To End and Begin Again

The Work of Victor Masayesva, Jr.

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From his earliest involvement with media production in the 1980s, Hopi video- and filmmaker Victor Masayesva, Jr., has displayed a complex sensibility and a strong sense of community-based purpose. Living in the Hopi community of Hotevilla, Arizona, and participating in a range of media activities, Masayesva integrates experiences of a strongly traditional American Indian world and the various discourses around Native American media found in artistic, academic, and media production.[1] For the growing circle of Native producers, Masayesva is a major figure for an additional reason—he is personally engaged in creating ways for an indigenous media movement to emerge in the United States and internationally. Masayesva is energetic in creating projects to further this aim and in recent statements has also considered the means by which Native American producers can best create an aesthetic specific to their own cultural and artistic outlook.

Masayesva is independent in perspective and practice and in his work avoids the didacticism typical of documentaries. Often viewers come to these works with fixed notions of how Indians should be represented and their histories and cultures explained. Masayesva does not believe that Indian cultures can be reduced to simple metaphors for the purpose of discussion, a frequent strategy of popular anthropology. He contends, for example, that the quest of ethno-filmmakers with the Hopi has been to present them as the "people of peace." But in at least one of his productions, *Itam Hakim Hopiit* (We/someone, the Hopi), 1994, Masayesva opens his story with a Hopi historian's narrative about a bitter and bloody historical struggle among Hopi. Also, Masayesva reveals information in a developmental way, as if mirroring Hopi patterns for instruction in which initiation into the implications of knowledge is a precondition for being the recipient of further information. Information is unfolded, to be apprehended at different levels of understanding according to the viewer's familiarity with Hopi or general Native American knowledge. Though strongly based on interviews, *Imagining Indians (fig. 1)* also presents the experiences of numerous Indians whose accounts mount a case about the intrusion of film into Indian communities.

With an experimental attitude toward media, Masayesva seeks rich, associative combinations throughout the

FIG. 1 Victor Masayesva, Jr., prepares to interview Orville Milk at Pine Ridge Reservation for *Imagining Indians*, 1993, color film, 90 minutes. Distributed by IS Productions, Hotevilla, Ariz.

visual track. In *Pott Starr* (1990) he experiments with animation in the opening sequence for a video concerned with a major museum exhibition on Pueblo pottery. In this a Native woman in traditional dress carrying a water pot is seen sinuously walking to the water, a sly reference to the eroticized feminine image with pots often seen on picture postcards of the Southwest. Masayesva uses animation to express something complexly sacred, reorienting the viewer to what Pueblo pottery means in *Pott Starr* by depicting bowls and their symbolic motifs whirling through the Indian landscape in which chasms, peaks, and waterways are often places of sacred history. In *Ritual Clowns (fig. 2)* he animates symbols from Hopi design, and figures representing various Hopi sacred clowns, to portray the key protagonists in traditional
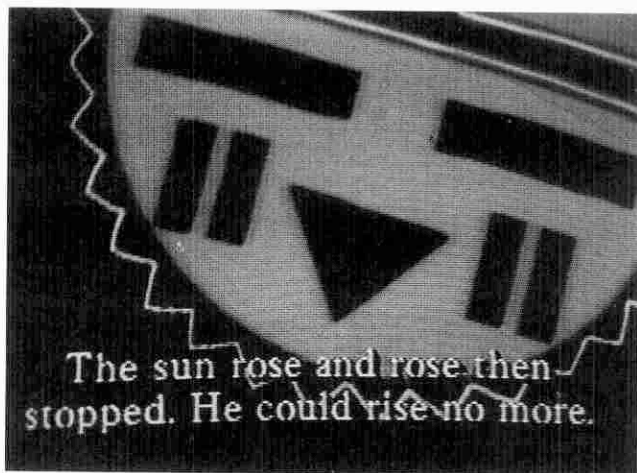
FIG. 2 Victor Masayesva, Jr., *Ritual Clowns*, 1988, color video, 18 minutes. Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

Hopi history with its emphasis on the disruptive and creative aspects of existence.

