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Screening Space:

The Making and Unmaking of Racialized Space in 1970s Mexican Film

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

by

Julia Ruth Brown

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Screening Space:
The Making and Unmaking of Racialized Space in 1970s Mexican Film

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Areas of Study

- Visual Cultures
- Latin American Literatures and Cultures
- Indigenous Languages and Literatures
- Environmental Humanities
- Space Studies

ABSTRACT

Screening Space:

The Making and Unmaking of Racialized Space in 1970s Mexican Film

By Julia Ruth Brown

1970s Mexican film is less studied than cinema of other periods, and this dissertation pays it overdue attention. The sexenio of President Luis Echeverría Álvarez from 1970 to 1976 saw a shift in the way Mexicans and foreigners alike thought about and talked about national identity. During this decade, discourse shifted away from the concept of a mestizo nation and toward conversation about Mexico's economic solvency and the direction of Mexico's economy. Discussions about land, land resources, and territory took on new importance. Where in previous decades, one of the primary concerns of the government and intellectual circles was how to make Indigenous peoples more culturally Mexican, by the 1970s, conversation had turned to territory and resource control. They pondered, for example, how to Mexicanize Indigenous territory in order to benefit Mexico's industries. Fundamentally, political objectives had not changed; the aim was always to make Mexico modern, which was in itself a goal without a universally accepted benchmark for success. Still, as 1970s Mexican films *Ayautla* (José Rovirosa, 1972), *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* (Paul Leduc, 1977), and *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976) each reveal, Mexican politicians and civilians alike spent the decade preoccupied with questions of land use, maximizing the profits of agricultural, mining, and energy industries, and the significance and value of labor. These three films approach the decade's dominant questions through an aesthetic and

ideological framework that leftist geographers, anthropologists, authors, and filmmakers had already been developing. Filmmakers of the New Latin American Cinema waves of the 1960s and 1970s had laid the groundwork for creating genre-bending films exploring the bounds of documentary and fiction cinemas while leveling critiques at capitalism and the State. Meanwhile, geographers thinking about the same issues developed geocritical theory, anchored in terms like territory, landscape, and space, to articulate some of the same observations New Latin American Cinema was making about social and economic inequality in the Global South. This dissertation considers *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio*, and *Cascabel* inheritors of both traditions, and as films that reflect—and grapple with—the implications of representing land and labor within the context of shifting conversations about territory, the Nation-State, and racialized Indigenous peoples in pre-NAFTA Mexico. This study has multiple implications: first, for the way we think about Mexican film not only of the 1970s but also of earlier and later periods, and second, for the way we think about—and perceive—film and its relationship to space.

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0 INTRODUCTION: THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF MEXICAN TERRITORY

This project emerged from a single line of inquiry about the relationship between cinema and the perceived place of Indigenous peoples within Mexican society. My original study, conducted on Golden Age cinema, was predicated on the understanding, which poststructuralist scholars had taken care to develop, that Mexican films released in the late 1930s through the early 1950s were semiotically tied to aspirations for national social, racial, political, linguistic, and economic cohesion. Yet there was a pattern in these films: even if they intended to promote social cohesion of racialized Indigenous, mestizo, and white protagonists through love, shared taste in music and fashion, or even shared enemies, the



Figure 0-1. Film Frame. Maestra Rosaura Salazar (María Félix) with Her Students in *Río Escondido* (Emilio Fernández, 1948).

films—intentionally or not—consistently suggested social cohesion and harmony were impossible. For example: the beautiful and morally irreproachable Indigenous but mestiza

protagonist (Dolores del Río) would die at the hands of the Indigenous violent hoards, as in *María Candelaria* (Emilio Fernández, 1943); the Indigenous but mestizo protagonist (Pedro Infante) would die saving his white heiress love, foreclosing the possibility of them ever being together, as in *Tizoc: amor indio* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1957); or the schoolteacher (María Félix again) with intentions of bringing quality education to a rural, Indigenous town would die, thwarting the possibility of equity for the town as in *Río Escondido* (Emilio Fernández, 1948) (Figure 0-1).

The pattern in these films was the recurrence of a divide between the idea of a cohesive and peaceful Mexican social body—an idea predicated on social cohesion through shared taste and consumption patterns, shared language, and common, mestizo racial identity—and attempts to narrativize and visualize that idea. In each of the aforementioned films, the cohesive social body would fall apart because of individual or collective acts of violence which would kill off the protagonist or their lover. Ultimately, the interracial relationship would fail, the acculturated Indigenous protagonist would die, and Mexican society, evoked by the protagonists, would remain segregated socio-economically, sometimes also by the rural-urban divide.

Mexican cinema from between the early 1930s and the 2000s and the characters in it are often recognized by scholars as referents for the Mexican national population, and when there is a breakdown in the relationships between characters, between generations, or between civilians and politicians, this breakdown is interpreted as an allegory for the

fragmentation of the population.¹ Film scholars argue that this breakdown, common to innumerable film narratives, is inevitable because social cohesion in Mexico—or at least the *sense* of cohesion—collapsed by the end of the 1960s. At the heart of this fleeting sense of cohesion—the sense that everyone living inside Mexico belonged, was equal, and had the same goals for their country and themselves—film scholars, sociologists, and historians agree, was a myth the Mexican government sold to the general public. The Mexican people was an “imagined community” (Anderson, 6), although as I will discuss subsequently, the consequences of this myth were hardly illusory. The idea of social cohesion might be described best as a national myth. This national myth has numerous facets ranging from the social to the industrial to the political, but scholars addressing the myth’s relationship to film and even to literature often focus, not coincidentally, on the myth of racial unity through mestizaje.

This dissertation keeps one eye on the myth of mestizo national identity while turning towards another, related myth virtually undiscussed in scholarship: the myth of national territory. In this instance, national territory is understood as an epistemology produced by both individual actors and institutions, particularly the State.² The material consequences of this epistemology—that is, the production of national territory—is understood in this dissertation as partially reliant on the visual economies of media like maps, oil paintings, photography, and cinema, which are in constant dialogue with other modes of territorial production, such as laws, speeches, news reporting, and literary prose and poetry. The

¹ A few authors with monographs on this or a closely related topic: Dolores Tierney, Julia Tuñón, Aurelio de los Reyes, Emilio García Riera, Pedro Ángel Palou, Analisa Taylor, Charles Ramirez Berg, and Carl J. Mora.

² For more on symbolic and linguistic articulations of territory, see Raffestin, *Por una geografía*, 108.

articulation and production of a national territory requires a particular set of terms. As with the terminology that grounds discourses of Mexican national identity, that of national territory is not static but rather shifts with time: with presidential administrations, with the economy, and with historical events that punctuate national memory. I argue that the production of national territory in the Mexican case, especially during the 1970s but also well before that, has relied on two sources for its language of self-articulation. The first source is rhetoric related to the idea of national identity and its relevant symbols and signs. The second source is a language or semiotics of consumption and fragmentation, a capitalist vocabulary that describes territory as an entity that may be broken down into consumable, exploitable, and legal-tender parts. Both of these sources of language that I argue ground an articulation of Mexican national territory rely on the language of sovereignty. The language of sovereignty is bound up in a particularly close relationship with national mestizo identity discourse in the Mexican case, as I will explain further on in this dissertation. Although my dissertation is principally occupied with conducting an analysis of representations of territory in Mexico-made films of the 1970s, the premise of this work is rooted in a broader inquiry of roughly five hundred years of social and cultural history pertinent to the materialization of Mexican territory, and the discourse and visual representations meant to reference it.

This dissertation aims to think through the ways epistemologies of Mexican national territory, like the myth of national identity, are presented and critiqued both symbolically and discursively in cinema. My analysis is rooted in geocritical theory and terms such as territory and space, which I will discuss at length further on in this introduction. Geocritical theory in application invites an analysis of space in terms of power and labor, interpersonal relations

and their effect on space. Few film scholars are applying geocritical approaches to their research and I hope to demonstrate the promise of this body of theory for the future of film studies. By drawing on geocritical concepts in this dissertation, I can approach film in a way which allows for an analysis of both narrative and technique. In subsequent chapters, I will analyze film elements such as landscape, *mise-en-scène*, framing, composition, as well as cinematographic space and physical space and will relate these back to theories of territory and space. In doing so, I will demonstrate the role film can play in dialoguing with, making and unmaking visual economies of territory and with them, spectators' own epistemologies of Mexican national territory.

0.1 Space and Territory as a Starting Point

I prefer to use the terms “territory” and “space” over land, and the reasons for this are many. In this dissertation, I draw from geocritical scholarship that rests heavily on these terms. Space, territory, and landscape theories allow us to think about how humans engage with their environments and each other, and about the ways power is organized within those environments. Geocritical theory also allows us to consider the consequences of power structures within a given space on humans and non-humans. Geocritical theory can also be related back to audiovisual media: if we accept that social and physical space are always bound up with one another, then film is not removed from geography but rather is in constant dialogue with it.

