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Review/Reseña

Jeff D. Himpele, *Circuits of Culture: Media, Politics, and Indigenous Identity in the Andes*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

The Lion King vs. Evo Morales? Adventures in the Andean Vision World

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Jeff Himpele is not only an anthropologist; he has also played one on TV. (Sorry about that, I could not resist). Commercial clichés aside, Himpele has written an excellent and challenging book that deserves a broad readership. A visual anthropologist and filmmaker, Himpele provides a series of remarkable vantage points from which to observe the circulation of images, discourses, and ideas of indigeneity in Bolivia. This book offers a theoretically informed history of key moments in Bolivian

film history, a fascinating ethnography of a Bolivian television program that seems something like an Andean answer to both *Oprah* and *The People's Court*, and an original contribution to our understanding of the converging processes of “popularizing indigenism” and “indigenizing the popular” that has culminated in (among other things) the election of Evo Morales as president of Bolivia. For scholars of Bolivia, visual anthropology, and indigeneity, *Circuits of Culture* is a must-read.

Between his introductory and concluding chapters, Himpele divides his book into three parts. For those who are looking for new teaching materials on Bolivia, it should be noted that one of the virtues of this book is that these three parts read well together, but they can also stand independently quite nicely. Each of the chapters, and the book taken as a whole, contribute greatly to our understanding of the cultural politics of film, indigenous identity, and the media in Bolivia. In the interest of clarity, I will discuss each of the main sections in turn.

Circulation of Films, Constitutions of Publics

Himpele's introductory chapter opens with a striking image. As dancers from the University Folklore Parade make their way down the Prado, the main boulevard that “runs along the bottom of the urbanized bowl-shaped canyon as if it were center stage in a performance arena,” Himpele discusses a photograph he took of a group performing the well-known *Diablada*, or devil dance. In the background of the dancers is a large billboard, above the entrance of the Cinema Monje Campero, one of the main movie theaters in La Paz. It announces the “*gran estreno*” of Disney's blockbuster movie, *The Lion King*. I cannot reproduce the full richness of Himpele's provocative opening scene, but it is worth quoting a small part of his discussion:

I contemplated the friction in this scene in the heart of Bolivia's most prominent public space in which *The Lion King's* bold billboard loomed above the Devils in the Prado. It could serve as an instance of the discourse of cultural imperialism, a dualist view in which Hollywood and Disney are external agents of a global corporate media invasion... In this view of the parade, the spectators with the backs turned [toward the billboard and facing the devils] appeared to be resisting the foreign conquest... Yet isn't

resistance more complicated than opposition? Can it also be viewed as a sign of seduction? (3)

Himpele usefully calls our attention to the complexities within and outside of the frame of his photograph. Spectators, many wearing *Lion King* visors take in both “local” folklore and “global” media. And the *Diablada* itself has traveled beyond Bolivian national space throughout South America and the U.S. The ethnographic point here, Himpele suggests borrowing John Peter’s (1997) phrase, is about the importance of “seeing bifocally,” in order to apprehend the “multidirectional traffic of cultural media.” Moving beyond binary conflicts of local vs. global, Himpele uses the first part of his book to explore La Paz as a transnational “media capital” and a fascinating case of the circulation of culture.

While tracing images and films may sound impossibly ethereal and abstract, Himpele provides an impressively grounded and interesting approach by actually following films through theaters of the city. Why do certain theaters show certain films at certain times? What do the paths these films take tell us about the political economy of culture? What do they say about the “struggles for public making, representation, and sovereignty” (15)? Even for those who are familiar with La Paz, Himpele’s tour of this city as a “cinemascape” will be extremely rewarding and insightful, as it examines the spatial and cultural politics that are important parts of the distribution of films throughout the neighborhoods of La Paz. Theoretically, this discussion is also extremely useful. Film debuts, for instance, become important windows into the workings of the temporalities of development. Francis Ford Coppola’s *Dracula* arrived in La Paz a week after arriving in Buenos Aires, but a month and a half after the U.S. debut. Bolivian newspapers often include these kinds of details and thus contribute to a public discourse about how far “behind” and “beneath” Bolivia is compared to the Global North. Himpele wisely notes that the ever-expanding supply of bootlegged copies of major films “subverts colonial paths and temporalities in Bolivia,” but official releases of Hollywood films nevertheless still serve as one kind of “timekeeper” of colonial modernity (58). The first part of the book, thus, provides a remarkably vivid account of the varied human geography of La Paz, with its

well known neocolonial topography that assigns the poor to the higher parts of the canyon wall while the well-to-do live in the lower, more temperate parts of the city. It is also an instructive reading of what the international and local circulation of films says about the place of La Paz in the nation and the world.

