THE SOCIO-POLITICAL EFFECTS OF NARRATIVE AND REPRESENTATIONAL INNOVATIONS IN BRAZILIAN INDIGENOUS MEDIA

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This paper examines the connections between internal content and external effects in Brazilian indigenous media. Focusing on films produced by the organization Video Nas Aldeis/Video in the Villages, I will examine which film techniques, narrative strategies, and modes of representation were employed. This paper also treats the Video Nas Aldeis films’ political implications in Brazil: their successes in furthering human rights, in building group cohesion and identity, in facilitating inter-tribal links, and in transmitting more “accurate” representations of indigenous culture to the non-indigenous world. There is a growing body of literature in the fields of anthropology, communications, and cultural studies regarding indigenous films and videos. This literature, however, tends to focus predominantly on the processes of media production, circulation, and consumption. This focus on what goes in to the production of indigenous media, sometimes at the expense of what is in indigenous films, is certainly understandable. I share the concern of writers such as Faye Ginsburg, who cautions against a reductionist approach that would essentialize indigenous cultures by focusing exclusively on the visual or expressive aspects of indigenous media and neglect political objectives and contexts. Nevertheless, it is my contention that greater attention to the content of indigenous films can enhance understanding by showing how the aesthetic and socio-political aspects of indigenous media are interrelated.

Defining “Indigeneity”

Determining what peoples and communities should be considered “indigenous”—and therefore what films and videos should be considered “indigenous media”—is incredibly difficult and contentious. For the purposes of this paper when I employ the term “indigenous” in its
global sense, I am referring to communities and other groups that tend to share certain common
c Characteristics and(226,242),(750,739) define themselves as “indigenous.” These characteristics, as listed
by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, include: “[h]istorical continuity
 with pre-colonial and or pre-settler societies;” a “strong link to territories and surrounding natural
resources;” “distinct social, economic or political systems;” “distinct language, culture and
beliefs;” non-dominant status in society; and a “resolve to maintain and reproduce their
ancestral environments as distinctive peoples and communities.”

According to the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) there are approximately 250,000 recognized indigenous
persons in Brazil, who account for about 0.2% of the national population. The officially
recognized indigenous population in Brazil is divided into about 200 separate tribes, speaking
over 170 languages.

A Brief History of Indigenous Media and the Video in the Villages Project

Indigenous media—and here I am focusing specifically on films and videos for which
indigenous directors, editors, and/or producers played an integral role in the production
process—emerged from the tradition of ethnographic filmmaking. While “documentary” studies
of indigenous peoples are as old as the documentary-film genre itself (see for instance Robert
Flaherty’s 1922 film Nanook of the North), in the 1960s and ’70s anthropologists began to use
film in a much more comprehensive way in their ethnographic research. This coincided with a

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3 Nanook of the North, directed by Robert Flaherty, documents life in an Inuit territory near Hudson’s Bay. While the film is now often cited as “the beginning of both documentary and ethnographic film,” it was not widely referenced or acknowledged until the 1970s. Jay Ruby, Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 67. While some see Flaherty as pioneering a participatory approach to filmmaking in indigenous communities, others have argued that he falsely represented Inuit culture as “untouched” by the modern world. Valerie Alia, Un/Covering the North: News, Media and Aboriginal People (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 15-20. Flaherty’s use of staged scenes and his failure to credit Inuit collaborators have also been objects of criticism. Joanna Hearne, “Telling and Retelling in the ‘Ink of Light’: Documentary Cinema, Oral Narratives, and Indigenous Identities,” Screen 47, no. 3 (2006): 1-20. For a more fulsome discussion of Nanook, see Ruby, Picturing Culture, 67-93.
period of “reinvention” in the discipline of anthropology which saw, among other developments, the re-imagining of “the native voice” as one that should be in direct dialogue with anthropological interpretation. This reconsideration of indigenous peoples as participants in ethnographic research—rather than unwilling subjects—resulted in their incorporation in all facets of the filmmaking projects, “in research, in production, in exhibition, in pedagogy, and in social action.” The work of the French ethnographer Jean Rouch in Africa in the 1960s and ’70s is an important example of this new type of filmmaking. In Rouch’s “shared anthropology” film projects, the subjects of a film were envisioned as its primary audience, and “the activity of filming” served as “a reflexive and catalytic encounter” for both indigenous participants and outside filmmakers. The films thus engendered intercultural dialogue both within and outside the frame of the film. Sol Worth and John Adair’s work with the Navajo represents another key instance of this re-conceptualization of “the native voice” in anthropological filmmaking, and is often cited as a founding moment for the field of visual anthropology. Beginning in the late 1960s Worth and Adair provided equipment and training to Navajo students, resulting in a series of seven short “informant-made” documentary films titled The Navajo Film Themselves. Worth and Adair described and analyzed this project in their 1972 book Through Navajo Eyes.

