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Voice of the Arhuacos

Transcending the Borders of “Indigenous”
Filmmaking in Colombia

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Voice of the Arhuacos: Transcending the Borders of “Indigenous” Filmmaking in Colombia

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Abstract: This article explores mainstream ambitions of indigenous filmmakers from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. Using the example of Zhigoneshi, the Arhuaco filmmaking collective, I analyse the trend to transcend the boundaries of so-called “indigenous cinema.” The filmmaking in the region emerged as a response to political violence, and it developed into a tool of cultural self-discovery and opposition to past misinterpretations of the Arhuacos by Western filmmakers. Today, the Arhuacos reach for audiovisual media to communicate, create an archive of their history and culture, and to reflect on the implications of adopting a Western tool to protect the traditional values. The fruit of their work widely circulates at film festivals, academic events, and special presentations, reaching audiences all over the world. As such, the universal qualities of audiovisual media promise hope of successful intercultural communication.

Keywords: Politics of Representation, Indigenous Filmmaking, Colombia, Arhuacos, the Other, Distribution, Film Festivals, Reenactment, Photos, Archives, Intercultural Communication, Constructing Memory, Audiences

Intercultural Communication as a Response to Violence

A plethora of films and other audiovisual forms are presented annually in various parts of the globe. Film festivals, regular screenings, academic presentations, and broadcast media channels, not even mentioning the omnipresent internet sources, offer an ever-increasing number of films of a different type. This abundance of productions requires some system of categorization for the audiences in order to help them find a way in this profusion of choices. A common way to help navigate in this chaos is by categorizing films by genre, style, or country of origin. These “labels” are often based on a set of commonly shared preconceptions. As a result, they create expectations that can influence not only the audiences’ choice of what they wish to watch but also the actual perception of the films. Additionally, the venue and the type of event where the projection takes place might also significantly influence the reception, i.e. “ethnographic” film festival will have a different type of audiences and expectations to an “artistic” one.

The case study I base this article upon takes us to the slopes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia. Four indigenous communities, descendants of the ancient Tairona culture, inhabit the region. The Kogui, the Arhuacos, the Wiwa and the Kankuamos, friendly cohabit various parts of the mountain (Mendoza et al. 1995). A turbulent history of Colombia did not spare the region, and it has left a painful mark on the life of its indigenous nations. Subjected to violence and forced displacement, many traditional lifestyles got disrupted. This, in the case of Amado Villafañá from the Arhuaco community, incidentally, led to initiating one of the most successful examples of indigenous filmmaking in Colombia and beyond. Tortured by the army and threatened by the ELN guerrilla, Villafañá had to abandon the basin of the Guatapurí River where he was born and lived peacefully for nearly fifty years. Following the advice of a *mamo*, a community spiritual leader, Villafañá decided that the only way to move forward and to transcend the violent impasse was by disseminating the peaceful wisdom of his culture’s elders. With the help of Pablo Mora, an established documentary filmmaker and academic with existing interests and links to the indigenous word, Villafañá secured his first steps into filmmaking by getting training from Steven Ferry, a National Geographic photographer. Following that, he participated in a series of audiovisual training with financial help from the US embassy. Finally,

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again thanks to Mora, Fundación Avina, a Latin American philanthropic foundation, provided the resources to establish the Centre of Communications Zhigoneshi, consisting of representatives of all four indigenous nations from the Sierra and led by Villafañá till this day. Since then, Zhigoneshi engaged in a prolific filmic production focused on giving the evidence of the situation in the region, promoting the pacific values of the elders, but also sharing ecological concerns and addressing examples of cultural violence in the form of nonindigenous (mis)representations of the communities. The production of the first Zhigoneshi film started in 2002, but it took five years to finalize it. Up till the time of this fieldwork in 2016, nine films have been signed by Villafañá and his team. They are regularly screened at various academic events, multiple film festivals in Colombia, and beyond; they are also published in a DVD set (subtitled in English, Spanish, and French). One of the titles was also shown on a local TV channel, TeleCaribe, which cosponsored it.

