

Confrontaciones lingüísticas y discursivas en los Andes*

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The Politics of Artistic Expression in the Andes

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Literary critics concerned with cultural politics in the Andes -- and in the Americas in general -- have focused a great deal of attention on the conflict between orality and textuality that originated during the early days of the Spanish Conquest. The last ten to twenty years have witnessed particularly creative and thoughtful scholarship about the political ramifications of textuality in the colonial and postcolonial context. In *Escribir en el aire*, for example, Antonio Cornejo Polar introduces the concept of a heterogeneous literature, where the producer, referent and consumer of a text belong to different interpretive communities. This was a critical breakthrough for cultural critics in general, but especially for those dealing with the *indigenista* legacy. In his alternative literary history, *La voz y su huella*, Martin Lienhard unsettles the oral-textual binary by focusing on the appropriation of writing by native populations who were historically marginalized by the text. These are two seminal works in a scholarly trend that, if it didn't exactly begin with the publication of two now classic texts by Angel Rama, certainly picked up speed and self-awareness. In *La ciudad letrada*, Rama discusses the pivotal role that textuality played in securing social privilege during the colonial, republican and nationalist periods in Latin America. Rama's propositions in this posthumously published book are all the more interesting since they follow on the heels of his equally groundbreaking text, *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina*, where by contrast, he stresses the ideological potential of transculturated literature¹. In recent years *La ciudad letrada* has not only come supercede *Transculturación narrativa* as a critical reference, but has been employed by critics to critique the earlier text, which arguably, has had an unparalleled influence in the field of Latin American cultural criticism. The disciplinary critique that is implicit to *La ciudad letrada* and the critical reflection that addresses literature as a political tool bring to mind Hegel's famous dictum that "the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk," or in other words, wisdom about literature arrives as its hegemonic efficacy is coming to an end.

Given the ideological relationship of literature, as a practice and as a discipline, to nationalism, it is not coincidental that *La ciudad letrada* was published the same year -- 1983 -- as *Imagined Communities*, the book by Benedict Anderson which transformed thinking about nationalism just as a more transnational era was becoming visible. Transnationalism has arrived with its own set of cultural variables. As many would agree, the Latin American subject "is," in the words of John Beverley, "interpellated culturally today [...] not by literature but by the mass media"². Though literature never informed *all* Latin Americans in the way that it did most Europeans -- that is through the direct practice of reading and writing -- its role in republican and modern nationhood has still

¹ John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) 48.

² John Beverley, *Against Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 5.

been decisive. Probably because of its democratizing role in Western contexts, until recently -- the last ten to twenty years -- print culture and literature in particular have been almost universally attributed with political promise. Even José Carlos Mariátegui, usually so attentive to the ideological subtexts of cultural production, believed that an authentic indigenous literature would emerge once native populations fully participated in national society. He was less inclined to imagine that the full participation of indigenous populations in civic life might redefine what national cultural practices would be.

Given its immediate and obvious relationship to the market, the counter-hegemonic capacity of mass media on the other hand has never been taken for granted; indeed it has often been considered precarious at best. The relationship of culture to politics in the era of mass media involves new issues and new points of departure; to begin with one focuses more on the global market than on the nation-state. If we have dispensed with cultural modernism's rather sanctimonious condemnation of mass-media in general, we have also graduated from the unconditional excitement for popular culture that is sometimes characteristic of a more postmodern sensibility. Retaining cultural modernism's political critique while adopting postmodernity's cultural flexibility is a difficult if not contradictory task, but one which I will try to keep in mind in my consideration of two instances of visual culture which attempt to appropriate mass mediated technologies for countercultural purposes. The following examination of the work of the Peruvian film-maker, Cesar Galindo, and the thriving indigenous video movement of Bolivia, will address the new cultural equations that have emerged in a social context long defined by the oral-textual divide.