A few geocritical scholars whose work is foundational in my understanding of geocritical theory and its points of contact with national identity, national territory, and film include Claude Raffestin (2011 [1980]), Doreen Massey (2005), and Marcos Aurelio Saquet

(2015 [2011]).³ Geocritical theory emerged largely during the 1970s, the same decade in which *Ayautla* (José Roviroso, 1972), *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976) and *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* (Paul Leduc, 1977), were directed and produced. In a brief historiography of geocriticism, Andrew Herod notes that early theorists were particularly attached to the idea that space—which we might usefully describe as a physical environment, containing rocks, plants, humans, birds, and human-made buildings—does not exist outside of or away from social space.⁴ This concept might, on the one hand, be interpreted as anthropocentric insofar as it assumes that physical space is always already determined by human behavior and language. Conversely, it may be interpreted as an acknowledgement that humans are simply one more animal interacting with its own species and with all other earthly material. In either case, the 1970s was a decade in which environmental concerns, human rights, globalization, and questions of space dovetailed. *Ayautla Etnocidio*, and *Cascabel*, each engage these themes as they pertain to Mexico.

To frame the subsequent treatment of geocritical theory in this dissertation, I wish to familiarize my readers with the concepts of space and territory, and to demonstrate the importance of these theories to the central questions of my dissertation.

0.1.1 Understanding Space

The space I consider in this dissertation is both confined and boundless: it is not outer space, but rather, the space we humans know and occupy—here on earth. Defined simply, space is a

³ I have also been guided by the theory of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1961]); Edward Soja (1971); Jean Gottman (1973); Robert David Sack (1980); Henri Lefebvre (1974); and Andrew Sluyter (2002).

⁴ Herod, 114.

human tool or invent—a construct—that permits humans to act in accordance with need.⁵ It is nothing more than human representation: in referents such as language, literature, painting, or film. Space does not exist prior to identities/entities: as both seem to indicate, space always develops out of human behavior.

Doreen Massey defines space as “the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny...always under construction...a product of relations—between, relations necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out” (9). Space, Massey reminds us, can be crossed and conquered; it also contains social interactions, along with the creation and destruction of material life. She writes, “space too is a product of interrelations. Space does not exist prior to identities/entities and their relations...identities/entities, the relations ‘between’ them, and the spatiality, which is part of them, are all constitutive” (*For Space*, 10). Her allegation has powerful implications for Mexican cinema because it implies that Mexican cinema could be constitutive as well as descriptive of Mexico, geographically speaking. In other words, the cinematic spaces presented in Mexican films are constituted by the relations between characters, the cinematographer, the screenwriter, the actors, and the director: these cinematic spaces are a space unto themselves, but they also have a relationship to spectators, to the movie theater, and to the relationships between the people within the movie theater and the people outside on the street.

Social space is a useful term for thinking about human interpersonal relations, and we might call the product of those relations physical space. Social space and the human behavioral

⁵ Raffestin, “Space,” 123.

patterns that constitute it are bound up with physical space, since they both shape it and are shaped by it. In constructions or alterations of physical space by constructing a monument, defining a neighborhood as middle class, or working class, or staging a political rally in the central square of Mexico City, social space and physical space become entangled and mutually constitutive. Pierre Bourdieu speaks to this process when describing how social space is constructed in such a way that individuals (“agents” is the term used) with a similar amount of economic or cultural capital live in a similar way and develop similar tastes, interests, allegiances, and senses of identity, and he calls this similarity *habitus*.⁶ In Mexico, the *habitus* transcended social class, or was meant to, and was built in part around the idea that all Mexicans had a place in society, and that this society was identified by its geographic location.⁷ By interrogating space as a theoretical framework as well as a material reality, the likeness of which is reflected in literature or cinema, it becomes possible to address the simultaneity of human histories and to dig into, and ultimately under and out from, colonial and national teleology.

The term “Mexican national space” appears to have first been deployed by Claudio Lomnitz.⁸ Lomnitz grounds his understanding of Mexican national space in the idea of *habitus*, with his first observation being that social spaces are shaped by human behavior and practice. In turn, he surmises, human behavior is also influenced “by the spaces in which [it has] been socialized (the house, the street, the temple and so forth)” (18). In other words, something of a social-infrastructural cycle is in operation within the political borders of

⁶ Bourdieu, 18.

⁷ For more, see Palou, “Reading,” 71-73.

⁸ Lomnitz, *Exits*.

Mexico: human behaviors shape physical space, which in turn shapes human behavior.

Lomnitz expands further on this observation, noting that “because places are frames of social relations, they become imbued with the values of those relations” (18). Lomnitz also draws on Foucault, whose writing on built spaces like the panopticon resulted from an interest in thinking about how knowledge and power shape physical spaces and as consequence, behavior. The core of Lomnitz’ analysis of Mexican national space, then, is “the spatial arrangement of power relations and cultural and ideological production,” (19). His case studies emphasize spatial relations of power in distinct regions of historic economic and cultural importance in Mexico, such as the Huasteca. However, of interest to me is the way Lomnitz articulates the relationship between social behaviors and physical space because the implications of his argument are that in Mexico, behaviors—the privatization of land, the extraction of oil, water, or labor, and the categorization of humans based on race—ultimately influence the way physical space is augmented or altered. Moreover, while Lomnitz is interested in physical space on a macroscopic level: looking at various regions across the territory politically identified as Mexico through their social and economic history, he opens



Figure 0-2. "Nuevo mapa geográfico de la América Septentrional perteneciente al Virreynato de México." 1768. Serie Tamaulipas N°. 7/21. Mediateca INAH.

up a vein of possible conversation regarding the nature of Mexican national space on a more microscopic scale.

There is at least one wrinkle in theories of space—and of Mexican national space—which deserves consideration here, even if only in passing. Conceptualizing space as a human or anthropocentric construct neatly avoids the necessity of producing some ontology of environment or geography that is not anthropocentric. This is one of the enduring challenges posed to spatial and geocritical theory and is a challenge too vast to tackle in the context of this dissertation. Some scholars writing and theorizing from Indigenous traditions have productively critiqued space theory while centering less anthropocentric elements of Indigenous intellectual and oral tradition. For example, Mishuana Goeman (Towananda Band

of Seneca) centers her edited volume around literary strategies for veering away from a self-outside-territory perspective. She examines these spatial representations as a linguistic and aesthetic product made manifest in Native women's poetry, novel, and short story. Her book begins with a discussion of colonial spatial relations, the consequence of "European planetary conscience," a concept borrowed from theorist Mary Louise Pratt. Goeman considers the relationship between colonial spatial relations and literary, noting that some literary forms contest colonial political borders and settler-colonial maps. Goeman explains that colonial maps and political territories in the twenty-first century are:

the 'real' of settler colonial society...built on the violent erasures of alternative modes of mapping and geographic understandings. The Americas as a social, economic, political, and inherently spatial construction has a history and a relationship to people who have lived here long before Europeans arrived. It also has a history of colonization, imperialism, and nation-building. (2)

Goeman relates the spatial construction of the Americas to the colonial practice of re-naming. This observation recalls the writing of Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, who writes specifically of Mexican territory and discusses the colonial practice of "de-naming of spaces" that already had names ascribed to them by their Indigenous and Native inhabitants.⁹ Goeman's observation, like that of Bonfil Batalla, is a reminder of the relationship between space and power: Bonfil Batalla reminds us of how renaming happened regionally, and Goeman of how this happened hemispherically: Turtle Island—or Abya Yala (Yuna term for the land mass)—was renamed "the Americas," or as "Latin America" and regions were renamed as *virreinos* (Figure 0-2), and then later, republics. This re-naming or de-naming, Goeman argues, is a practice of enforcing colonial geographies and a means of managing populations and enforcing

⁹ See also Bonfil Batalla, 13-14.

hierarchies. Native people, she argues, are hyper spatialized: linked to a specific location as if there is only one place or space in which Native people may exist or thrive. This is a double bind, since as Goeman also points out (in reference to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori)), colonial geographies forcibly disconnect Native and Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories, languages, and social relations. The hyper spatialization and disconnection resulting from colonial geographies and of course from the creation of reservations tie Indigenous peoples to a specific piece of land or to a specific ontology of land, as well as an ontology of being. This disregards the fact that seasonal migration has historically been a reality for many Indigenous cultures from across the hemisphere and denies the fluidity of Indigenous social and physical spaces.

Goeman sees the potential for a critique—and even a deconstruction—of these relations through Native women’s literature. She looks to works by Joy Harjo (Mvskoke), E. Pauline Johnson (Mohawk), Esther Belin (Diné), and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), as texts that achieve two tasks: they eschew the aesthetic production of so-called ‘realist,’ epistemologically Occidental maps and they trace a decolonized space both social and telluric, with embodied, feminist, Native lyricism. Not only does Goeman explain how Harjo, Marmon Silko, and others achieve this effect, she also emulates their example by contributing autobiographical testimony about growing up on land in rural Maine purchased by her grandparents. Writes Goeman:

the spatialities I navigated through daily were complicated as well—the maps of my experience did not reflect those learned in grammar school or mediated through pop culture...our family’s mobility causes me not only to pause at the dichotomy of the urban/reservation Native, as we exist somewhere outside that paradigm, but also to question the very acceptance of colonial spatialities that, rather than reflect deeper

meanings of spatialities, look at distance and closeness in terms of dichotomous differences. (6-7)

Goeman acknowledges that her personal experience of space has been bound up with her being gendered and racialized as well as being defined by tribal identities, yet her experiences, synthesized in writing, trace an alternative map to the official maps that appeared in her school textbooks, ones that utterly fail to capture the complexity of her family's relations, location, and travels.