Creating Memories and Challenging the Established Order

In one of his films, “Nabusímake, Memories of Independence,” made in 2010, Villafañá uses his family history to teach three of his children (Ángel, Gunza, and Dilia), and his audiences, the tragic history of the Arhuacos in the past decades. The film starts with a reenactment of the scenes of Capuchins’ arrival to the Sierra as documented by Bolinder, a Swedish ethnographer, who conducted his fieldwork in the Sierra in the early twentieth century. Villafañá not only referenced these images to illustrate the scale of the persecutions imposed on the Arhuacos by the Capuchins, but he also used present-day actors to reenact the scenes: we see Capuchins reprimanding the Arhuacos and forcibly cutting their long hair. Moreover, he enhanced the scenes by introducing new elements that were not present in the original photos, like the figure of the apostolic vicar. Catalina Muñoz describes how Villafañá skillfully manages to (re)create a vivid reality from these documents from the past: “In Villafañá’s documentary, the scenes captured in four separate photographs are brought together into a single moment in time: the children exercising, the tied Arhuaco man, the hair-cutting scene, and the tied girl. The photographs are re-signified in an interesting exercise of cutting and pasting instants from the past. In the process, the photographs lose their initial ethnographic interest and become supplies in the task of constructing memory” (Muñoz 2017, 390). The subsequent film, “Resistance on the Dark Line,” also features a reenactment of the meeting with the Capuchins, which only proves how deeply the collective relies on these archive images to give credibility to their statements. This “film in a film” is accompanied by a voiceover commentary from the director, giving instructions to the actors: “Camera! Action!” By doing so, Villafañá reinforces that today the act of constructing the memory of Sierra’s past lies entirely in his (and his countrymen’s) hands. This insistence brings a sense of regained control, something Villafañá will not be willing to relinquish easily.

This heavy reliance on archive materials points to the role of photography in the construction of memory where “pictures become vehicles in the production of narratives about the past” (Muñoz 2017, 382). Villafañá contests the dominant external narratives by creating his indigenous ones, using not only foreign technologies such as photography and video but also foreign archival images. He subverts power reactions by claiming the right to be a history-teller for the Arhuacos. Muñoz argues that by doing so, Villafañá “contests Western historical narratives—by producing local one—while inventively partaking in Western storytelling technologies” (390). His re-appropriation of the images serves the purpose of strengthening his cultural identity, and while producing Arhuaco narratives of empowered indigenous resistance, he portrays his community and resilient and strong. Muñoz concludes that:

Arhuacos are not merely passive subjects of the imperial gaze; they can stand both sides of these photographs, also observing, interpreting and reusing the tools of colonisation in their struggle for resistance, self-representation and self-government... An indigenous media-maker re-signifies anthropological photographs from the early twentieth century, but his contemporary use is not entirely detached from a colonial history of which he is a part of. (Muñoz 2017, 377)

I agree with Muñoz that the work of this contemporary Arhuaco collective emphasizes indigeneity and authenticity in an era of multiculturalism: “The authenticity that Bolinder sought to capture is now emphasized by the Arhuaco for different purposes and under new circumstances” (Muñoz 2017, 387). As such, the production and dissemination of indigenous narratives that aim to denounce threats to their culture can be seen as a form of resistance, and Villafañá has clearly understood the potential of using new media for protection and conservation of his land, language, culture, and identity.

Indigenous Cinema as a Tool for Self-discovery

The complex situation in the Sierra that created this unprecedented impulse for strong self-representation needs happened among a community which was, hitherto, utterly uninterested in audiovisual media. In the case of the Arhuacos, this newly acquired tool not only permitted them to give evidence about the painful past, allowing it to become a wound-healing, therapeutic process, but it also encouraged them to further explore the place they hold in the audiovisual landscape both as authors but also as subjects. Despite the clearly stated lack of artistic ambitions, Villafañá and his collective put a significant effort into assuring the highest quality of their productions to guarantee that they are treated seriously by exigent Western audiences. They did not wish to be perceived as a “second-class” type of filmmakers (an expectation that often results from an “indigenous cinema” label). Making the technical aspect as perfect as in any other nonindigenous films, they ensure that the audiences’ focus remains on the message rather than any potential technical flaws. This worked in line with the principal value of the Zhignoeshi, which was to communicate their concerns to their Western audiences.