I discovered the work of Cesar Galindo while viewing indigenous video at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York City. His work had been included in the indigenous film festivals hosted by the museum over the past decade. Two of his works produced in 1992 struck me as companion pieces commemorating the 500th anniversary of the encounter of Europe and the Americas in contrasting ways. In the short film "Five Minutes for the Souls of America," a group of three musicians and a singer play at the edge of an Andean cemetery. Over their music one hears the slow and ominous approach of a horse which, when it comes into view, is mounted by a figure that is simultaneously funny and terrifying; he carries the staff and has the bearing of a Spanish conquistador yet is dressed in the regalia of a North American football player -- a symbol of the Spanish and North American aggression which have played such a decisive role in Andean history. As the horseman circles around an enormous crucifix in the middle of the cemetery, the sadness of the traditional huayno in the background completes the picture.

The companion film to this somber commemoration is also short, five minutes long, but in its own way celebratory. Called "Cholo soy," the film is set to the well-known Peruvian song "Cholo soy y no me compadezcas" by Luis Abanto Galindo, and is nothing less than a cultural anthem. The images of the film move quickly, following the rhythm of the song which tells of the trials, tribulations and joys of the cholo. Depicting mestizo and indigenous figures who are urban, rural, young, old, happy, sad, struggling, working, and sometimes jubilant, the multiplicity of choledad is stressed. Images of

upbeat children recur throughout the film, and in this way, in addition to affirming popular identities, it anticipates a promising future for the losers of the original encounter between Spain and America. At one point, however, Galindo adds a scenario which tempers the film's optimism. The angle of the picture changes, we see a wealthy woman watching the film "Cholo soy" on a screen in her living room, which, with one click of the remote she turns off. The silence that replaces the music is startling, the effervescent movement of images is stilled, and we watch the woman light a cigarette and get into her car, seemingly indifferent to the lives that she had just witnessed on the screen. Minutes later, the main part of the film resumes.

The scene allows for many interpretations. It dramatizes Antonio Cornejo Polar's idea of a heterogeneous art form, since the viewer is only too aware that the woman belongs to a different interpretive community than do the cholos portrayed in the main part of the film. Yet, as the indigenous video movement makes clear, film and video are not only accessible to indigenous sectors but also produced by them. For better or worse indigenous populations are consumers of all types of visual culture, including western film. They may view versions of themselves on the screen that displease them, but nevertheless they are consumers -- in fact watching representations of themselves which they have no control over has been an important motivation for the development of the indigenous video movement. Also, how did "Cholo soy" reach the hands of this woman? Is she a dispassionate academic who can decide to walk away from the subjects she studies whose choices on the other hand are far more limited? Has this short film joined the cultural mainstream because it is so entertaining, which implies that a standardized idea of what qualifies as entertainment today reaches across cultural, ethnic and class lines? So, if a heterogeneous art form, the variables involved in the positioning and relationship of different interpretive communities in film are less stable, more complex and more dynamic than they are in the case of textual production. In the case of film and video, interpretive communities intersect, clash, blend and communicate in a multiplicity of new ways.

Another interpretation of the scene with the wealthy and seemingly indifferent woman speaks to the power of the commercial audio-visual industry, and by extension, the power of the hegemonic classes who control it. It highlights the very precarious conditions that govern a film-maker's opportunity for social critique. As in the case of "Cholo soy," however moving and important a film may be, whether it is turned on or off, made available or not lies in the hands of a network of forces that far exceed the film-maker's control. Obviously, if no one watches a film, for whatever reasons, it can't have much of an impact. I was made sadly aware of this last fall when I was unable to show my class a film by the important Bolivian director Jorge Sanjinés, since, with the exception of one non-circulating copy at Duke University, a nation-wide search for any of his works brought up nothing. In "Cholo soy", the shock that comes from the abruptness of the silence that replaces the soundtrack and the abruptness of the changed perspective in the scene with the wealthy woman drives home the extent to which forces external to the film itself determine its fate.

