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Ethnotypes in Latin American cinema

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Summary

Histrionic Indigeneity Ethnotypes in Latin American Cinema

By connecting major theoretical formulations from various disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, this project examines critically the ways in which ethnotypes are used in the portrayal of the figure of the indigenous in Latin American cinema. It reviews how films, produced between 2000 and 2018, reflect, reinforce, mask or challenge outdated archetypes. Indigenous ethnotypes, as reviewed here, are constructed through visual strategies and elements of a storyline. As evidenced in this analysis, films are illustrations that aim to emulate, remodel, enhance, or present intangible possibilities, mostly by appealing to our senses and sensitivities. Until recently, indigenous characters in films tended to be depicted mainly as superficial, relatively stable and mono-dimensional. To simplify matters, directors frequently opted for group scenes, giving the impression that there were not individual differences between indigenous characters (Stam, 1997), or at least not differences worth exploring in detail. The particular interest and willingness shown by contemporary non-indigenous filmmakers to focus on indigenous themes in recent feature movies is therefore considered a remarkable change. However, from a formalist perspective, portrayals of indigeneity still appear to be intrinsically linked to Eurocentric ideologies. The underlying notion is that, in spite of important reconfigurations, stereotypes and exotifying paradigms still determine the representation of indigenous characters in cinema.

Films have the potential to adumbrate or reconfigure assumptions about the indigenous *Other* and to repeat or avoid rhetorical and visual strategies to mark difference. Through well-established codes, movies tactically deploy ethnotypes and portray societies, often by recurring to fixed formulae and tropes. With these considerations in mind, ultimately, this review provides the foundations of a theory that explains how overtly histrionic proclivities play a significant role in the portrayals of an imagined indigenous *Other* in recent films (Histrionic Indigeneity).

Emphasis is placed upon assessing how Latin American indigenous groups are represented in cinema from a mainstream cultural and sociolinguistic standpoint. Within this framework, an important aspect to consider is that films operate at a local and international level, and that many of the reviewed narratives have prompted discussions of the plight of undermined segments of the population. Yet, in spite of wider inclusion of indigenous themes across cinema, limited academic attention has been devoted to recent portrayals of indigeneity in films. So far, studies have been attuned to representations in early stages of cinema (Lienhard, 1997; Alvira, 2011), focused upon one specific country (Mesa, 1974; Stam, 1997; Mouesca, 2010; Lusnich, 2005; Middents, 2013; Quispe, 2011; Mateus Mora, 2012; Cupples, 2013), concentrated on analysing specific filmmakers (Gamboa, 1999; Tacca, 1999), engaged with a particular film (Floek, 2001; Villazón, 2008; Cisneros, 2013), or examined new trends of self-representation (Viridi, 2003; Schiwy, 2009; Maturana, 2012; Wilson, 2015). Until now, limited research has been conducted on cinematic representations of indigenous peoples across Latin America as a continent. Whilst previous research findings are useful when approaching specific countries,

filmmakers, or films depicting these communities, few studies have analysed recent representations of indigeneity as a sign of cross-border processes in themes and foci, specifically in a global North-Global South context. Reviewing previous studies on the topic, it becomes evident that there are gaps in the ways cinematic portrayals of indigenous groups have been outlined.

The thesis is divided into Part I and Part II. Chapters One, Two, Three and Four constitute Part I. Chapter One schematically lays out the conceptualizations and theories that have informed the analysis of the selected films. It draws on insights developed in humanities and social sciences on the links between aesthetics and production within the realms of cinema. Furthermore, this chapter discusses some of the most influential approaches formulated to understand how cinematic narratives manufacture and frame otherness (e.g. mental schemas). Subsequently, Chapter Two outlines theories on the interaction between society and cinema from a cultural, hegemonic and globalized perspective. It revises approaches where films are regarded as externalizations of societal processes, but also discusses available theoretical patterns in the relationship between media and audiences. Furthermore, it includes a description of qualitative and quantitative approaches applicable to analyse feature films, from a producer and consumer viewpoint. Central to Chapter Two is also to revisit the most prominent theorizations and methodological approaches pertaining to language as a social entity within cinematic discourses.

Chapter Three reviews cinema as an artform intrinsically linked to canons originally featured in European works of art. The underlying notion is that visual cultural artefacts provide more information about the worldviews of the producing society than about the communities being depicted. This chapter explores how the figure of the indigenous emerges from a need of registering the 'discovery' of a New World and its peoples. This chapter identifies the processes by which iconic images of headless men, cannibals, savages, or idealized, idyllic natural creatures spread rapidly throughout Europe and beyond. This section of the thesis charts how the image of the American natives has historically been registered as the embodiment of a noble savage in works of literature, paintings, photography and cinematic spaces. A discussion about common themes and approaches transposed from the fine arts onto the cinematic world is followed by a review of self-representational cinematic production. In a succinct manner, Chapter Four summarizes the spectrum of themes and approaches found in self-representational films (auto-images). This chapter suggests that indigenous cinema and new forms of cinema produced in 'peripheral' regions of Peru challenge notion of (self)-identity, ethnicity and representation. Films produced by exponents of *Cine Regional* (Regional Cinema), are reviewed to draw parallels between the different approaches. Conclusively, cinematic production by Andean filmmakers / collectives and directors from rural regions in Peru, problematize the definition of self-representation and representation of those perceived to be indigenous. Reviewing the interaction between audiences and films, based on entries on social media platforms, this chapter concludes that the level of identification with the themes of the films is high. Films in this category are evidence that indigenous, non-indigenous *mestizo*, non-*mestizo*, and *cholo* are contended terms in media spaces—as much as in real life—but irrelevant to motion pictures where categorical ethnical ascriptions are not central.

The subsequent three chapters constitute Part II. Chapter Five, presents an analysis of the films produced in the various countries across the region. The research in this chapter summarizes how the codes, conventions and symbols found in the objects of analysis can be linked to processes and reconfigurations of group affiliations and identities. It explores the commonalities, but also striking differences in the way Latin American filmmakers approach indigeneity in recent films. Whereas Andean directors are notorious for resorting to indigenist practices reminiscent of previous decades, Mexican visuals highlight the importance of identity. In the case of Brazil, natives are still regarded through a tropicalist optic, and historical chronicles are preferred over confrontational, present-day stories. Meanwhile, the Southern Cone region presents two clear approaches. Argentine cinema seems to address indigeneity as a *part* of newly rediscovered rural geographies, while Chilean films are critical about what indigeneity actually entails. Due to a lack of resources, and widespread indifference to the plight of self-identified indigenous communities, the number of Central American and Paraguayan films on the topic is limited.

Chapter Six documents the ways in which Amerindian languages are included in filmic narratives, and outlines formularizations on hegemony, audiences and globalization from a sociolinguistic standpoint. It addresses the role played by Amerindian languages in the selected films as tokens of realism, exoticism and authenticity. Out of the 65 selected films, 41 include conversations of various kinds and lengths in Amerindian languages; 34 use subtitles to translate these exchanges. As a marker, language is a constant in heterogenous cultural artefacts, not the least because it operates as an element that enhances the sense of realness, authoritativeness, and credibility. As has been observed, the visibility / invisibility of certain cultural elements, such as Amerindian languages or oddly accented Portuguese and Spanish, play a role in how cinematic indigeneity is constructed. Use of languages such as Quechua in *La teta asustada* (Peru, 2009), Guaraní in *Hamaca Paraguaya* (Argentina-Paraguay, 2000), or Tzotzil in *La Jaula de Oro* (Mexico, 2013), support the notion that besides audiovisual instances, filmmakers also use linguistic strategies to epitomize and fabricate ethnotypes.

Based on a comparison between hetero-images and auto-images, and a quantitative approach to the use of ethnotypes in films, Chapter Seven, presents the findings of an evidence-based content analysis. This chapter also offers an assessment of the artistic fabrication of otherness, contemporary archetypes, regnant ideologies of representation and intersectionality of social categories in the selected corpus. Conclusively, ethnicity and gender remain within an outwardly positioned realm. A common pattern seen in most of the reviewed films is that cinematic imagery of female characters is influenced by their ancestry, and in particular, by a well-defined "pigmentocracy" (Lipstchutz). Exoticism remains a symptom of a *Self-Other* binary within Latin American cinematic tradition, where indigeneity implies conspicuousness and continues to lie outside the range of normality. As discussed earlier, the global entanglements of an under-supported film industry and a need to supply imagery that resonates with outdated cultural repertoires might explain the continuity of this tradition. Usually endorsed by funding bodies, there are ample examples of cultural artefacts where otherness is stressed or highlighted by means of exaggeration. There is a tendency to script, exotify, and above all histrionize what constitutes indigeneity according to canons and paradigms that secure the recognition, popularity and attention linked to festival

circuits. In many cases, festival criteria align with Western precepts, and tap into the enormous nostalgia of (inter)national audiences for the figure of the noble savage.

Chapter Eight, the final chapter, added during the last stage of writing this thesis, argues that the release of *Roma* (Mexico-United States) in December 2018 marks a paradigm shift in the portrayal of indigenous characters in Latin American cinema. This concluding chapter suggests that Alfonso Cuarón's film redraws a blueprint for the representation of indigeneity by presenting a syntonic, rather than a histrionic, approach.