Indigenous filmmaking in Latin America owes a lot to the Third Cinema movement. Originated in the late 1960s, the movement was made possible thanks to technological developments of lightweight cameras and synchronized sound. Today, many indigenous video productions emerged across the globe thanks to the popularization of cheap and easy to use digital technology. However, the access to audiovisual media was never evenly distributed, and the productions united under the umbrella of “indigenous cinema” still required a significant nonindigenous help, mostly with funding, training, or distribution, making them similar to a model of contemporary co-productions. As a result, I find the term “indigenous cinema” confusing in its attempt to place all indigenous productions under one category, regardless of the differences. Nevertheless, the movement allowed many traditional communities to speak for themselves on a larger scale for the first time in history. Also, the definition of “indigenous” has changed over time. Since the 1970s, it had a strong political meaning, reflecting a “growing awareness of the role of ethnicity in national cultures” (Leuthold 1998, 3). Currently, “it refers to people who are minorities in their own homeland, who have suffered oppression in the context of colonial conquest, and who view their political situation in the context of neo-colonialism” (3). In the face of changing concepts of who can call themselves “indigenous,” and the increasing adoption of Western technologies in an original way, we might need to reflect on the relevance of Western criteria applied to the expectations of the new indigenous filmmaking. The compatibility of these two should neither be disregarded nor taken for granted. This awareness might become useful in understanding the differences between Western and indigenous motives for reaching for audiovisual media.

As suggested, indigenous communicators acquire the technical knowledge essential to make their films in training provided by Western filmmakers, and the funding for these productions also usually comes from Western sources. Such situation might appear paternalistic, although it remains the only way in which most indigenous peoples can gain the skills and obtain the technology required to satisfy their filmic ambitions (Ruby 2000, 216). However, this tends to be the case only at the initial stage, until the communities feel confident enough to run their own workshops and internal training. Such initiatives could be observed in the Indigenous House in Santa Marta during my fieldwork. The Four Nations of Sierra Nevada got to the stage where they are becoming increasingly independent in their filmmaking practices, while still relying on the nonindigenous collaborations to help with the distribution and dissemination of their audiovisual work.

In order to reduce the impact of stereotypical preconceptions resulting from (indigenous) film classifications created for distribution purposes, attempts have been made to transgress the label of “indigenous filmmaking.” One of the ways in which it could be achieved is by including these films in nonindigenous sections of festivals or mainstream cinema and TV channels (a tendency strongly supported by Pablo Mora, Villafañá’s close collaborator). Another notable initiative was to present some of the Zhigoneshi films before the screenings in commercial cinemas. Undoubtedly, presenting the films in the indigenous villages and the ongoing participation in the growing circle of academic and indigenous-focused events remain indispensable, and its huge popularity directly contributes toward the growing success of the whole initiative. Altogether, Zhigoneshi achieved a position of highly recognised and prolific protectors of the Arhuaco vision and a robust indigenous voice in the international arena.

Representing “The Other” or Indigenous Self-Portrait

Having suffered from past misinterpretations by external filmmakers who worked in the Sierra, Zhigoneshi took great care to reflect on their position as film subjects. The Western filming practices in the region resonate with Catherine Russell’s warning about the consequences of using visual methods. She noted that the “reduction to sheer image and spectacle always runs the risk of aestheticisation, of turning the Other into a consumable image” (Russell 1999, 62). By disagreeing with these Western visions and by producing an audiovisual response to these films, Villafañá and his team actively engaged in this dialogue, striving to regain the control of the image of the Arhuacos and present them as a community fully capable of speaking for themselves rather than being a passive subject for the external gaze and, effectively, a commodity of Western ethnographic filmmaking. In order to achieve that, the community undertook an enormous effort not only to adopt these foreign tools but also to accept them culturally by the elders, and finally to consider them as the most effective communication tool in the dialogue with the *bonachi*, as they call the nonindigenous. Villafañá describes that the first step to achieving that was to learn Spanish, then to learn the film language, and finally to convince his compatriots that this was the right way to go. As a result, gaining their audiovisual voice depended not only on initial external help but also on some necessary cultural adjustments. Paradoxically, in order to protect the traditional culture, some elements of the tradition are destined to be compromised. According to Freya Schiwy, the subaltern status of indigenous techniques of representation is a reaction to the “hegemonic structure of thinking” resulted from a colonialist geopolitics which implies that the North (West) produces theoretical knowledge while the Third and Fourth worlds only produce culture, or in best cases, “local knowledge” (Schiwy 2009, 3). She argues that “when indigenous organisations employ the audiovisual medium, they are commonly considered oral cultures using Western technology” (3). This might suggest constant appropriations, implying that “having emerged in capitalist, colonial and patriarchal contexts, audiovisual media carry the burden of a colonial geopolitics of knowledge” (3). Initially, Villafañá faced criticism from his people who accused him of assimilating into the nonindigenous world by adopting their tools. It took some time before it was accepted as the

most effective tool to protect the Arhuaco lifestyles. The final step was to ensure that the above efforts make a real impact and that could only be secured if enough people become aware of the Zhigoneshi efforts.

What is so pervading about audiovisual media that they get so easily adopted by traditional cultures? Leuthold (1998, 8) argues that aesthetic systems are “focal points for intercultural communication on a global scale; members of varied cultures negotiate differing value structures through aesthetic expression.” Video technology is often chosen by indigenous communicators because of the intercultural universality of an image, which is believed to secure understanding despite cultural differences, and the distribution beyond local communities is often considered as paramount: “Media technologies increasingly transmit the knowledge used in cross-cultural aesthetic appreciation. They cannot substitute for the direct experience, but they expose audiences to a wider range of aesthetic practices than direct experience. Many people’s sole knowledge of the aesthetic traditions of non-Western cultures derives from film and video. Exotic, frequently stereotyped images in more widely distributed fiction films also shape public perception of other cultures” (Leuthold 1998, 11). Schiwy (2013, 648) argues that native people in Latin America use audiovisual technology to revive indigenous cultures, seeing film as a way to challenge Western representations of the indigenous and as “counteracting the colonisation of the soul, that is, the self-denigrating effects that colonialism and its aftermath have had on the perceptions and self-perceptions of indigenous communities.”

The Fate of the “Indigenous” Label

Since communication is the core value for the Zhigoneshi Collective, Villafañá puts much importance on the clarity of his message. As a result, the audiences of Zhigoneshi films are considered at the early stages of the production. However, reception processes are far more complex, and many elements affect them (such as audience’s background, experience, race, gender, venue, and context of the screening, dominant discourses, etc.). And this is where the negotiation of the meaning begins. The power of the spectator is not only confirmed by the passivity of the subject on the screen, but also by the fixations of gender and race power relations. These objectifying gazes are usually filtered through culturally inflected stereotypes (for example, one of the “Primitive” or romanticised “Noble Savage”). However, as Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996, 6) argues, even for someone who is watching samples of ethnographic work about an “unknown culture,” it is never the “first time” as the “exotic is always already known.” This knowledge is based on cultural pre-assumptions and stereotypes, and this is precisely what the participants of this study aimed to contest with their work. This raises a question about the status of films made from the perspective of the “Other,” where the identification (of the audiences) might occur on the border between the “Self” and the “Other.”

Nevertheless, since the purpose of the Zhigoneshi filmmaking was to spread the knowledge about the situation in the region, a significant scope of reach was needed in order to achieve that. However, reaching for broader audiences and more mainstream distribution channels brings back the necessity of classifications. As discussed, despite the lack of a precise definition of what an “indigenous” film is, other than a requirement to have some link to indigenous affairs, the productions labelled as such are rarely seen as equal to mainstream films. This often results in some degree of marginalization in distribution strategies. And even if some indigenous productions make it to mainstream film festivals, such as Berlinale, they end up being shown in relatively unpopular sections such as NATIVE, screened at a significant distance from the main festival venues, and at the time competing with the most expected titles by the festival’s stars. As a result of being categorized as indigenous productions at indigenous sections, or altogether indigenous festivals or events, reactions to these films could be filtered through a stereotypical set of expectations. Having analyzed the topics of films presented at the Indigenous Film Festival of Bogotá (XI Festival Internacional de Cine y Video de Los Pueblos Indígenas), I identified the following: land issues, indigenous resistance, documentation of local rituals and traditional forms

of living, an attempt to start a new life in a city and resistance to remaining faithful to one's identity, historical debates about indigenous identity and ancestral life, violence and other crimes, social and environmental conflicts caused by modern land developments, surviving with the traditional lifestyle, and territorial conflicts and forced displacement. Also, some films focused on questions of nature, access to water supplies, traditional healing, female resistance, and human rights. It is worth mentioning that most of the films related to more than one topic. And as much as the topics mentioned above are often present in many of the indigenous films, there is an equally large number of those with more universal values.

Most importantly, the diversity of what is labelled as "indigenous" filmmaking cannot possibly be unified under one category. Emerging on various continents, and for many different reasons, indigenous filmmaking is as diverse as any other creative expressions. And this diversity is also a response to the diversity of audiences around the world. Stewart Hall (1997, 225) proposes that "'other cultures' are given meaning by the discourses and practices of exhibition in ethnographic museums of 'the West.'" These exhibitions have their own poetics (discourses) and politics (relations of power). In more contemporary contexts, ethnographic films and other forms of exhibition often acquire a similar role. The discourse surrounding these practices is significantly contributing to the fact of how these "Other cultures" are being seen and given meaning. Therefore, the politics of representation cannot be seen as innocent (Hall 1997, 223–25). Bill Nichols (1991, 209) argues that in the setting of the canonical ethnographic film, "our" culture assumes the task of representing "theirs." This task is often linked to assumed responsibility or power. The regained agency of the Arhuaco communicators makes this external responsibility obsolete and undesired, replacing it with the self-proclaimed alternative. The second stage of this indigenous emancipation lies in freeing the films from the burden and restrictions of what was traditionally associated with indigenous filmmaking.

Conclusions or Measuring the Impact

Emerged as a necessity, developed to satisfy international audiences, and turned a tool of cultural self-discovery and self-reflection, Zhigoneshi filmmaking is definitively a phenomenon in the region. Colombia has a strong tradition of filmmaking focused on indigenous communities, with Marta Rodriguez and Jorge Silva influencing the entire continent and beyond. But what makes Villafaña's case unique is the trajectory of his filming endeavors and his ambitious attitude. And although the scale of films' impact is not necessarily the ultimate focus of the collective, it becomes an indispensable requisite to measure their success as intercultural communicators. Distribution destinations are of strategic importance: local academic circles help disseminate the knowledge about the existence of the indigenous filmmaking in the region, political allies increase the possibility to get more funding, while international recognition at various film festivals cements Villafaña's role as an ambassador of the Arhuaco culture (with its values and problems) in Colombia and beyond. Even with the restrictions resulting from the "indigenous" labelling of the Zhigoneshi's films, by presenting these films at the international festivals, Villafaña and his team finally achieve the ultimate goal that pushed this filmmaking to existence, that is, to capture international attention and give a testimony of what is happening in the Sierra. The numerous awards and an international recognition result in even more invitations to present the collective's work at other events, which only testifies to the success of this task. All this led to what I label a Golden Era of Arhuaco filmmaking.

Nevertheless, I identify two potential failures of this task. Firstly, we cannot assume that film of any kind can inspire actions, and in that sense spreading the knowledge about the traumatic past of the community does not necessarily guarantee any immediate protection or allies. Many people venture to festivals to enjoy films rather than to get inspired to act. Also, no matter how good the film is, it always remains one of many others, especially when presented alongside multiple other titles at prominent film festivals. Secondly, having criticized a unified (in a sense of focusing on just one of the four indigenous nationals of the Sierra) and subjective

view of some European filmmakers, after few initial titles, Villafaña fell in the same trap and made his following films almost exclusively focused on the Arhuaco culture, reducing the presence of the Kogui, Wiwa, and the Kankuamos. Finally, after an enormous effort to make the elders accept the filmmaking tools in order to protect and promote the Arhuaco culture, Villafaña (and his children) became yet another example of people who had to separate from their culture in order to fight for it. Despite being extremely close to Sierra's values and visiting the indigenous villages on a regular basis, Villafaña is still based in a city. He continuously circulates between Valledupar and Santa Marta where he collaborates with the Indigenous House (Casa Indígena), which provides him with the office space and support, and various (European) capitals, often Paris, where his work is presented at different types of festivals.

One might argue that the real impact might only be seen in the local scope, while in the broader international context Zhigoneshi's work will always remain one of many curiosities. However, what counts are the first steps that opened the door to both internal and external recognition and enabled further collaborations and interest. The question that remains open is the legacy of Villafaña's work. Will it continue with other prolific successors to guard their place and inclusion in the international audiovisual dialogue, or will it remain an ephemeral example of communication excellence building the intercultural bridges at the time of change? Regardless of what will follow, significant work has already been done by opening the door to this intercultural conversation for these emancipated indigenous voices. Once Zhigoneshi's films get presented next to other titles regardless of their origin, they liberate themselves from the oppression of their "indigenous" label and the value which they produce is based on the quality rather than anything else. The struggle that remains is the balance between the effort by the indigenous communicators to maintain this communication and the willingness from the *bonachis* to listen. I conclude with Faye Ginsburg's (1991 94) words, who proposes that: "when other forms are no longer effective, indigenous media offer a possible means—social, cultural, and political—for reproducing and transforming cultural identity among people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption. The capabilities of media to transcend boundaries of time, space and even language are being used effectively to mediate, literally, historically produced social ruptures and to help construct identities that link past and present in ways appropriate to contemporary conditions."



Figure 1: Villafaña Directing; A frame from "The Voice of Sierra Nevada" by Agata Lulkowska
Source: Lulkowska

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