Indigenism at the Movies

The second part of Himpele's book looks at the history of Bolivian film and traces how the state, international forces, and a series of filmmakers have posed and challenged the "Indian question" in Bolivia. Though there are other treatments of Bolivian film history and many discussions of indigenism in Bolivia, Himpele uses his knowledge of filmmaking, original interviews with important Bolivian filmmakers, and his keen ethnographic eye to trace the changing representations of indigenous peoples in film. Borrowing the theoretical language of "assemblage" (from scholars like Deleuze and Guattari, and Ong and Collier), Himpele examines how films and nations both "connect and intertwine international circulatory matrices" (96). Examining national cinema and the Bolivian nation-state as dynamic articulations that are shaped, in part, by transnational flows is an effective way to examine perhaps the most familiar "problem" of modern Bolivia, locating the place of indigenous people.

The early years of Bolivian cinema were characterized by state censorship and orientaling depictions of Aymara people (always played by non-indigenous actors). Yet these films are important in disseminating the "foundational fictions" of the Bolivian state. The representation of Andean landscapes and peoples in films like *Wara Wara* and *Corazón Aymara*, Himpele suggests, were tied to indigenist projects of the early twentieth century (in the 1920s and 1930s) that used the new technology of film to capture the past and serve as a "visual register of the modernization of the nation state" (107). Though the early films witnessed a preoccupation with indigenous culture and past conflicts (like the Chaco War), they were careful to avoid representation of contemporary contention. The process of editing the nation's past, Himpele shows, was an important part of narrating a future of synthetic mestizo nation building. This, however,

changed with the social convulsions that became known as the revolution of 1952.

Himpele's chapter on "revolutionary films" is extremely useful as it explores two forms of revolutionary filmmaking, the "official" revolutionary films sponsored by the revolutionary regime (1952-1964) as well as the more radical responses of filmmakers like Jorge Sanjinés (especially during the 1960s and 1970s). Through the creation of the Bolivian Cinematographic Institute (ICB), the Bolivian state helped produce films like *Los Primeros* (1958), a documentary fictional film that tells a triumphalist story about the discovery of oil in the tropical lowlands and the construction of vast networks of pipelines and communication technologies that would connect landlocked Bolivia with the world. For the first time, filmmakers had access to state resources and international funds (especially from the United States) for their projects. Filmmakers like Jorge Ruiz, for instance, returned to the indigenous themes of early filmmakers, though this time he actually shot in indigenous communities rather than having "white" actors "play Indian." For Ruiz (who would later head the ICB), film could play an important social role. Ruiz saw his work in indigenous communities as being about nothing less than saving indigenous cultures, as "it is important to rescue them as soon as possible before they disappear totally" (quoting Ruiz, 120). Though Himpele does not spend much time discussing the strong family resemblance that this style of filmmaking shares with the history of salvage anthropology and modernization theory, the original interview material with Ruiz and others provide many suggestive passages that can allow readers to make these connections.

Himpele avoids making the ICB the villain of his story, despite some tempting opportunities provided by the generous support of the United States and the collaboration with a young entrepreneur by the name of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, who decades before his rise as a technocratic, neoliberal president, was the head of Telecine, a private film company. Often, some of the most interesting parts of the story are tucked away in the endnotes, like the brief discussion of Sánchez de Lozada's work on a script that tells the story of U.S. outlaws who escape to Bolivia, a story that would

later become famous (in someone else's script) as the story of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (220, n. 6). It is an unmentioned irony that Goni, as Sánchez de Lozada is popularly known in Bolivia, was himself accused of violating Bolivian law and left the country to seek refuge in the United States (a story nicely captured in Rachel Boynton's recent film, *Our Brand is Crisis*). Though the ICB and its head, Ruiz, are never depicted as simple minded modernizers or U.S. puppets, it is clear that this kind of film making is aligned with a nation-building project which seeks to soften the jagged edges of Bolivia's very uneven development.