What Goeman urges for, through her own testimony and her analysis of other Native authors, is a move “toward spatialities of belonging that do-not bind, contain, or fix our relationship to land and each other in ways that limit our definitions of self and community” (11). In other words, feminist Native literature interrogates colonial or imperial spaces, asserting spatial sovereignty by emphasizing non-colonial relationships between land and community. Yet colonization shapes colonial subjects, including Native peoples, and urges literary or otherwise aesthetic representations to cleave to the idea of national space. To think beyond a settler heteropatriarchal mapping of space as Goeman does is to deconstruct the spatial ideologies of nation-states. Indeed, as Raffestin has reminded us, cartography has been one of the most politically impactful representations of space in the last three centuries: the medium gained popularity in the context of the European Renaissance and the early years of European colonization and was also instrumental in the formation of the modern State.¹⁰ Thinking with these theories can also help tease out contradictions potentially lurking within the films treated in this dissertation: might they in some ways reify the existence of Mexican

¹⁰ Raffestin, *Por una geografia*, 103.

national territory and in other ways disturb its habitual depictions? As Goeman shows, Native literature can map and convey a non-European or Occidental politics of place: if Native literature can be read towards a decolonial and perhaps non-anthropocentric spatial aesthetic, then film arguably can as well. Mapping affect onto literature or mapping oral histories onto alternative cartographies or literary anthologies are a few pathways for troubling colonial and anthropocentric teleologies of space. As I will argue in this dissertation, audiovisual media also has this potential.

Film theory has its own relationship to spatial and geocritical theory. Film scholars have developed vocabularies designed to discuss film in geographic, relational and spatial terms with respect to film. Lincoln Johnson, for one, deploys the term “cinematic space” to refer to the composition of technical elements ranging from framing to angle, depth, width, to the arrangement of objects within the frame, to camera movement, and object or subject movement. Johnson also labels the space of the screen, the visual, two-dimensional plane contained by the frame, and calls it the “filmic space.”¹¹ Graham Cairns, in turn, attempts to distinguish between the space in which the camera and crew intervene in the pro-filmic moment and the way space is perceived within the context of the actual filmed sequences— analogous to what Johnson would call the filmic space. In other words, for Cairns, “physical space” is equivalent to the physical environment, real places or sets constructed by or within studios, and “cinematographic space” the spatial perception by the spectator of those places filmed. Lastly, Martin Lefebvre breaks down the spaces depicted within a film into categories: there are settings, landscapes, or territories, or a combination of those.

¹¹ Johnson, 26.



All of the aforementioned theories serve the analytical framework of this dissertation

Figure 0-3. Photograph. "Recuerdos del Zócalo a la 1 de la tarde - Octubre 23, 1925." Guillermo Kahlo. Mexico City. Mediateca INAH.

in some way. Nonetheless, Lefebvre's cultural-materialist approach to space in film is the most compelling for me because it acknowledges the degree to which ideology is intertwined with filming technique (cinematic space, according to Johnson), sets or filming sites (physical space, according to Cairns) and the way space is depicted and perceived within the film (cinematographic space, according to Cairns). Taking film space theories and geocritical theories of space into account, I propose writing about cinematographic space in this dissertation as the intersection of material surroundings with human social interactions, either

improvised or scripted, which is recorded onto a film reel or digitally to a memory drive. Within this broader definition, there are a number of existing observations and terms related to cinematic space that are useful in parsing out what cinematic space looks like, and how it functions on technical and narrative levels.

Regarding the relationship between space, film, and ideology, Walter Benjamin observes that when the movie camera enters a given space in which humans live, it shows us taverns, streets, and factories in ways that change how we normally view them, by employing angled shots, slow motion shots, traveling shots, or crane shots taken from unlikely angles (Figure 0-3). This altered way of seeing, Benjamin contends, helps spectators consciously observe—and even question—that which was previously unnoticed—a concept that Benjamin calls the “optical unconscious.” Film bursts open our otherwise locked-in ways of viewing spaces.¹² Similarly, I will argue in subsequent chapters, films like *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio* and



Figure 0-4. Medium Close-Up. A Woman Weaves at a Loom in her Home. *Ayautla* (José Roviroso, 1972).

¹² Elsaesser et al., 85.

Cascabel may alter—or manipulate—cinematographic spaces in ways that—intentionally or not—alert spectators to the plants, scenery, or even bodies within the frame to which they might not have otherwise attended.

There are a number of concepts encompassed by cinematographic space that also help me ground the film analysis in this dissertation. Setting, according to Lefebvre, is one of several types of film space, and operates in the service of the plot or arching narrative.¹³ Settings featuring skyscrapers, department stores, churches, or condominiums could fall under this category. A particular backdrop can do more than convey the movement of characters from one location to another: it helps affix the plot to a geographic, economic, or social context (Figure 0-4). But what about cinematographic spaces from which buildings are absent? Lefebvre contends that film landscape can be external to the spectator and artist: a kind of space in which neither spectators nor artists are entangled its politics, economics, or even its society. Film landscape, Lefebvre explains, can be “autonomous landscape,” that is, “space freed from eventhood” (22), by which he means space freed from the plot of a film. Autonomous landscapes are the parts of a film we might call art for art’s sake, and they are those shots unrelated to human activity and interactions and all that those relations and interactions imply.¹⁴ Yet it is debatable whether any physical space describable as landscape can escape the reaches of human-meaning-making processes, history, and ideology. Harper et al. use the term “film landscape” to refer to all cinematographic space and explain that the film

¹³ Lefebvre, *Landscape*, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 22.

landscape “a colloquial description of the world or vistas around us personally, to specialist descriptions of topography, land use, industry, design and control, and even of cultural condition and understanding” (Harper et al., 2). I argue that film landscape also fits within the broader category of cinematographic space, covers all sorts of terrain, like the archeological site near Lacanjá in *Cascabel*. Furthermore, cinematographic space can be regional or universal. It can encompass economies, politics, societies, and environments and is almost always semiotically tied to physical and social space. For example, the cinematic space of *Ayautla* is its namesake, Ayautla, and the film, shot within the town of Ayautla, is the referent for the physical (non-celluloid) space, comprised of human interactions, material exchanges, hills, rivers, homes, and plants and livestock.

What are the benefits—and potentials—of film representing spaces in ways that interrupt or awaken our optical unconscious? As will be argued in this dissertation, the representation through camera angles, fixed frames, deep shots, and subjective shots of different regions in Mexico, namely of the Mazatec Mountains, of the Mezquital Valley, and of the Lacandon Forest, invite spectators to question how Indigenous hamlets, Mexico City’s universities and slums, power plants, are the spatial consequence of colonialism, land privatization, agrarian reform, and indigenismo.¹⁵ I would also extend Benjamin’s observation to add that film can awaken our optical unconscious about the relationship between humans and the ecosystems in which they live: the rivers and mountains that are not simply backdrops to human activity and architecture but rather the inspiration for and sustenance of it.

¹⁵ In future research, I will be discussing the relationship of film to its spectators and to Mexican national habitus by drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the space of spectatorship.

I am not the first to apply geocritical or spatial theory to Mexican cinema: indeed, Andrea Noble demonstrates that the analysis of space in Mexican cinema is a fruitful way of parsing out gender and class discourse. Writing of *Una familia de tantas* (Alejandro Galindo, 1948), she notes that much is revealed in the activities associated with the rooms in which scenes are shot, as well as the exclusion or absence of certain characters from certain spaces.¹⁶ In Mexican as well as Hollywood film, cosmopolitan space is constructed through settings such as middle class or luxury homes, upscale music bars and *antros*, even *cabarets*. Since the films in question within this dissertation span the 1970s, we might consider films such as *Los caifanes* (Juan Ibáñez, 1967), *Cinco de chocolate y una de fresa* (Carlos Velo, 1968), *Canoa, una memoria vergonzosa* (Felipe Cazals, 1976), and *El lugar sin límites* (Arturo Ripstein, 1978), amongst the many that dig into the class-distinctions of space in Mexico up to and during the decade, specifically relating to city life, rural life, domestic spaces and the distinction between private and public space. However astute these films are in palpating the constructions of exploitative, elite, or socio-economically segregated space within Mexico, they do not articulate a contestation to the idea of Mexican space as such, nor do they address the way Mexican space is inevitably also marked and divided based on racial discourse. The films addressed in this dissertation are examined together as a means of understanding how Mexican films might have been shot in locations allowing them to contest or critique the limits of middle class or urban working-class life as a national standard, as well as the very notion of national space and the way economic and cultural exploitation are inevitably bound up in racial discourse. Films like *Los caifanes* and *El lugar sin límites*,

¹⁶ Noble, 105.

alongside Ismael Rodríguez' Lagunilla films (*Ustedes los ricos* and *Nosotros los pobres*, 1948) and *Amores perros* (Alejandro González Iñárratu, 2000), lightly sidestep any possible spaces that would address agricultural spaces, infrastructure projects, or racialization but do gesture to the class-segregation of space, particularly in the metropolis.¹⁷

0.1.2 The Idea of Territory

Up to now I have discussed components of geocritical theory pertaining to space, but this is only part of such theory. Another part is territory, and this component of geocritical theory is especially pertinent to addressing epistemologies of Mexican territory. Mexican territory is legally defined as the geographic location of the Nation-state, but it also constitutes a series of spheres of influence that contain the web of relations between all entities inhabiting that defined region of land. Mexican territory, like all territories, is the product of human relationships and relationships between humans and land, and has been architecturally and artistically produced and reproduced, revised, and contested over time. Where territory differs epistemologically from space according to this dissertation, is that an epistemology of territory cannot exist without an epistemology of space. For example, an epistemology of Mexican territory cannot exist without an epistemology of cartographies, or mapped geographies.