The emergence of indigenous film did not result solely from the efforts of Western ethnographic filmmakers. The growing global indigenous rights movement of the 1970s and ’80s, which was particularly strong in the Americas and Oceania, played an important role in the development of more participatory forms of ethnographic filmmaking, and in the “re-imagining” of anthropology in general. During these two decades, Western media spread increasingly into

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6 Ibid., 65-6.
8 Ibid., 64.
9 Ibid., 41-55.
indigenous communities through VCRs and communications satellites, and inexpensive video recording and editing devices became more widely available. Indigenous people began to use media technology not only to “write back” to those who had previously spoken for and about them, but also to preserve cultural traditions, build a sense of community, and—most importantly—to advocate for their human rights.

In 1987, the Centro de Trabalho Indigenista (CTI) in Brasilia launched the Video in the Villages project (hereafter “VIV”). According to its mission statement, the Video in the Villages project sought to “make accessible to Indians the vision, the production and the manipulation of their own image.” VIV’s first projects were films about rather than by indigenous peoples. As the project developed, however, VIV gradually moved to facilitating original works by indigenous filmmakers, providing equipment, training, distribution, and archiving facilities. Today nearly all VIV films are directed and edited by indigenous filmmakers, and these filmmakers are usually members of the community depicted in the film. Though originally intended for internal consumption and domestic advocacy, videos produced as part of the VIV project have now been shown around the world at film festivals and special screenings hosted by international organizations such as Amazon Watch and the United Nations. VIV films have also garnered a substantial amount of attention within Brazil, including a retrospective held in Rio de Janeiro in 2004 in celebration of the organization’s fifteenth anniversary, and a major exhibition in Brasilia in 2006.

Defining Indigenous Media

Faye Ginsburg’s definition of “indigenous media” exemplifies how those analyzing indigenous-produced films and videos have tended to place the emphasis on the political context and effects of these media. Indigenous media, according to Ginsburg, refers to

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12 ibid., 84.
indigenous peoples’ use of “a variety of media, including film and video, as new vehicles for internal communication, for self-determination, and for resistance to outside cultural domination.” This definition emphasizes the process by which films are created and circulated. Similarly, the anthropologist Juan Salazar argues that any discussion of indigenous film must start with the “poetics of indigenous media”—that is, “the way media comes into being and functions in a given community, group or culture” and how the “social practices of media are grounded in cultural politics and social action.” Steven Leuthold, for his part, finds that indigenous films lack enough formal consistency to define a common, internal “native aesthetic” but argues that such an aesthetic can be founded instead on common, external views of indigenous filmmakers regarding “social conditions of production, distribution, and reception.”

Reviewing the literature on the political effects of indigenous media we can identify three most commonly cited purposes/effects of the process of indigenous media:

1. Building, recovering, reconstituting, strengthening, and safeguarding tribal group identity and solidarity, including through the revival and re-imagining of cultural rituals and traditions.

2. Creating and strengthening links with other indigenous groups for the purpose of intercultural learning and forming/solidifying political alliances.

3. Informing the non-indigenous world about indigenous culture and living conditions in order to raise awareness, build understanding, and garner support for political activities.
These three main purposes/effects of indigenous media correspond to the three types of audiences that typically view indigenous films, and VIV films in particular. These are the following: (i) the indigenous community depicted in the film; (ii) other indigenous communities; (iii) the non-indigenous public (on both the national and international levels). It is important to note that various audiences will interpret the films in different ways. Indeed, according to Salazar, “indigenous media should not be understood in a narrow, technical sense, but rather as a set of cultural practices in which media makers and audiences actively produce their own, often divergent, meanings.”