Standing in sharp contrast to Ruiz is the work of Jorge Sanjinés, who as a young man, also worked at the ICB, though with his studies in Chile and Cuba brought a very different ideological vision to his work. Gone are the optimistic visions of Bolivian progress and the paternalistic concern with indigenous peoples that are endangered by the coming of modernity, and in their place one finds a much darker picture of the exploitation that indigenous peasants experience in the process of economic development. Sanjinés views his filmmaking as grounded in the Andean world and thus works with indigenous communities, cosmologies, and narrative forms. His work, though, was very controversial. *Ukamau* (This is How It Is), his first full-length film, tells the story of an indigenous man who takes revenge on the mestizo man who had raped his wife. While the film was lauded internationally (Sanjinés was named "Best Young Director" at the Cannes Film Festival), the military government of René Barrientos reacted very negatively to this representation of Bolivia. Also unpalatable for the regime were the anti-imperialist messages in films like *Yawar Mallku* that accused the U.S. Peace Corps of sterilizing indigenous women. Not only were Sanjinés' films not shown in Bolivia, but the ICB itself was shut down (127). As it was no longer a tool of the official revolution, it became a liability.

The pairing of these two revolutionary traditions, the official and the radical, is highly effective. Himpele frames this discussion nicely by asking us to view these contrasting images of Bolivian modernity as examples of the "dialectical images" that Walter Benjamin described, images, in Himpele's words, "in which heaven and hell, progress and ruin, utopia and dystopia are the disparate frames with which we can view the

ideological parameters and material traces of historical projects to define modernity” (117). Taking advantage of rich interview materials with key Bolivian filmmakers and a deep familiarity with many films, Himpele provides an excellent discussion of how indigenous representations are themselves a terrain of struggle in which broad visions of the nation are contested and negotiated. These struggles do not only unfold on the big screen, but as the last part of his book shows, also on television.

Trials of Popular Culture: The Open Tribunal

Perhaps the most interesting part of this fascinating book are the chapters (5 and 6) dedicated to the ethnographic exploration of one Bolivian television show that was an important part of the political landscape in Bolivia during the 1990s. Carlos Palenque (a.k.a. “El Compadre”) was the host of the immensely popular show, *La Tribuna Libre del Pueblo*, and the head of the political party Condepa. Both the show and his party reflected the emergence of a kind of *cholo* populism, in which Palenque, a former musician and radio host, was a champion for the poor Aymara and Quechua Bolivians. On the show, ordinary citizens (who often spoke in a mix of Spanish, Aymara, and Quechua) could come and denounce abuses they had suffered at the hands of their spouse, employer, neighbor, etc. Palenque would listen compassionately, voice his outrage about the suffering of his guests, and then instruct these folks to go to the show’s off-stage “Social Wing” where social workers would presumably find solutions to their problems. “If the Condepa party provided access to political structures, *The Tribunal* was an arena where a new popular nation was being staged” (143).

Though Palenque died in 1997 of a heart attack, this was an important moment in the history of the Bolivian public sphere (or as Nancy Fraser would have it, the history of subaltern counter-public spheres) and Jeff Himpele literally had a front row seat. Early on in the book, he shares a fascinating account of his own appearance on Palenque’s show. A commercial for the show announced: “We are definitely the best!!! Tonight, a North American anthropologist visits us to study *The Open Tribunal*, a unique example of alternative communication across the entire world...”