For Raffestin, territory is a construction of human activity: "the lived side of the acting side of power" (translated by Klauser, 13). Power, in turn, is the capacity to transform physical and social space. Raffestin's theory is anthropocentric but suits the needs of an

¹⁷ Charles Ramírez Berg points to the Lagunilla films as particularly apt examples of how mainstream Mexican cinema purveyed a discourse situating the urban poor as noble and more authentically Mexican. It is worth considering too, how urban poverty is aesthetically coupled with racialization in these and other films.

analysis aimed at the anthropocentric concept of Mexican territory. Raffestin's theory is also useful because it establishes the link between power and space: the production of territory is a consequence of power. Power, in turn, is generated and harnessed with labor, which allows for accumulation and for the transformation and conservation of ecosystems. Raffestin's theory makes it possible for us to imagine Mexican territory precisely as a production—ongoing and occurring in multiple spaces simultaneously—in which labor and human behavior are both helping generate and shape power, as well as the territory itself. By thinking of cinematographic spaces in relation to the epistemology of territory, we may compare how film interrupts the optical unconscious surrounding space, and how film may disrupt spectator perception Mexican territory with its social relations, labor practices, and power relations.

I have not simply plucked the term “Mexican territory” out of the air: my interest in examining Mexican territory as a referent for power, its production and its deployment in a particular space is rooted in institutional uses of the term, which is found in Mexico's constitution, defining Mexican national territory in explicitly material and economic terms. Article 27 states, “La propiedad de las tierras y aguas comprendidas de los límites del territorio nacional, corresponde originalmente a la Nación, la cual ha tenido y tiene el derecho de transmitir el dominio de ellas a los particulares, constituyendo la propiedad privada.” Without delving too deeply into legal analysis, what I am interested in emphasizing here is that the constitution describes national territory as water and land—both property—belonging to the Nation, which is none other than the Mexican political body, or its citizens, institutions, and the laws governing them. This article links the concept of Mexican territory

with the right to privately own land and to consume from that land. Furthering this claim is the part of the Article that reads, “Corresponde a la Nación el dominio directo de todos los recursos naturales de la Plataforma continental y los zócalos submarinos de las islas; de todos los mineras o substancias que en vetas, mantos, masas o yacimientos constituyan depósitos cuya naturaleza sea distinta de los componentes de los terrenos.” The territory for which the Nation is private property is fragmented into consumable materials by the constitution’s language, which considers the Nation not as existing in a continuum with the environment and the land but rather in a hierarchical and hegemonic relationship to the land, which is described as water, islands, minerals, natural resources, and numerous other substances available for consumption. Article 27 presents the idea of Mexican territory as the fragmentation of space, dividing the environment into parts and separating humans from it, and encouraging the fragmentation and extraction of the environment itself.

This dissertation is in partial dialogue with Lomnitz’ theory of Mexican national space, but is interested in examining human interactions, environment, and power arrangements together within film, and thus draws heavily on institutional and political uses of the term “Mexican national territory.” As such, this dissertation will use Mexican territory as its referent rather than Mexican national space. Mexican territory, as it is understood within this dissertation, is the consequence of colonization and subsequent nationalization, a process that—as evinced by the Mexican constitution—divided up land into consumable, arable, ownable material goods, disciplined and controlled bodies both human and non-human across physical space, and shaped the behavior patterns in which humans interact with one another and with every other aspect of their environment. Bonfil Batalla affirms this posture in noting

that in Mexico, “physical space has been fragmented as a consequence of expropriation of Indian lands, policies of dividing the land for administrative purposes, the establishment of non-Indian cities and enterprises, networks of roads, and the construction of public projects” (25). When writing of Mexico and Mexican territory in this dissertation, then, I am understanding it as being a physical space: a specific, geographic space bounded by borders and ocean. It is sovereign insofar as its government has established what Lund calls “institutions of sovereignty” and that I understand as Ideological State Apparatuses operating to sustain the social contract and the myth of national identity, all of which act within this bounded physical space and in accordance with a set of ideologies to build hydroelectric dams, roads, schools, or oil drilling sites—actions with consequences for physical beings and environments.¹⁸ Likewise, these institutions have the power to decide how to allocate land, where and when to construct of public projects, when and how to expropriate or give land to racialized Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous ones alike. In this interactions we can find the actuality of the relationships between the State, territory, and power. The creation of Latin America as a territory was carried out through capitalist territorial appropriation and expansion beginning with Columbus’ travels at the end of the fifteenth century. Territorial expansion during colonization entailed the violent expropriation and exploitation of natural and cultural riches based on principles of wealth and power acquisition. Formulating and adapting a teleology of race was part of this process, because it allowed the colonizers to locate themselves outside ontologically in opposition to the land, while suggesting that racialized

¹⁸ For more on the relationship between territory and sovereignty, see Jean Gottman (1971). For more on the way social space and power relations relate to space, see Lefebvre, *Landscape*.

Indigenous peoples were not separate from land and thus were controllable. This justified the land's expropriation and the subsequent economic and social hierarchy that emerged in the colonial realm of New Spain.

Because this dissertation centers Indigenous territories in relation to Mexican territory, it is fundamental to draw on a corpus of space, territory and territoriality that troubles the very Cartesian problematic that frequently lies at the core of European geocritical theory. What so many of the aforementioned scholars' theories of space share is their reliance on Cartesian logic. For example, Saquet writes "el hombre es naturaleza con consciencia, poder de creación e invención" (20), a very explicit reference to the concept that humans are distinct from the rest of nature because of their minds—and their consciousness. Similarly, Raffestin asks: "is the history of our relations to nature anything other than the chronicle of an exile, that from 'given' nature, which constrains us to continually imagine 'produced' natures?" (translated in Klauser, 132). The aforementioned theories of territory and of space, as well as their rootedness in Cartesian dualism are important to this chapter, because they provide a language to precisely articulate the capitalist logics of space, anthropocentrism, and habitus, all of which apply directly to an understanding of Mexican territory. Yet, with the exception of Massey, the aforementioned theorists do not address at the teleologies of space, territory, and even landscape as mechanisms for obtaining or sustaining hegemony or power. Territory is a physical space in which the materiality of politics and power are made manifest, an object of symbolic operations as well as a sort of screen on to which people or institutions project their concepts of the world. Art such as landscape paintings, photographic portraits, and cinema are all iterations of this projection.

It is necessary to recognize the ways teleologies of space, territory, and landscape have served coloniality, and to ponder how we might trouble or break open those teleologies to understand their roots, while posing other ontologies of space, territory, and landscape undermining the logic of colonial space. Films, while unable to directly act upon territory and space, can use visual representation to denaturalize (or naturalize) spatial manifestations of epistemologies of Mexican territory.¹⁹ Likewise, film may depict space in ways that allows spectators to see Mexican territory as the consequence of history, of epistemologies of space and identity, and of course, of power arrangements. Moreover, film may invite spectators to see Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous territories beyond, or in opposition to, an optical unconscious heavily influenced by a capitalist, racialized habitus. The assertion of this chapter is that film is uniquely positioned to confront teleologies of space and of national territory, although concepts of territory that break open or push past colonial spatial logics can come from numerous forms of human expression: essay, poetry, linguistics, and human observations about land and the environment can also help us rethink national territory.

¹⁹ Though Bonfil Batalla does not use Bourdieu's term, he references something similar when he writes of social organization. See pp. 20-21.



Figure 0-5. Fixed-Frame Shot of an EthnoAgrarian Map. *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976).

0.1.2.1 *Language as Territory*

Territory, as we will have it understood in the context of this dissertation, is material and immaterial: it is the interaction between human concepts of space and the human behaviors that mark, name and engage with that space. The arrangements of power within a given space are, likewise, an element of territory. While the concept of territory as human-land interactions is of paramount importance for identifying and analyzing the material components that comprise and sustain territory, we would be remiss to ignore one of the principal means by which the very notion of territory is transmitted socially. That is, through language. Indeed, as we will see in this chapter, territory may be articulated through any number of aesthetic media, yet all of these hold some relationship, if not some debt, to

language itself. Moreover, in a Mexican territorial context, the articulation of this territory is inextricable from language hegemony, and the territoriality of the Spanish language itself.

Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil (Mixe) gestures to the importance of language in relation to epistemologies, rituals, and culture, all of which have consequences for physical and social space. She also emphasizes the pivotal role of language itself in naming space and shaping territory. When Aguilar Gil discusses the term “linguistic territory,” she specifies that this territory is the space in which a particular language or variant of that language is spoken, and theorizes that linguistic territory is also a cognitive territory—a terrain that is shaped by verbal communication and that contains a particular way of thinking and of perceiving interpersonal and inter-material relations.²⁰ The implications of the relationship between Indigenous languages and cognitive territory for education policy are clear: imposed monolingualism in Spanish, which has been the norm in the public education system supervised by the Mexican State, disturbs networks of practices and relations that comprise Indigenous territory and community, while whittling down the unique cognitive territory of the language in question.

Aguilar Gil conceives of territory as not merely physical, terrestrial space, but rather the “el producto de la relación entre el ser humano” and with physical land. Territory, she also adds, is a conglomerate of “las relaciones mediadas por ideas, rituales y cultura” within that physical space.²¹ Her theory of territory helps us consider Indigenous spaces (e.g. agricultural, educational) as well as non-Indigenous spaces from an environmental as well as

²⁰ Aguilar Gil, “La defensa.”

²¹ *Ibid.*

social perspective. Aguilar Gil also points out that “no hay fronteras internas ni externas que hayan respetado los límites de los pueblos y de las lenguas” (94). Her observation elucidates the way national politics and the establishment of national and regional territories in Mexico have systematically divided linguistically and culturally linked Indigenous communities (Figure 0-5). Aguilar Gil invites us to imagine another reality, musing “¿Qué hubiera sucedido si todas las lenguas mixtecas y el pueblo mixteco conformaran por sí mismo un solo territorio o estado?” (Áa, 95). This rhetorical question invites us to imagine a parallel reality in which Indigenous communities’ territories are respected and in which Indigenous societies can build political coalitions built on shared language and customs. Raffestin’s theory of territoriality, which fits within his larger corpus of work moving away from a study of physical space to a study of human power relations within a given space, gives credence to the notion that language is fundamentally important. He asserts that “Le paradigme de la territorialite renverse l'ordre habituel de la geographie puisque le point de depart n'est pas l'espace mais les instruments et les codes des acteurs qui ont laisse des traces et des indices dans le territoire” (“Territorialité,” 94).²² One of the principal mechanisms through which power is distributed in social space, he argues, is language, which is one of the principal tools for organizing people within space.²³ Raffestin’s theories and Aguilar Gil’s have many applications in the study of Mexican territory, because allow us to conceive of the implications of imposing the exclusive use of Spanish in schools, in local government offices, and in film.

²² Klauser translates this to “[territoriality] reverses the usual geographical approach. Its starting point lies not anymore in the analysis of space but in social actors’ instruments and codes which are leaving marks and indications in territory” (114).

²³ For further analysis of Raffestin’s theory, see Klauser.



Figure 0-6. Tizoc and María. *Tizoc: amor indio* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1957).

The relationship between linguistic territory and aesthetic productions within Mexico is self-evident in the dominance of the Spanish language in Mexican cinema as well as the use of accents and particular words in Spanish as markers of socio-economic status. If the protagonists Tizoc (Pedro Infante) of *Tizoc: amor indio* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1957) (Figure 0-6) or Chankin (Ernesto Gómez Cruz) in *Cascabel* speak broken Spanish, it is to emphasize that each belongs to a non-mestizo racial category and simultaneously to reinforce the idea that Indigenous racial identity is rooted in being functionally monolingual with only some proficiency in Spanish. In this same train of thought, Dolores Tierney, writing of *María Candelaria* (Emilio Fernández, 1944), notes that the protagonist does not speak Nahuatl—the Indigenous language spoken in Xochimilco, the setting for the film—but instead speaks “a kind of pidgin Spanish that is neither the anti-bourgeois linguistic play of *Cantinflas*...nor indeed a respectful depiction of the way indigenous people speak” (84). Dolores del Río’s

feigned broken Spanish is not unique among Mexican cinema, as the previously indicated examples illustrate. The racialized accents deployed in films like *Tizoc: Amor Indio* for the title character Tizoc played by Pedro Infante, the *Raíces* (1954, Benito Alazraki) characters, or *Cascabel* character Chankin are all quite similar even though there is no reason why Indigenous characters would have a similar accent in Spanish, just as there is no reason why speakers of three different European languages would have the same accent when speaking Spanish. As Aguilar Gil points out, the implications of a film like *Tizoc* have been that, “Hay gente que cree que cuando los indígenas aprendemos español todos tenemos el acento de Tizoc” (Ää, 91). The relative homogeneity of these accents is a cinematic interpretation of an invented kind of Indigenous speech pattern, based on the idea of racialized Indigenous people as uniformly inept at speaking Spanish. It is no coincidence that well beyond the Golden Age of Mexican cinema characters racialized as criollo or light-skinned mestizo either speak working class slang or standard, educated Spanish, while characters racialized as Indigenous may speak Spanish exclusively but with numerous errors and with their speech patterns serving as a source of comic relief for the plot.

As one more salient example of this homogenous linguistic treatment within Mexican cinema of the racialized Indigenous character, I look to María Elena Velasco’s *la India María*. This character, featured in over eighteen films as the lead role, embodies an amalgam of stereotypes, ranging from her manners of speech and dress to her fondness for her donkey.²⁴ Like *La India María*’s manner of dress and the braids in her hair, the comedic character’s manner of speech is also meant to mark her racially for non-Indigenous Mexican

²⁴ See also García Riera, 314.

audiences. Ariel Zatarraín Tumbaga notes that the implications of an exaggerated accent and speech patterns go far beyond reinforcing the stereotype that Indigenous people speak Spanish poorly: he addresses the fact that the character's speech patterns, laden with errors but delivered with total confidence by the clueless yet cunning María imply that the character is proudly uneducated. Linguistic conventions standardized in Golden Age Mexican films like *María Candelaria* and *Tizoc: amor indio* endured from the 1930s well into the 1970s, meaning that Mexican movie-goers were repeatedly confronted with the depiction of characters racialized and stereotyped in a way that turned them into minstrels, not unlike the stereotyped racialized characters in twentieth century Hollywood cinema.

The use of morphological phrases as a means of signaling race, class, or both, is key to understanding Mexican cinema franchises *La India María* as well as other classic films like *Tizoc*. In the United States, discussion on the education for heritage speakers and native speakers of Spanish led Kim Potowski to address the distinction between a “norma culta” in Spanish and a “norma popular,” where “se entiende normal culta como la lengua formal de un país...no aparece de forma natural durante la adquisición del idioma natal; se tiene que estudiar en un context formal, como en la escuela” (37). This point is important: film protagonists who eschew archaisms like “haiga,” “naiden,” or “ansina” assert membership within a specific, socioeconomic sector of Mexican state subjects with access to a formal education. It is virtually impossible to ignore instances of juxtaposed prestige and discriminated language patterns in Mexican cinema, since the use of these language patterns is integral to character formation in films like those I have mentioned here. This juxtaposition of speech patterns takes on weight when it is layered with a racialized visual field. By

marking protagonists such as Tizoc, la India María, or Chankin as Indigenous principally through their use of vernacular forms of speech, these films double down on spectators' expectations about how a person racialized as Indigenous might talk. In other words, those who do not obey proper morphosyntax in their speech are uneducated, are second language learners of Spanish, and may justifiably be marketed as not only a linguistic but also an economic and even a racialized Other. It is impossible to ignore the tendency for Mexican theatrical and non-theatrical films to juxtapose or exaggerate vernacular morphological practices with ones associated with high socioeconomic status.

As Aguilar Gil implies in her discussion of the relationship between Indigenous language and territory, linguistic territory—dominated by the Spanish language—has been fundamental to the articulation and assertion of Mexican territory. We may look to activities of the Mexican government and in particular, to its indigenista branches, to understand how Indigenous languages and Spanish language literacy were taught during the twentieth century in rural, Indigenous communities and to understand the extent to which Indigenous linguistic territories were intentionally or unintentionally affected by federal education policy. The Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) and the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) were instrumental in this project. The former, for example, established bilingual mother tongue-Spanish schooling in Indigenous communities in which Indigenous languages were the lingua franca. Still, As Stephen Lewis points out, Indigenous languages were deployed in these programs only as far as they were perceived useful to further Mexican institutional ends and to enabling Spanish language proficiency:

The INI in Chiapas would draw liberally from the SEPs most forward-thinking programs and add two important innovations—indigenous *promotores culturales* and

an “indirect” (i.e., bilingual) method of teaching Spanish literacy...Maurice Swadesh’s Tarasco Project (1939–1941) demonstrated that indigenous adults and children could learn to read and write in their native tongue in thirty to forty-five days. Literacy in Spanish could then be introduced efficiently and successfully. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán drew liberally from the Tarasco Project experience when he opened the CCI in 1951. Indigenous cultural promoters and the “indirect” method of language instruction would become the linchpins of the INI’s entire development strategy. (42)

The aims of this project were to teach Indigenous adults and children to read and write in their own language (after developing or standardizing a writing system for the language, obviously) not as an end in itself but rather as a means to then teach these same students Spanish, which would enable them to integrate more fully into mainstream Mexican society, economy, and civil life. The issue in itself was not bilingualism, but rather the fact that education programs in Indigenous languages were not actually the priority. The INI’s policy of teaching Indigenous languages was instead seen as a means to an end rather than an end in itself, even though some functionaries vehemently disagreed with the idea that the end goal ought to be Spanish-language proficiency (such as Julio de la Fuente). De la Fuente, for example, believed the end goal should be literacy in both the students’ mother tongues and in Spanish. With the INI’s decline in the mid-1960s, the SEP took over education campaigns in Indigenous communities, and promptly did away with the indirect method, turning instead to Spanish language immersion: teaching Indigenous languages was simply not a priority.