**The Connection Between Politics and Aesthetics**

Certainly there are a number of good reasons to emphasize the politics of production and circulation when it comes to indigenous media. Perhaps most importantly, Ginsburg and many others have provided qualitative evidence that the evaluation of indigenous film within indigenous communities themselves tends to focus less on content, and more on social relations. In her 1994 analysis of indigenous film and video in Australia Ginsburg notes:

> With few exceptions, questions of narrative or visual form are not primary issues for discussion per se, despite the obvious concern for it in individual works. Rather, for many Aboriginal producers, the quality of work is judged by its capacity to embody, sustain, and even revive or create certain social relations.

Nevertheless, I believe that a discussion of what is represented in indigenous films, as well as how it is represented, must be an integral part of any analysis of an indigenous media project. In undertaking such an analysis, however, we must be cautious about committing what Ginsberg calls “epistephyalia” – the tendency of Western audiences to engage with the aesthetics of indigenous films and ignore the broader social issues depicted. Thus, in all cases, my

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18 Salazar, “Imperfect’ Media,” 95.
20 Ibid., 376.
discussion of the content of VIV films is tied to the political motivations and effects of these elements.

We will recall that an important political effect of indigenous media is the building of tribal group identity and solidarity. For instance, Ginsburg explains the important role of film in creating “screen memories,” as indigenous communities use media “to recuperate their own collective stories and histories…that have been erased in the national narratives of the dominant culture and are in danger of being forgotten in local worlds as well.” This recovery occurs partly through the act of producing the film or by the mere fact that a film exists. Yet it is important to discuss how recovered traditions are portrayed within the film, and how the use of certain narrative strategies can facilitate cultural recovery.

For example, many VIV projects incorporate archival ethnographic footage of the subject tribe. The editing and screening of this footage as part of the filmmaking process no doubt builds a sense of connection to the past and allows communities to recover lost knowledge, but the ways in which the footage is included and commented on in the films also have an important impact. For example, Zezinho Yube’s film *I’ve Already Become an Image* makes extensive use of historical films of his Hunikui tribe taken by a French ethnographer in the 1960s. By viewing the footage, community members were able to reconnect with lost relatives and reacquire forgotten skills. Yube also goes a step beyond by combining both the ethnographic footage and the present-day Hunikui engagement with that footage in the film itself. For instance, in one scene several present-day Hunikui attempt traditional fire-making methods after viewing footage of their ancestors using these methods. This scene shows that what is at work here is not a process of pure recovery, but also one of re-signification, as historical knowledge is adapted into contemporary life. This becomes apparent when a Hunikui man, after successfully creating an ember using two pieces of wood, remarks: “Now we have a way to make fire if there are no

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22 Zezinho Yube, *I’ve Already Become an Image* (Olinda, Brazil: Video in the Villages, 2008), DVD.
more lighters!” The narrative strategy of having the present comment on the past allows Yube to undermine tropes of indigenous “authenticity.”

Many VIV films contrast “traditional” and “modern” representations of indigenous culture. Scenes of rituals, traditions, and of elders relating ancient stories and knowledge are often immediately followed by scenes of indigenous people engaged in modern activities such as talking on CB radios, watching television, and using video cameras. During a panel at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian’s *Video Amazônia Indígena* exhibition in 2008, several indigenous VIV filmmakers explained that they sometimes intentionally juxtaposed the traditional and the modern to emphasize the possibility of indigenous peoples’ participating in “modern” society while still preserving traditional culture and cultural identity. This demonstrates how indigenous filmmakers use specific editing and narrative strategies to make a political point.