“Cholo Soy” stimulates speculation about the nature of culture in the age of mass media. Responding to what Walter Benjamin describes as the distracted character of sensibility in the age of film, Galindo knows how to entertain and how to shock. Whether the woman will return to watch the rest of the film may well depend on whether or not she has been sufficiently entertained, whether “Cholo soy” can successfully compete with the information, images and activity that are about to distract her attention. Galindo points to the political value of entertainment -- unthinkable of course for cultural modernists. Yet the film also raises the question as to whether privileging entertainment value implies a viewing experience that has been emptied of political content. What happens when difference is standardized by its transformation into spectacle; or in other words what happens when everything becomes culture, and a culture that launders experience of its conflictual edge? It is said that within a transnational order, heterogeneity is managed not homogenized. Yet if spectacle neutralizes all but the surface of difference, homogenization has very effectively if surreptitiously taken place. In part because of his artistic virtuosity, Galindo leaves us hopeful, but he never fully answers whether politically meaningful jouissance is possible in the age of mass media.

Frederic Jameson elaborates on what is involved in the cultural dilemma raised by Galindo's film when he remarks that “the becoming cultural of the economic and the becoming economic of the cultural has often been identified as one of the features that characterizes what is now widely known as postmodernity”³. The insidious way that the economic -- and the cultural -- insinuate themselves everywhere today marks the erosion of the public sphere, coincides with the demise of the welfare state and makes it increasingly difficult to simply identify something that is discretely political. Arresting this situation with culture, when it is precisely culture that one cannot escape, may not seem like the most likely of propositions, but this is precisely what the indigenous video makers of Bolivia have in mind. In the words of Ivan Sanjines, the non-indigenous son of director Jorge Sanjines and one of the pivotal figures in the Bolivian indigenous video movement, their goal ultimately is “to change the logic of the market somehow”⁴. If the sheer momentum of market-driven activity makes this goal sound ambitious to the point of outlandish, one should keep in mind the political and economic developments that have taken place in Bolivia in recent years. Bolivia is one of the centers, along with Mexico and Brazil, for indigenous video production.

The indigenous video movement is not, of course, solely responsible for the unprecedented political situation in Bolivia, but the fundamental reciprocity between political and cultural developments in recent years has been an integral part of this situation. The increasingly intense indigenous activism that began in Bolivia in the 1980s had by the 1990s given “the category of ‘indigenesness,’ in the words of anthropologist Jeff Himpele, “new political prominence and value in [the] modern public sphere [...]”⁵. In particular, Himpele goes on to say, the selection of an Aymara vice president in

³ Frederic Jameson, “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue”, *The Cultures of Globalization* Eds. Frederic Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) 60.

⁴ Jeff Himpele, “Gaining Ground: Indigenous Video in Bolivia, Mexico and Beyond” *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 106 Issue 2 (2004) 359.

⁵ *ibid* 356.

Bolivia in 1993, “conspicuously heralded the political value of indigenusness”⁶. The history that has since unfolded is well-known and belies any notion that indigenous causes can be reduced to a matter of culturalist identity politics. The massive protests in Bolivia against the privatization of gas and water count among the strongest and most effective moments in the anti-globalization movement; indigenous populations were the primary protagonists in these events. The historic election of Evo Morales as president in 2006 who strongly identifies with his indigenous origin and is steadfast in his resistance to western economic and cultural hegemony, makes the bold political logic that accompanies the category of “indigenusness” unequivocally clear.

The growth of the indigenous video movement in Bolivia has coincided with this increased indigenous political capital. CEFREC (the Cinematography Education and Production Center), a center that trains indigenous film-makers and facilitates film-making, was founded in 1989 and, among other groups, collaborates with the more recently founded CAIB (The Bolivian Indigenous Peoples' Audiovisual Council) which in turn have the support of several prominent indigenous political organizations⁷. They are also part of international networks that bring together members of different indigenous video movements throughout the Americas. These audiovisual organizations in many respects are fulfilling the ambitions of the Bolivian director Jorge Sanjines. Sanjines believed that film possessed a political potential that distinguished it from other art forms that could not exceed bourgeois limitations. He believed in a “Cinema with the People”, which is the title of a book he wrote about the theory and practice of “revolutionary” cinema in 1979. Sanjines' description of what a “revolutionary” cinema would be is uncannily similar to the film process which Bolivian indigenous video makers today refer to as “integral”⁸. “Integral” film-making attempts to change “the logic of the market”⁹ in a variety of ways, but especially by changing practices of culture that are an essential aspect of the market.

Indigenous video in Bolivia, which consists of documentaries and short and long feature films that “repatriate” images and messages devalued by commercial mass media, that educate, entertain, mobilize and conserve cultural traditions and that privilege knowledge made invisible by conventional channels, is, according to those active in the movement, a process *not* a product¹⁰. What is stressed is the collaborative work between cameramen, writers, editors, “directors”, and actors who complete a script that is generally more suggestion than explicit narrative. Directors do not take responsibility for the film, referring to themselves instead as “communicators”. Distribution and circulation are considered as important to the process as production. Viewers are collaborators just as are those who are involved in making the film. “Integral” then means collective in an essential way. There is something fully transparent about this understanding -- or practice -- of culture as pure process, where the idea of director and product are reifications. Trained as many of us are in the cult of artistic genius and the tradition of the

⁶ *ibid* 356.

⁷ *ibid* 357.

⁸ *ibid* 362.

⁹ *ibid* 359.

¹⁰ *ibid* 362.

masterpiece, it is difficult for the western mind to grasp cultural activity that has no author or product. In fact it initially strikes more as manifesto than reality.

If common-sense tells us that not only is the introduction of new technologies *never* innocent, but nor are indigenous video-makers ever *purely* neutral communicators, the notion of an “integral” cinema should nevertheless be taken seriously. Whatever end of the video-making process one is on -- training, producing, acting, distributing, viewing -- one is actively involved in producing the category of “indigenusness” -- a category that is as much a matter of active collaboration as identification. To confirm the power of these collaboratively-produced cultural identities to counter, in Sanjines’ words, the “logic of the market,” or to counter the way that the main-stream media devalues indigenous peoples and alienates them from their right to self-definition, one should look to the increased political capital that “indigenusness” possesses in Bolivia today. Again, the relationship is a reciprocal one, indigenous video both produces this political capital and is itself produced by it.

Indigenous video-making reminds us of the elasticity involved in what it means to be “Indian”. If for José María Arguedas, “indígena” in the 1950s meant a subject inescapably tied to subalternity, obviously, “indígena” means something very different in Bolivia today. This leads to a final question about what is included in the umbrella term, indigenous video. Cesar Galindo, for example, is included in indigenous film festivals, and in the files of the NMAI, he is classified as an indigenous film-maker. Additionally, his work has been sponsored by CEFREC and CAIB. But does his work fit into the idea of “integral” film-making, the collaborative process from training to viewing which seems to be the one steadfast criteria for what indigenous video is all about. Along with architecture and urban planning, Galindo was educated in film-making at the Université de Paris and lives most of the year in Sweden -- something which probably influenced his concern for heterogeneous interpretive communities in “Cholo soy”. Stylistically, his work is quite different from most indigenous video, which tends to be traditional. Galindo’s films on the other hand are experimental. One, “The King of Dansak,” is an avant-garde piece that takes place under a freeway overpass in Sweden. The Andes never enter the picture. To end with a question apropos of the age of globalization; one wonders how ample the term indigenous video is or should be; can it include works made by a self-identified quechua mestizo film-maker trained in Paris and living in Sweden, how many and what types of interpretive communities can intersect in the film-making process and can “integral” be international?

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