The implementation of language education, specifically, and of national history, broadly, as a means of assimilating Indigenous communities into the national social body is vividly reflected in Mexican fictional and documentary cinema. Returning to the Golden Age film *Río Escondido*, written by indigenista author Mauricio Magdaleno, it is significant to note that María Félix’ young schoolteacher character is portrayed as a national heroine whose

desire to educate the impoverished Indigenous (but Spanish speaking) schoolchildren was thwarted by a local cacique and her own health struggles. This film positions education as the enemy of the local, villainous oligarchs, and the state as the heroic purveyor of education. By coupling the idea of education and speaking Spanish (not to mention the fact of María Félix' light-skinned looks) with the concepts of goodness, national progress, and social unity, films like *Río Escondido* implied that rural, Indigenous communities needed an exemplary Mexican woman like María Felix to teach them how to be a part of the Mexican social family. The underlying assumption of this film was that, by speaking proper Spanish and learning occidental narratives about history, family, and material culture, integration could be achieved. Moreover, by excluding Indigenous languages from mainstream dramatic cinema, films could insidiously ensure that there would be no opportunity for audience members to confront the culturally specific ways of understanding family, self, history, and even land that are rooted in Indigenous languages. As Ingrid Hummels points out, it was not until the *video indígena* movement in the 1990s that the amount of non-fiction film and fiction film in Indigenous languages burgeoned in Mexico.

The phenomenon of implementing institutions of sovereignty was broad-based in Mexico, but the exclusive use of Indigenous-language pedagogy within INI programs reflected a consensus within the Mexican government and among Mexican elite that Indigenous languages were only worth learning or incorporating into national institutions insofar as they would afford material control over Indigenous goods, labor, and lands—that is, insofar as they would reinforce the hegemony of the government and, by extension, of Mexican territory. Even the INI, considered radical in its employment of Indigenous

collaborators who could serve as translators to communicate INI messages to Indigenous communities in their own languages, used Indigenous languages mostly to sustain their vertical power relationship with Indigenous communities.

The consequences of linguistic territory become clear in films with characters such as *Tizoc*, *Chankin*, or *La India María*, where the characters are presumably outsiders to Spanish linguistic territory and therefore speak pidgin Spanish. Still, the impact of perceived linguistic territories—imagined or real—is found beyond the realm of theatrical cinema. For example, in *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital*, Hñáhñú families in the Mezquital Valley are interviewed on camera. Some of the characters fidget as they speak, their gaze often darting away from the camera. Rather than render their accented Spanish with its occasional grammatical errors a comic act, the limits of linguistic territory, or indeed, the imposition of Mexican linguistic territory, is painful. During one sequence in which an Otomí woman, sitting facing the camera, is asked about her education (in Spanish). She replies in her limited Spanish that she has received none, her voice breaking: the woman before the camera appears deeply embarrassed, either because she is being interviewed in her second language and cannot speak freely or because she feels judged for her lack of Spanish-language education, or perhaps both. Regardless of the reasons for the woman's discomfort, this interview situates *Etnocidio* within a broader trend of Mexico-made film imposing Spanish linguistic territory and use of the Spanish language upon film subjects whose discomfort with Spanish is evident. On the other hand, scenes like these offer an aesthetic opportunity to confront the limits of linguistic territory and to recognize the coincidence of this immaterial

boundary with the limits of government campaigns to teach communities in Indigenous linguistic territories to speak, write and read in Spanish.

Louise Spence and Robert Stam make the claim that within commercial, or state-funded cinema, language is racialized, something I have already substantiated in my discussion of Golden Age Cinema, yet it is also racialized in more recent films, like *Cascabel*, in which the Lacandon protagonists speak comical pidgin Spanish. The culturally specific languages of colonized and racialized people are, until today, consciously, and subconsciously censored, evinced in the emergence of films in Nahuatl, Maya Yucatec, and other Indigenous languages, which have really only emerged in the last three decades.²⁵ Spence and Stam note: “The absence of the language of the colonised is also symptomatic of colonialist attitudes. The languages spoken by Third World peoples are often reduced to an incomprehensible jumble of background murmurs, while major 'native' characters are consistently obliged to meet the coloniser on the coloniser's linguistic turf (here westerns, with their Indian-pidgin English, again provide the paradigm)” (6). Of course, Stam and Spence’s observation plays out differently in the context of twentieth century Mexican National racial identity, in which mestizaje, rather than whiteness, is centered. On the one hand, the absence of the colonized language is, in the context of Mexican film, a way of gesturing to the uniform linguistic affiliations of mestizo national identity. On the other hand, in having characters racialized as Indigenous speak in broken Spanish, films convey the idea that these characters are childlike, unintelligent, or that their efforts to communicate are

²⁵ This is another subject I will address in a future publication regarding theatrical films made since the 1980s, including *Santo Luzbel* (Miguel Sabido, 1996) and *El ombligo de Guie'dani/Xquipi Guie'dani* (Xavi Sala, 2018).

merely comical, rather than indicative of the hardships of navigating a colonial space dominated by a colonial language.

Linguistic territory, which may be represented in cinema, is also adapted to literatures. The re-emergence of literatures in Indigenous languages ranging from Nahuatl of the Mountains of Guerrero to Zapotec variants from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to rap in Tutunacu speaks to the artistic re-assertion of Indigenous linguistic territories taking place in Mesoamerica. Though the subject is too vast to discuss within the scope of this dissertation, it must be acknowledged that literatures, as well as hip-hop music and even filmmaking, are on the vanguard of aesthetic creation emerging from Indigenous linguistic territories across the Americas. These forms of aesthetic production, centering and creating with Indigenous languages are re-asserting the existence of Indigenous territories—linguistic, geographic, and social—to audiences who may not be connected to a particular linguistic territory because of migration, a lack of familiarity with Indigenous languages, or cultural differences. The assertions of linguistic territory via Indigenous cultural productions are gaining the attention of scholars and activists alike and will likely flourish—to great effect—in decades to come.

0.2 Indigeneity, National Myth, and the Matter of Space

Over seventy years ago and in the context of his own critiques of the Mexican government which had landed him in prison, José Revueltas was thinking about the racial teleology of land control in colonial New Spain. Under the Spanish crown, the racial category of ‘indio’ was used to legally strip Indigenous peoples of their land rights. Wrote Revueltas: "upon being despoiled and proletarianized by the Conquest, the indigenous peoples constituted in fact a more or less homogenous social class, one that shared the same economic interests"

(222). While this generalization had exceptions, Revueltas' historical perspective on the deployment of racial ideology in institutional measures gestured to a deeper truth: that racialization has been a tool for economic control over sectors of the Mexican population since colonial times. Étienne Balibar reminds us as much when he notes that racialization is a “historical system of complementary exclusions and dominations, which are mutually interconnected” (49). Racialization in a New Spanish context—and later in Mexican one—has constituted an elliptical practice ensuring the systemic and cyclical poverty of racialized Indigenous peoples generation after generation, constituting the homogenous impoverished social and economic class to which Revueltas refers. By denying Indigenous peoples land ownership, the Spanish Crown (and later the Mexican State) secured the sovereignty to extract land for resources such as coal, silver, copper, water, grazing space, and large-scale agricultural and energy projects. This observation cannot be made without acknowledging that land extraction is not inherently part of the nation-State project, but rather is a capitalist one. Under capitalism, a state's relationship to territory is predicated on the conversion of space into commodity.²⁶ Historically humans have not been exempted from the commodification of space: they too have been transformed into commodity through a process of racialization so that such bodies can be exploited and can be agents of the exploitation of land and natural resources.

Discourses linking the Mexican national identity project, territory, and economic development are discernable within the foundational texts of various twentieth century intellectuals. For example, Moisés Sáenz—one of the masterminds of indigenismo in

²⁶ Aguilar Gil, “La defensa.”

Mexico—proposed intervening in Indigenous communities because he believed this was key to national legal sovereignty over Mexican territory. Obtaining national legal sovereignty, in turn, would be an antidote to international industrial intervention in Mexican Space: if the Mexican government did not get there first, multinational corporations would take control over entire regions and the people living in them. Sáenz saw sovereignty as means for Mexico to gain full access to “sus recursos, tanto físicos como humanos, según les conviniera,” (82). Gaining this access, however, could not happen until the Mexican government was fully sovereign over Mexican territory: to truly gain sovereignty, Sáenz believed, Mexico needed national social cohesion. Social cohesion was lacking, Sáenz argued, because Mexican territory was racially segregated: he saw that Indigenous peoples lived primarily in rural areas, so proposed the creation of *escuelas rurales* which would not only teach students to speak, read and write Spanish, but would become “el centro social de la comunidad indígena, e incluiría a niños y adultos en una amplia variedad de actividades” (Britton, 82). These proposed interventions would allow the government to enter rural, racialized communities, and to cultivate national identity amongst residents, as well as willingness to allow the government to conduct other kinds of activity within the community. Yet as we see in films like *Ayautla*, *Cascabel*, and *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital*, government education programs, economic programs or agricultural development programs were insufficient, by error or by design, to address the underlying causes which placed Mazatec, Lacandón, or Otomí communities on the margins of national culture, economics, and politics.

In 1936, President Lázaro Cárdenas created the Autonomous Department of Indian Affairs (its acronym in Spanish was DAI), which would organize and host the 1940 Pátzcuaro Indigenista conference in Michoacán, Mexico, the first international indigenista conference ever.²⁷ Cárdenas mandated the creation of this organization so that material assistance and federal policy might be more effectively leveraged in bringing the Indigenous populations into the national fold.²⁸ Not a decade later, the INI was established as a replacement to the defunct DAI. The INI implemented several programs under the auspices of its director, archaeologist Alfonso Caso. Caso's vision for the INI could not have been more blatantly shaped by an understanding of race:

Our obligation is to make these millions of indigenous Mexicans *feel* like Mexicans; *to integrate them* by improving their economy, their health, and their education... We need to bring to them everything that they have lacked during centuries so that they feel like...members of a nation, of Mexico. The flag should symbolize not only political unity, but also the purpose of achieving the *social and cultural unity* of all Mexicans.²⁹

²⁷ For more on the Pátzcuaro conference and its historic significance, see Comas, 61.

²⁸ Lewis, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7. Emphasis added.



Figure 0-7. Photograph. "Granja de promoción avícola, INI." Nacho López, 1974-1975. Mediateca INAH.

Caso's statement indicates his understanding that the racialization—and self-identification—of people as Indigenous first and Mexican second, rather than Mexican first, was an impediment to participation in Mexican society.

The first half of the twentieth century saw the formation of various government branches and institutions which upheld the idea of a single, unified Mexican people, centered upon the working class, as well as the idea of race and the racialization of parts of Mexico's population. The SEP, under José Vasconcelos and later Moisés Sáenz, was the *de facto* post-Revolutionary government organization which created policy affecting and directed at Indigenous people in Mexico. Other state institutions tied to the national identity and indigenismo projects included the DAI and the INI, and later, the kinds of institutions—cultural apparatuses—which supported and promoted cinematic projects which aligned with

the politics and narratives coming from other government institutions.³⁰ In particular, I call to mind the now defunct Consejo Nacional de Arte Cinematográfico, or the Dirección de Cinematografía. The INI's programs spanned audiovisual productions, agricultural education programs (Figure 0-7), and everything in between. The INI also ran programs such as consumer cooperatives, designed to “defend” Indigenous communities from the repercussions of contact with the local capitalist economy while also creating new needs, promoting the “right” kinds of products, and facilitating the community's socioeconomic development.³¹ Not mincing words, historian Alexander Dawson has suggested that the INI did “little more than promote clinics, schools, the popular arts, and social welfare” (*Indian*, 142). Yet this observation suggests that even if the INI did not go far enough to addressing and fighting the root causes of Indigenous disenfranchisement, poverty, and mortality rates, it was highly active in terms of intervening in Indigenous communities or spaces (territorial and social).

Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán was another architect of indigenista government policy in Mexico whose research and activity sheds light on the kinds of concerns and ideas at the center of indigenismo. A doctor by trade and an anthropologist by practice, Aguirre Beltrán's research concerned the cultural and economic behaviors of different Indigenous communities across Mexico, and as well as resource allocation and the legal treatment of such communities: comprehend all this, he argued, and one could better understand the Mexican

³⁰ In Althusserian terms, the SEP, and DAI—later the INI—would qualify as Ideological State Apparatuses, whether political, familial, or scholastic, and the Dirección de Cinematografía a cultural apparatus (Althusser, 75-81).

³¹ Lewis, 77.

Nation.³² His anthropological research landed him various government positions making him part of Official Indigenismo. Aguirre Beltrán's trajectory within Official Indigenismo began with a stint as an employee of the SEP as the Dirección General de Asuntos Indígenas (1946), then as the director and founder of the INI Centro Coordinador Tzeltal-Tzotzil (1951-1952) and finally the Vice-Director of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista under Alfonso Caso.

Aguirre Beltrán summarized his understanding of indigenista policy's importance in Mexico in the following way:

Sin la intervención de la acción indigenista, la aculturación ... continuará su marcha. El poder de expansión y penetración de la cultura industrial no cederá ante obstáculos físicos ni fronteras étnicas aun cuando estas estén representadas por las culturas más primitivas, pero es evidente que, sin la acción indigenista, el cambio sociocultural que habrán de experimentar los grupos indios puede resolverse en la desorganización de los pueblos subordinados y no en su integración productiva dentro de la cultura mestiza. (*El proceso*, 141-142)

In other words, Aguirre Beltrán believed that industrialization, with the market capitalism and extractivism it implied, would dissolve and destroy what he understood to be discreet, as yet untarnished Indigenous communities and cultures. His solution, then, was that people in Mexico racialized as Indigenous must be integrated into dominant culture to soften industrialization's imminent blow.

Moreover, Aguirre Beltrán believed that the legal division and allocation of land to people racialized as Indigenous, by way of the *ejido* system,³³ would promote "el paso del macehual o comunero indio, de una relación sacra y comunal con la tierra, a la relación individual y secular del campesino libre, es trascendente porque implica un profundo cambio

³² Warman. "Prólogo", 9.

³³ For a full history of the *ejido* system and its shifts in the late twentieth century, see Vázquez Castillo, 2-3.

de actitud que le permite, sin graves trastornos de personalidad, recorrer aceleradamente la ruta de la aculturación en los restantes aspectos de la vida social” (*El proceso*, 142). In other words, when the Mexican government officially allocated land to Indigenous individuals (*macehualmeh*) rather than communities, the land would be rebranded as a part of Mexican territory and, in turn, the ‘comunero indio’ would be refashioned into a subject of the Mexican state: they would become a Mexican, and therefore mestizo, campesino. Of course, Aguirre Beltrán’s belief that government management of land ownership was the answer to integrating racialized subjects into the national social fold belies an expectation that racialized Indigenous subjects, once granted land ownership, would gain equal economic footing with non-Indigenous subjects, and subsequently would rush into the State’s paternal arms. As time would show, however, this was far from the case.

Analisa Taylor summarizes Aguirre Beltrán’s legacy as follows:

Aguirre Beltrán, one of the principal shapers of the official indigenista program, outlined the ways in which the problems of indigenous communities were to be confronted; he designated the indigenous enclaves in need of development as hinterlands or regions of refuge (*regiones de refugio*). In these regions, coordinating centers (*centros coordinadores*) were set up by anthropologists, agronomists, engineers, and other professionals to implement and oversee government-funded projects such as the construction of rural schools, roads and transportation networks, health clinics and other programs designed to foment indigenous integration into the national economy, language, and culture. Ethnographers and linguists used the *centros coordinadores* as bases for researching the languages and cultural practices of the indigenous communities inhabiting these *regiones de refugio*. In turn, the information gathered by specialists was used to fine-tune the theoretical apparatus... (98)

Taylor’s summary offers a panoramic view of the scope of the theory and applications of those theory in institutions—or apparatuses—used by the Mexican State to intervene in social and physical space in Mexico discursively labeled as Indigenous territory (or

Indigenous communities). The methods of intervention ranged from construction projects to education campaigns to research. Some had obvious and immediate benefits for Indigenous communities, like ensuring the ability of young people to learn Spanish and to read government documents, or eradicating polio, measles, and other infectious diseases. Some projects, from a contemporary standpoint, might be critiqued as projects designed to help the Mexican government assert greater biopolitical control over Indigenous communities.³⁴ Others might be understood as means to assimilate Indigenous community members into hegemonic mestizo society.

Mexico's national identity project, grounded in racialized identity, cannot be understood without accounting for state indigenismo, the broader theoretical and ideological framework driving these projects. In this dissertation, indigenismo is understood as a body of theory and praxis created for—and almost never by—Indigenous peoples. Indigenismo is not monolithic, but rather encompasses multiple schools of thought, some more hardline than others. One of these lines of thinking postures that Indigenous peoples will only gain social, political, and economic equality by assimilating into non-Indigenous, mestizo, Spanish speaking society. This school of thought champions policy aimed at assimilating Indigenous peoples by shaping their consumption patterns, language use, racial identity, and relationship to the national economy.³⁵ Another posture is that assimilation is harmful, and that Indigenous peoples are better off living as far away from capitalist, globalized cities, and spaces as possible, that learning Spanish is harmful, and that the government must help these

³⁴ For more, see Antebi, "Prometheus," and *Embodied Archive*, as well as Janzen.

³⁵ A philosophy to which policy makers like Moisés Sáenz heavily subscribed. For a study of these policies from the 1920s-1940s, see Dawson, "From Models." See also Lewis, 3, on the differences between schools of Indigenista thought and policymaking.

communities preserve their culture so that it does not change more than it already has. Of course, most indigenista praxis lies somewhere within this spectrum, and the way politicians, anthropologists, Indigenous activists, and civilians have engaged with it has differed wildly.