**Pirinop: My First Contact**

One of the most sophisticated films produced by VIV—in terms of the narrative strategies and modes of representation employed—is *Pirinop: Meu Primeiro Contato/My First Contact* by Karané Txicão and Mari Corrêa.23 *Pirinop* documents the Ikpeng tribe’s struggle to recover its traditional lands in the Jotobá region, and explores the effects of European contact on the tribe, including land dispossession. Early in the film, the viewer is shown historical footage of the Ikpeng’s first contact with Europeans. In the grainy, washed-out footage, we see three white ethnographers (and presumably a fourth behind the camera) walking through a field of tall grass. There is a sudden commotion and a cacophony of yells from off camera. Various Ikpeng community members approach the Europeans, who attempt to communicate using hand gestures. In many “mainstream” documentaries, historical footage is employed as proof of

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23 Karané Txicão and Mari Corrêa, *Pirinop: My First Contact* (São Paulo: Instituto Catitu, 2007), DVD.
authenticity, as evidence that things really occurred as the film says they did. In the case of *Pirinop*, however, this historical footage (and a voiceover reading of the account of the European ethnographer) is intercut with the testimony of an Ikpeng elder. The elder’s testimony provides an entirely different take on the first contact from the one described by the ethnographer, thus calling the footage’s verity into question and adding an element of subjectivity.

The film employs a variety of other methods of representation to illustrate various aspects of the first contact. A participatory mode of representation—by which I mean a mode that acknowledges that presence and involvement of the filmmaker with the film’s subjects—is at work when we see a spontaneous, informal reenactment by an elderly female community member, who addresses the filmmaker several times as she demonstrates her experience on the day of the first contact. The reenactment takes place in an outdoor village gathering place. The woman, who is naked and holding a small child in her arms, runs to and fro about the space, excitedly narrating to a small group of community members. Later in the film, observational and reflexive modes of representation are used in relation to a more formalized reenactment of the same events. This reenactment has clearly been pre-planned. Community members in traditional dress and face paint exit a large *maloca* and fire arrows at a real plane flying overhead, yelling to one another, “It has come!” and “It is a spirit!” This scene is more or less observational in nature. It is followed almost immediately, however, by a reflexive scene in which those who participated in the reenactment watch footage of themselves and critique their own performances.

The use of multiple modes of representation in *Pirinop* is likely in part a result of the social relations underlying the production process. The filmmakers used a collaborative approach to create the film, and the inclusion of contributions from various community members

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24 This practice is typical in a huge number of contemporary documentary films and television programs. One might think, for instance, of the way the historical footage is often employed in the hour-long documentaries frequently shown on television networks such as *The History Channel* or *A&E*.

may have been prioritized over representational consistency. For example, a reenactment of the Ikpeng tribe’s abduction of two young girls from the neighboring Waur’a tribe uses effects and techniques more typical of American ‘B’ movies—such as menacing music, tight camera angles, and slow motion—that are absent from the rest of the film. According to the directors, this may be because the scene was directed not by the filmmakers, but by a group of Ikpeng elders (although it is unclear why the elders would have chosen these particular aesthetic devices). Nevertheless, in some cases the filmmakers also may have used contrasting modes of representation intentionally to convey a political message. For instance, the pairing of “evidentiary” historical footage of the first contact with subjective narration allows the filmmakers to give new meaning to a previously exploitative ethnographic film, furthering their overall objective of creating a new narrative of an event previously depicted and discussed only by outsiders. (Note the inclusion of the word “my” in the subtitle “My First Contact”). Furthermore, the inclusion of the scene of community members’ critiquing their reenactment serves to debunk any notion of the tribe’s being located in some sort of stationary, idyllic past. Indeed, many of the criticisms offered by community members relate to the mistaken inclusion of modern elements, such as shorts, wristwatches, and Portuguese speech, in the reenactment. Thus the adoption of a reflexive mode of representation helps to accomplish the goal of building community solidarity by providing a realistic portrayal of the Ikpeng community while also breaking down essentialist stereotypes.

Conclusion

While there are ethical issues that must be taken into consideration in any indigenous film project, the potential for indigenous media to act as an instrument for the direct and indirect advancement of indigenous rights is remarkable. Studies of indigenous media can help to further this objective by increasing understanding of the political forces inherent in the process of filmmaking, and of the political effects of indigenous films. Such studies, however, should also
consider the internal dimensions of indigenous films, which play a crucial role in transmitting political messages to both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences.