garo, *Comunisme i estratègia [Communisme et stratégie]* (Manresa: Tigre de Paper, 2021), 311.
10. Stephen Mullen and Simon Newman, “Slavery, Abolition and the University of Glasgow: report and recommendations of the University of Glasgow History of Slavery Steering Committee” (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2018). Retrieved from: https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_607547_smxx.pdf

11. Nancy Fraser, “Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism,” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017).
12. C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1963).
13. Octavio Getino, Christian Pageau, and Jonathan Buchsbaum, “Some Observations on the Concept of ‘Third Cinema’” [“Algunas observaciones sobre el concepto del ‘Tercer Cine’”], *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 62, no. 1 (2021 [1979]): 85–105.
14. Isabel Seguí, “Auteurism, Machismo-Leninism and Other Issues: Women’s Labour in Andean Oppositional Film Production,” *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 1 (2018): 11–36.
15. Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London & New York: Verso, 2019), 8.
16. The reproduction of colonial values in higher education is today conflated with the values of a neoliberal culture that privileges, according to Wendy Brown, “genetics, personal responsibility, and market competition.” Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), ebook, loc. 688.
17. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe / New York / Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013).
18. We draw inspiration here from Kristin Ross’s work on Communal Luxury and the Paris Commune. Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2015).