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## *Maquilapolis, Monk, and the Political Imagination*

Review by Irina Leimbacher

Our imagination affects what we think of as possible and impossible, what we tolerate, and what we hope for. Politically and historically, locally and globally, the imagination is a powerful force—one that is, thankfully, open to transformation. Films, of course, constantly appeal to this imagination of ours, sometimes managing to expand or even change our sense of what was, what is, and what might be. Two recent DVD releases, one nonfiction and the other avant-garde, encourage such an extension of our imagination across boundaries of space or time through a visceral, bodily engagement with people on the screen.

*Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (2006), directed by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre, is a documentary film that everyone, especially everyone in North America, should see. It ever-so-gently brings home, once again, the fact that the products we consume and take for granted each day—from television sets to plastic notebooks and panty hose—are the products of others' hands, others' lives. Here, these hands belong to women of Tijuana working for corporations that erect their factories wherever they find cheap labor. These corporations get tax breaks, pollute the environment, underpay their employees, dismiss them at a moment's notice, and leave town when they please. The employees, meanwhile, represent mere units of work, a tiny ingredient in the global production process and one that, unlike many of the machines, seems to require no investment (e.g., education) and no solicitude (e.g., health care, labor rights, benefits). It is this commodification, denigration, and ultimately erasure of human labor that the film so eloquently deconstructs.

Set in California's own backyard among the employees or former employees of some of the thousands of maquiladoras that line the U.S.-Mexican border in Tijuana, *Maquilapolis* is concerned with the human and environmental costs of globalization. But it is not a story of victimization, nor a sensationalist exposé of the horrors of poverty and environmental destruction. Instead, it is in a profound way the embodiment of a collaboration, and as such perhaps a model for an alternative and more just world, one based on a different notion of time, commitment, and care than that which drives late capitalism.

The two filmmakers, Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre, initially joined forces with Factor X, a local nonprofit in Tijuana. Working with women factory workers, Factor X provided resources and training in human rights, labor rights, and domestic violence issues. Some of the women from Factor X participated in Funari and De La Torre's video workshops, workshops that ultimately led to the production of the video diaries incorporated into the film. These first-person accounts, complemented by the filmmakers' interviews and observational footage, form the central thread of the film. Two women, Carmen Durán and Lourdes Luján, generously share their stories and struggles with us, introduce us to their children and neighbors, and show us their homes made of recycled American garage doors without electricity or running water. Over the course of the film we observe Carmen and her coworkers' successful efforts to get the severance pay owed them by electronics giant Sanyo, and Lourdes' and her companions' fight to clean up the toxic detritus of a U.S.-owned recycling company that is poisoning her neighborhood.

## FILM REVIEWS

What lifts the film beyond the realm of conventional or activist documentary are the elegantly choreographed and staged scenes that punctuate its narratives. In these scenes the women collectively enact the gestures of work they know so well, performing and critiquing their own commodification in the global labor process. Together, they function as a sort of chorus for the film—and the drama/trauma of globalization as a whole. Unlike the spate of reenactments that populate so many recent theatrically released documentaries, these are not realistic, but rather function on a deeper metaphoric level. On the one hand, in a film that is sometimes excessively verbal, these scenes solicit a nonlinguistic, somatic engagement on our part with the women and the repetitive gestures of their embodied knowledge. On the other hand, they function as a compelling and eloquent visual rendering of the most profound message of the piece: the women's critical self-understanding of their role in the global production process and their collective and creative refusal of their own effacement.



*Maquilapolis's* enactments (I will refrain from describing them more fully to encourage you to see them) make use of the visual language of metaphor to distill complex concepts into images at the same time as they use the choreography of the women's bodies to address our guts and emotions rather than just our information-overloaded minds. Developed collaboratively, like most of the film, these performative scenes work in tandem with the personal stories, observational footage, and historical and contextual background (largely presented via a voice-over cowritten and read by three of the factory workers, Lupita Castañeda, Tere Loyola, and Natty Guizar) to transform how we imagine, and perhaps subsequently engage with, the complex systems of production and consumption of which both we and the women in Tijuana are a part.

That attention to the choreography of bodies and gestures, which is the most innovative aspect of *Maquilapolis*, is the driving force of two of Meredith Monk's films that have just been released on a single DVD: *Ellis Island*

(1981) and *Book of Days* (1988). Renowned for her vocal compositions and musical performances as well as for her choreography and site-specific work, Monk is perhaps less well known as a filmmaker.

Shot on Ellis Island, the main port of entry for immigrants arriving on the East Coast by ship between 1892 and 1954, the eponymous film incorporates her musical compositions and a troop of performers whom she directs in a series of staged scenes set in both the past and the present. Flowing freely between historical moments, using many tableau-like scenes that suggest an iconography of early twentieth-century photography gently roused into motion, and unafraid to insinuate her eccentric imagination into carefully constructed re-creations, Monk reimagines this place and the traces left by the millions (literally, twelve to sixteen million) of life stories that passed through it. Virtually without words, aside from the brief citation of some phrases and their multilingual translations that seem to come from a recorded tour, *Ellis Island* uses Monk's music, her original choreography, and stunning black-and-white and color cinematography (courtesy of her longtime collaborator Jerry Pantzer) to evoke and revivify a crucial, crumbling site of our historical and contemporary identity.

At seventy-five minutes, *Book of Days* is a longer piece that uses some of the same strategies—in particular, the forceful, almost violent, cutting between past and present; the luscious black-and-white cinematography; and Monk's elegant but humor-inflected choreography—here in a quasi-narrative set in a fourteenth-century medieval village during the plague. Conceived when AIDS was having a huge political and emotional impact, the film presents its historical moment as deeply imbricated with our own late twentieth century, and the small Jewish community in the village functions as an allegorical embodiment of socially marginalized groups. At times this allegory can feel a bit heavy-handed; the experimental dialogue, with its wryly incongruous direct-address interviews, somewhat strained; and

the carefully designed palette of clothing slightly precious. Nevertheless, *Book of Days* is a powerfully expressive work. Monk's own performance as a speechless but animated madwoman who becomes a mentor figure for the young Jewish heroine is superb. And the sequences of gestures of daily life, the Parajanov-like choreography of the traveling players, and the depiction of the last violent gasps of a town on the brink of extinction are all magnificently rendered.

The DVD bonus interview is conducted by San Francisco-based curator John Killacky, and Monk recounts the genesis of both film projects with her characteristic humility and grace. Such an artist's interview would have also been extremely welcome on the *Maquilapolis* DVD, as it could have shed light on the extensive nature of Funari and De La Torre's collaborative and creative strategies, strategies certainly worthy of exploration and emulation.

Both *Maquilapolis* and Meredith Monk's works illustrate the power of film to evoke and reimagine the world we live in, with its historical roots and geopolitical reverberations. Each piece embodies a unique approach to depicting other places, times, and people via the inventive choreography of bodies and gestures and the incorporation of forms of testimony that are not exclusively, or in Monk's case even primarily, dependent on language. Whether creative renditions of a past time or lived, collaborative explorations of a global present, they expand our capability to imagine and ethically engage the world.

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