Masayesva's artistry extends to other video techniques. Implying the multileveled states of being that are represented in the Hopi stories of origin, Masayesva devised in *Ritual Clowns* an elaborate graphic tableau through which images of harmony and disruption are projected. His experiments with colorization highlight some of his presentations. *Itam Hakim, Hopiit (fig. 3)* features a long interlude of repetitive images of invading conquistadors, in color shades distorted through digital manipulation.[2]

Masayesva is an active participant in the highly traditional Hopi community at Hotevilla, yet he has been exposed to many aspects of the world outside the Hopi mesas. As a teenager he was awarded a scholarship to attend a well-regarded prep school in New York, and he continued his education at Princeton University. While there he was encouraged to explore the cultural history of the Hopi for his course work. Masayesva found himself unwilling to write a major paper in any language other than Hopi. From early on he asserted that his expressive capacity would be best served in languages other than English—visual language and the Hopi language are his tools for eloquence.

When he returned to his own community, Masayesva became engaged in a series of photography projects.[3] In 1980, under the federally funded Ethnic Heritage Program, a short-lived initiative for the development of culturally specific curricula, Masayesva created a project with the Hopi community schools in which oral histories of elders would be used to teach Hopi language and values, as well as to demonstrate the adults' knowledge of traditional skills. For the project he began by using a video camera and trained an all-Hopi crew of high school students in video production. Ironically, Masayesva recently found these early tapes thrown out by the school. In telling this story he does not hesitate to wryly comment on what this tells the videomaker about the importance of his work. Perhaps this action demon-

strates the difficulty of sustaining interest in tribal heritage among today's Indian youth. But perhaps it is also a revealing look at values articulated by the Hopi and other Pueblo groups—the preservation of objects is not important, rather the importance is placed on the continuation of traditional practices. For instance, the masks of ceremonial dances are to be buried with their user upon his death, rather than be preserved in his absence. For the Hopi, videotapes have an ambiguous relationship to lived reality and could be seen as inappropriately preserving the elders' images past the duration of their own lifetimes.

Masayesva's early videomaking was undertaken in a context of a community that has had great concern about the process of being documented. From the first days of photography in the nineteenth century, photographers and tourists saw the Hopi and their dances as a compelling subject. The distinctive qualities of their communities, which include the oldest known community in the United States, Oraibi, led anthropologists and popular writers to try to penetrate the Hopi philosophical system, and missionaries and teachers attempted to alter that philosophy forever. The filming of the Hopi has been vigorously pursued by white documentarists, museums with Hopi art collections, and anthropologists.

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FIG. 3 Victor Masayesva, Jr., *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* (We/someone, the Hopi), 1984, color video, 58 minutes. Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York.

Some elders, given the charge to convey the Hopi prophesy, have seen in film a chance to spread their message worldwide. Masayesva's work has developed as a response to these mediations of Hopi belief and world view created for outside audiences. But there is in the community a wariness about media, even internally. Masayesva has pointed this out himself, commenting on how he has been perceived in his community in his role as photographer as a "katcina, a spiritual being, one of that category of katcinas who involve themselves with buffoonery, burlesque, and social commentary,"[4] and some Hopi see him as obnoxious. Even his acts of mediation are being held in question. But Masayesva tries to strike a different note in his work, by staying focused on Hopi knowledge for Hopi audiences, rather than on the interpretation of Hopi-ness by and for outsiders. This radical shift frees the filmmaker.

In addition to his portraits of elders, in 1984 Masayesva produced two highly original videotapes from footage shot during the Ethnic Heritage project. *Hopiit* (1984) is a montage of different views of Hopi landscapes and people during the cycle of a year. In every scene the view is unusual, and no narrative is supplied. He shows visually stunning views, such as the concluding image of an old woman stacking numerous ears of blue corn like cordwood.

Based on one of the elders' strong interest in being involved with the video production, Masayesva produced his first long video, *Itam Hakim, Hopiit*. In this innovative work one of the last members of the Hopi historians' clan, Ross Macaya, recounts various epochs in Hopi history. The production consists of visual sequences and frequent close-ups, with a narrative audio track that is complemented, although not specifically illustrated, by what is seen. The vignettes, including scenes of landscapes, cascading blue grains of corn, and a captive eagle in the rain *(see fig. 3)*, strike the viewer as still photographs prolonged through time and motion by being on video.

The production opens with a clear assertion that Masayesva is presenting an unidealized view—a closeup shot of Macaya's feet in old sneakers as he goes to fill a bucket with water. The elder is dressed in his own worn clothes and lives in a simple house without many amenities. Macaya evokes four epochs of history, beginning with his own life story as it was affected by his father's insanity. He then recounts the origin of the Hopi and explains how, through the intervention of Ma'asaw, a sacred culture hero responsible for creativity and for death, they came to be. The Spanish invasion and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 (to which the program is dedicated) are depicted by using repetitive images of horseback-riding conquistadors, accompanied by an endless loop of Renaissance music, juxtaposed against contemporary images of Hopi ritual runners (the uprising occurred simultaneously in all participating communities because of the effectiveness of Pueblo runners in contacting them).

Macaya's tale concludes with a particularly Hopi type of history—the Hopi Prophesy. The apocalyptic nature of things out of kilter is suggested by scenes, in normal and speeded-up time, of Hopi social dances (including dances that spoof the apparent chaos of Indians from other tribes who have taken on white clothes and culture). This is followed by a final scene, the serene image of two people at work in the fields; according to the Prophecy this is how the creative cycle continues—the world will end and begin again.

Throughout this work Masayesva carefully chose imagery to correspond to the elder's account. Frequently the visuals present symbols particularly meaningful to a Hopi audience. For example, as the elder tells of the origin of death, the tape shows a captive eagle in closeup. What the Hopi audience knows is that the eagle is to be ceremonially sacrificed in order for feathers to be obtained for use in acts of prayer. Children are seen, probably on a cultural heritage visit to Macaya's cabin, but they are rowdy or bored and play dangerously with a kerosene lamp. The tone is of the chaotic aspects of unpredictablity in life, and the unfolding quality of human experience in which life's lessons are to be learned.

Although produced in the Hopi language, clearly with a Hopi audience in mind, *Itam Hakim, Hopiit* received funding from German National Television (ZDF). Its screenings in the United States were initially in Hopi.[5] Yet opportunities for distribution and new audiences pressed Masayesva to create a version in English. For the next several years, the implications of the white-dominated cultural world's increased interest in his work would also become its central theme. Masayesva's productions began focusing on the many ways in which whites have misunderstood Hopi culture, while continuing to insist on the right to interpret it. He began to be contacted for commissions. Two productions—*Pott Starr* and *Siskyavi: The Place of Chasms*, 1991—were made for museums. He also received one of the first Intercultural Media Fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, which enabled him to work with computer animation and graphics.

Masayesva has never received funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's (CPB) Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium, whose mission has been focused on support for productions that might gain a broadly based American TV audience, rather than on experimental media. In the first year, however, of a new CPB initiative urged into being by the independent film and video arts community, the Independent Television Service, Masayesva was granted funds for the production of a major work. The time was ideal for further reflection on the implications of white intrusions on Native realities, and Masayesva turned his attention to filmmaking itself. In 1993 he released *Imagining Indians*, a unique work that draws its energy from its layered inquiry into the effects of white intrusion upon Native individuals and communities. His principal focus is a strong

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critique of Hollywood movies as projects instigated by outsiders who not only disrupt, but inevitably exaggerate differences within the community. Interviews initially were held with many Native Americans who have participated in Hollywood productions, and then with Native American media makers and cultural critics. Early on Hollywood decided to shoot films on location on Indian lands with Indian extras to create a feeling of authenticity. What commands most attention in *Imagining Indians* is the examination of films as social projects, sowing disruption while perpetuating the myth that Indian cultures are easy for whites to understand.