(29). Himpele reports that despite his efforts to avoid endorsing or criticizing a program he had only just begun to study, he found himself pushed by Palenque to “repeat [the program’s] own discourse about its unique openness, accessibility to the urban poor, and popular social authority” (30). Even more disturbingly for Himpele, as he watches a tape of the show he wrestles with the resemblance between his own project of social representation and Palenque’s. “I began to ask myself if my ethnographic solicitation and editing of informants’ voices was different from Palenque’s elicitation and cutting off of participant’s voices while he praised their protagonism” (31). While Himpele does find some important differences between himself and his television interlocutor, the discomfort he examines produces a productive tension that the author is able to mine for important insights into the workings of popular publics.

Chapter 5 is a careful and detailed description of the performances of Palenque, his co-hosts, and his audience. Himpele suggests that these performances are a case of what Deborah Battaglia has called “agency play... in which agency is invoked, ascribed, concealed, obfuscated, more or less strategically” (155). People are invited to speak for themselves, to denounce those who have wronged them, yet Palenque reserves for himself a large “agentive role” who can find solutions to the problem of the poor. Despite the unequal power relations among the show’s “compadres” and “comadres,” the show and the Condepa party represented vehicles for imagining new channels of political participation for the poor and indigenous citizens left out by the neoliberal models of politics and communication (156-161).

Yet, there is something about the promise of Palenque that is too good to be quite true. In Chapter 6, Himpele provides an often unflattering close-up of the social work of the program. In spite of on-air promises, disappointment and delay often await the visitors of the “Social Wing, duplicating the same bureaucratic delays that *The Tribunal* itself contested on the air” (174). There is much more to Himpele’s critical examination than this. Drawing on his own previous work in television, he takes readers on an instructive backstage tour in which he explains how camera work, editing, and sound are used by the show to explore, display, and address

the pain and trauma of the people who come on the show. In an interesting theoretical move, Himpele suggests that Palenque is able to navigate the “double bind” of pain that has been provocatively expressed by Elaine Scarry (1985, 13), who writes that “To have pain is to have *certainty*, to hear about pain is to have *doubt*.” This means that an advocate, like Palenque, “is necessary to publicly validate and represent the victim’s pain and the demands” (168). I cannot do justice here to this extraordinarily rich chapter, but I would go so far as to say that all by itself, it is worth the price of admission.

Indigenizing the Popular, Popularizing the Indigenous

At first blush, the concluding chapter of the book does not seem like a traditional conclusion, as much of it is spent chronicling the work of a new generation of indigenous Bolivian filmmakers and their participation in international film festivals in places like the Smithsonian Museum of Art in Washington D.C. and in smaller venues including the cultural centers of Bolivian immigrants living in the D.C. area. It is at one of the later events in Arlington, Virginia that some of the broader themes of Himpele’s book come into focus. After the screening of Marcelina Cárdenas’ film *Llanthupi Munakuy* (Loving Each Other in the Shadows), an audience member voices her admiration for the project’s depiction of indigenous culture, but asks as if she were playing the role of Jorge Ruiz in the years after the revolution, “how can we prevent these practices from disappearing?” Himpele writes, “Like two proverbial ships passing at night, the traditional indigenista view of native culture carried in with members of the Bolivian-born families that night in Arlington eclipsed a view of these visiting video makers as part of the cultural transformations that were indigenizing national politics southward in Bolivia” (190).

Southward in Bolivia, Evo Morales was on his way to becoming the first indigenous person to govern this country, where indigenous people constitute a majority of the population. As Jeff Himpele notes, Morales is himself a product of the history that his book so ably narrates. In his own political assemblage, Morales as a highland Aymara migrant who came of age politically in the struggles of the *cocalero* federations in the tropics, brings together the histories of class-based, anti-imperial, and indigenous

resistance. These projects are not always easy to reconcile in what Nancy Postero (2006) has called “post-multicultural Bolivia.” While for some Morales is too much a man of the union left and for others he is too indigenous, it is clear that Morales is part of a broader, post-Washington Consensus rise of popular politics in Latin America. As scholars continue to focus on Bolivia’s efforts to once again re-imagine itself through the drafting of a new constitution and the pursuit of new arrangements between foreign capital and national resources, it is important to keep in mind Himpele’s suggestions to see “bifocally” and not lose sight of the local and global forces that continue to shape Bolivian modernity.

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