Masayesva intercuts interviews with a fictional scene in which an Indian patient (acted by Patty Runs after Swallow) suffers through the ministrations of an intrusive dentist. The piece, like his other work, creates a mounting indictment of white attitudes. It is also witty, and in the presentation of the broadly stereotyped dentist mirrors what he has been saying about the usual way the images of Indians are frequently substituted for more authentic portrayals.

Masayesva provides a critical look at Indian accommodations to white ways. For example, his inclusion of footage of powwow dancing, with the components of competition and colorful public show, is a critique of some Indians having lost the thread that connects dance with spiritual practice. In such scenes as the meeting of Hopi leaders concerned about permitting the filming on their lands of a movie based on the Tony Hillerman novel *The Dark Wind*, he shows the Hopi community divided on an agreement to permit the filming. He exposes the most dearly held of white attitudes—the non-Native's professed love of the beauty of Indian ways, an affection that fails to comprehend the complexity and Native definition of these ways. Masayesva examines his own position as a media maker with this same, even gaze. Thus at the end of *Imagining Indians*, the dental patient herself drills into the camera lens (Masayesva's camera!), and the very well-intentioned Indian portraits painted by George Catlin in the 1840s dissolve into little color particles. The film ends with the sounds of Indians speaking in their own languages.

Masayesva is committed to exposing the *bahana*, or white-man mentality, which has so strongly affected Indian lives. The clearest statement of this white world view is found in the privileged place it gives to acquisition, ownership, and appropriation. To Masayesva, Indian creativity is appropriated when arts are purchased for white collections; in *Imagining Indians* the freedom of white filmmakers to use Indians to "authenticate" their films is analogized with the art buyers at Indian Market and at the antiquities marketplace. Even more profound, the source of all future creativity is depleted when whites devalue through appropriation the traditional language, songs, and histories from which the Indian community would continue to draw its arts. Finally, reflecting carefully on the image-making enterprise, Masayesva is concerned with the process by which whites feel that they own

Indian knowledge and therefore can freely represent Indians in films, scholarly works, and discourse.

For Masayesva, knowledge is always best gained through exploring ideas in their original context. In his recent work he has been even sharper in his metaphoric critique of whites converting Native cultural practice and belief into collectibles.[6] Every artifact is embedded with a knowledge of sacred sites and symbolic representations of Indian philosophy. In *Imagining Indians*, by adding scenes of Indian Market's satisfied white customers to the critique of the way Hollywood employs Native actors and locales, he completes the circle of associations.

Masayesva has reached a changing point in his career. He now speculates that he is at the end of a long period of concern with *bahana*, with the impact of white mentality on Indian lives and arts.[7] He has stressed in forums at various recent film festivals and symposia that a Native American media maker's first obligation is to his or her community. He believes the source of all future Hopi creativity is to be found within the community.

This is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of Masayesva's concerns to grasp for people outside contemporary Indian community life. In the non-Native world, progressive media has been associated with widening the distribution of information and viewpoints generally suppressed from the public. For Native Americans an alternative view is that their media can focus on aspects of culture that can affect public opinion, but that privileging Native access to anything internal to their own communities is the right of each Native community. In recognizing this, Native media makers ideally would be given the primary responsibility of mediating Native situations, above all because they would best understand the processes by which community elders would hold them accountable for their media works.[8] For Masayesva, Native Americans rooted in their community appreciate knowledge as something achieved, not something to be distributed equally. This mirrors the Hopi process by which young people become initiated in stages into full adult awareness and knowledge.

Masayesva's attention has been drawn to concerns with Native filmmakers and communities and their own communication with each other. A founding member of the international indigenous media makers alliance and a founder of North American Producers Alliance in the United States, Masayesva is currently working to help unify independent Native media makers and to further their access to resources for making productions that reflect a deeper version of Indian experience. Masayesva recognizes media making as a creative social project as well as an artistic one, although, always skeptical, he does not assume that media is always beneficial and nurturing. He sees deep benefits, however, in indigenous-to-indigenous communications and is currently exploring new projects reflecting this. He currently is deve-

loping productions in collaboration with other Native film-makers in both the United States and Mexico, thus conveying Indian stories with strong shared meanings across borders that may have been artificially imposed.

For Masayesva, the purpose of his work includes making space for the development in Native terms of an aesthetic, even a technology, for the future. The source for the development of a uniquely Native aesthetic resides in filmmakers drawing from their own people's knowledge, tribal stories, and languages. But he is also exploring a fast-dwindling option, and he knows it: "Native American filmmakers have run out of the luxury of access to the creative old-timers for whom language and song was the ultimate human creation."[9] With the sense of this valuable "community property," Masayesva has been active in developing protocols for the future production of Native images within Native communities. He is also defining the application of "cultural copyright" protection, a sphere in which, through moral suasion and community agreement, the investigator respects the community's ownership of knowledge and practice.

In this atmosphere Native Americans are given the opportunity to have first access to the work of their culture's interpretation. In Masayesva's view their creativity will flow from their actions toward those in the community most conversant with the people's historical versions. He asserts that Native filmmaking, if it succeeds, will do so because Native Americans will know when their topics are appropriate for public circulation and when their subject matter may be too private.

As with his own work, Masayesva considers Native audiences as the primary audience for Native work. His documentaries, always provocative, have reserved the right to teach without didacticism, as in the best Native storytelling, in which the audience's knowledge is counted on for filling in details that are lightly suggested in the narrative. The shift in the notion of audience creates for the non-Native viewer a chance at achieving a truly alternative perspective and at becoming aware of how events are seen by Native Americans. This same shift moves the discussion of Native Americans as a minority to allow a way in which Native media can free itself to be itself.

This brilliant, innovative media artist retains the independence of the elders, to create, to explore a prophesy of re-creation in the future, and to be truthful about internal as well as external forces pushing Native communities. His concerns have drawn him to deeper commitments to nurturing other young talented film- and videomakers and their critical voice. ●

Notes

1. An excellent recent article about Masayesva's work is Fatimah Tobing Rony, "Victor Masayesva, Jr. and the Politics of Imagining Indians," *Film Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (Winter 1994–95): 20–33.
2. At this time a growing movement of Native American artists resulted in the formation of ATLATL, a professional organization. Its founding director, Erin Younger, worked with Masayesva on Victor Masayesva, Jr., and Erin Younger, eds., *Hopi Photographers/Hopi Images* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press and Sun Tracks, 1984).
3. For longer descriptions of his works produced before 1988, see Elizabeth Weatherford and Emelia Seubert, *Native Americans on Film and Video*, 2 vols. (New York: Museum of the American Indian, 1988), 2: 36–37, 42–43.
4. Masayesva and Younger, *Hopi Photographers*, 10–11.
5. The work had its New York premier at the Museum of the American Indian–Heye Foundation's *Native American Film and Video Festival*. Shortly thereafter it was selected for the video series Video Viewpoints at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and an illustrated transcript was supplied to the audience. The video art distributor Electronic Arts Intermix then took on the production in its English language version. See Masayesva's statement in the catalogue for the *Imagining Indians: Native American Film and Video Festival* presented by the Scottsdale Center for the Arts in Scottsdale, Ariz., June 2–5, 1994. Masayesva was creative director of this festival.
6. Victor Masayesva, Jr., acceptance speech for the American Film Institute's 1995 Maya Deren Award for Independent Film and Video Artists, February 2, 1995, Anthology Film Archives, New York.
7. Victor Masayesva, Jr., "Through Native Eyes: The Emerging Native American Aesthetic," *Independent*, December 1994, 27.
8. Ibid., 21.
9. Ibid.

ELIZABETH WEATHERFORD, *head of the Film and Video Center of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, co-wrote* Native Americans on Film and Video *(Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation).*