Indigenismo has not existed solely within the confines of government offices or brochures, but indeed has heavily permeated cultural production in Mexico, influencing novelists, poets, muralists, filmmakers, and linguists. Estelle Tarica emphasizes the pervasiveness of indigenismo in Latin American literatures in her critical monograph on three novels from three parts of Latin America, all of which deal with indigenismo. Indeed, the first chapter of her book, *The Inner Life of Mestizo Nationalism*, is titled “Anatomy of Indigenismo.” Her chapter begins with a succinct summary of how indigenismo as discourse and praxis uses racial logic to shape national identity on a symbolic as well as a material plane, resulting in the creation of a corpus of literature highly influenced by discourses and debates surrounding indigenismo. Commenting on the very nature of indigenista ideology, Tarica notes that one of indigenismo’s principal objectives has been to

envisio[n] the Indian as proper to the nation as, in fact, its most valuable and integral asset, key to modern progress and prosperity. Seen from an economic perspective, the Indian becomes a potential labor force for nascent industry. Seen from a political and military perspective, the Indian becomes an ally in power struggles between oligarchic elites and a newly empowered urban middle-class. Seen from a symbolic perspective, the Indian becomes...a sign of the distinct historical origin and cultural formations of Spanish American nations: a sign which makes them unique with respect to the United States and Europe. (2)

Tarica’s observation underscores the material implications of indigenismo, and gestures to a deep truth of this ideology: it is rooted in the struggle for emerging nation-states like Mexico to obtain modernity, defined in this case as economic solvency and as cultural practice tied to consumption and taste. Mexico has historically depended on the geographic segregation,

economic precarity, and legal precarity of Indigenous territory as inflection points through which industry might manage to exploit Indigenous land and labor. Tarica situates indigenismo within a mostly urban, intellectual context, but its implications for Indigenous peoples everywhere within Mexican territory are evident. Mexico's mestizo nationalism, as scholars like Tarica and Pedro Ángel Palou have called it, is inarguably bound up with the project of Mexican state indigenismo.

My interest in the relationship between national identity, race, and film inevitably led me to the INI. What I gathered, the more I researched the INI, was that the INI was, like cinema, one of the settings in which the drama of an untenable national myth played out, often tragically. The INI's policies and initiatives were constantly negotiating between the idea that Indigeneity was a liability to national cohesion and economic progress and that Indigeneity was instrumental to the myth of national mestizaje, which relied so heavily on Indigenous history and material culture to distinguish itself from European and Euro-American history and material culture. This negotiation is highly evident the INI's campaigns and projects, like the relocating of tens of thousands of Mazatec and Chinantec families displaced by a dam project, through educational campaigns promoting Western hygiene practices using puppet troupes like Rosario Castellanos' own Teatro Petul in San Juan Chamula, or through promotional videos circulated in Mexico City like *Todos somos Mexicanos* (José Arenas, 1958), the script of which Castellanos wrote, and that has been likened to Nazi propaganda films because of its ethno-nationalist undertones.³⁶

³⁶ Dorotinsky Alperstein et al., 24.

The more closely I have studied the national myth, the more I am convinced that social cohesion under mestizaje—or, nowadays, under multiculturalism—is understood by Mexican national politics as a means to a modernizing, industrializing, economically prosperous end. It is this perception, with which the reader may or may not agree, that I come to the crux of my inquiry in this dissertation. The philosophical question undergirding my research up to this point had largely concerned the application of racial discourse in Mexican nationalism, but I realized I had not fully grasped the teleology of race in a Mexican context. I perceived a puzzle piece slide into place when I read Joshua Lund’s chapter on Rosario Castellanos’ Chiapas-based novels. Lund postures his book *The Mestizo State* as an attempt to “reread race as the concept around which the actual political battle over land resources come to light and is rendered narrative” (xiv). Lund’s work remains unique in the field because of its approach to the fractious relationship between the Mexican national myth, racial identity, land struggle, and literature. In the moment of reading Lund’s literary critique and even now, it seems to me that he touched on one of the most critical and sensitive subjects in Mexican national discourse: land and land rights.³⁷ Drawing on Lund, on a history of visual economies of *Mexicanidad* and of Mexican territory, on cultural criticism, the Mexican constitution, and on my own impressions, I perceive that racial teleology, land, and the arts have a shared history dating from as early as the sixteenth century and stretches until today. I attempt to demonstrate this shared history and its implications for the mid-to-late twentieth century in the following chapters of this dissertation.

³⁷ For further reading on land reform in Mexico, see Baitenman, 2020 and Sanderson, 1984.

0.3 Chapter Overview

In Chapters One and Two, I expound upon key elements of this shared history, tracing what I argue is an epistemology—and a symbolic aesthetics—of Mexican territory: a piece of land identified through politics and acted upon by social arrangements. Like the national myth of social cohesion, Mexican territory is a myth with material consequences most visible in its production. I assert that the visual arts—film of the 1970s, particularly—exposed the fact of this myth by demonstrating the ways Mexican territory can be made and unmade aesthetically, discursively, cinematographically, socially, economically and through labor, and even through language. This, broadly put, is the thrust of my dissertation.

The films I discuss in Chapters Three through Five were all filmed during the presidency of Luis Echeverría Álvarez. I discuss the importance of this decade and the ways each film—and its filmmaker—relates to this presidency and to the decade of the 1970s in Chapter Two. I will hardly be the first to discuss the Echeverría years through the lens of a series of attempts to reconstitute public confidence in the social contract, which was completely shattered by the Tlatelolco student massacre because the state, had ordered its soldiers to turn their guns on its own citizens. The “Halconazo,” three years later, buried the myth of national identity in the grave that the Tlatelolco massacre had dug. The Echeverría administration was keenly aware of the dissolution of public confidence in the government, and its policies are perceived by some scholars as attempts to reconstitute the broken and buried myth, this time with reduced emphasis on racial and cultural unity, reduced INI activity in Indigenous communities, and instead with increased promises of increased Indigenous participation in the national economy, with the nationalization of industry and

with the advancement of national infrastructure.³⁸ The thesis of my dissertation rests, in part, on the perception that Echeverría Álvarez' administration turned to the myth of national territory as a new point of departure for social cohesion, which was supposed to be cultivated through a shared goal of asserting the Mexican state's authority—moral, economic, and social—over that territory as much as possible. As I will demonstrate in Chapters Three, Four and Five, the myth of national territory—and of the state's authority over that territory—is, like the myth of national identity, troubled by visual arts and above all by film—a medium uniquely positioned to depict relationships between land and people. Moreover, in subsequent chapters I will discuss how Mexican national territory is an epistemology deeply bound up with the practice of racializing space. With this, I will also explain how this practice is, in turn, bound to the gridding and commodification of space, as well as aesthetic practices rendering spaces in specific ways meant to reinforce the perceived relationship between national identity and geography.

From this point forth, I rarely employ the word land—*tierra*—as my referent. This is a decision I have come to with care and the reader deserves an explanation: I have chosen not to write of land because I am interested in disrupting an epistemology of land as a space that exists in a sort of vacuum outside of the non-anthropocentric relation between chemical compounds, molecules, plant life, fungi, and animals, including humans. In other words, I perceive land as a referent that represents a human concept without gesturing to its human epistemology and the influence of humans upon it. Because this dissertation deals directly with the relationship between human societies and land, I choose terminology that, to my

³⁸ See Blair, 1977 and Looney, 1983.

understanding, better articulates such a relationship. In following the lead of the very Mexican Constitution itself, I gravitate toward the term territory and also toward the term space and will endeavor to demonstrate that these are referents that implicate the relationship between human epistemology and land.

Territory has been described as space seen from the “inside,” a subjective and lived space.³⁹ Following this logic, we might call Mexican territory an insider experience, one which can only be lived subjectively and from within the territory. As a woman of upper-middle class extraction raised in the comfortable suburbs of Boston, I am perhaps the last person with qualifications to define Mexican territory. My positionality as a person who has only lived within Mexican territory sporadically and always with an outsider’s perspective means that I understand Mexican territory—this space seen from the inside—only through the portraits of that insider experience that find their way to me either through literature, photography, film, or conversation. This limits my ability to understand the affective value of Mexican territory, but it does allow me to take stock of others’ insider experiences of Mexican territory and to think about how those experiences relate to one another. I am not qualified to define Mexican territory nor to qualify what it means to live in Mexican space, but my ability to consume second-hand information without imposing my own experiences of Mexican territory makes me sensitive to the conflicting narratives presented to me through audiovisual and literary forms of expression. As such, the definition of Mexican territory I employ frequently throughout this dissertation rests on the definitions provided by Mexican intellectuals, artists,

³⁹Lefebvre, *Landscape*, 53.

historians, sociologists, politicians, and activists: it is understood in relation to the question of sovereignty, the modernity project, national identity, land rights, and the environment.

Any discussion of land rights in Mexican territory must include a conversation about Agrarian Reform and ejidos. The creation of ejidos, a federal policy since the Revolution, was meant at least in theory to give rural communities—including Indigenous ones—the legal authority to be able to live, to grow and harvest crops, and to build upon land without the risk of being taxed or exploited by landowners. Preceding ejidos, colonial-era policy theoretically protected the land rights of Indigenous peoples: with the ratification of Indigenous Republics, tracts of land designated by the crown as exclusive Indigenous social and geographic spaces could be autonomously occupied. Yet these measures did not account for the fact that Indigenous territory—that is, social relations, land, and ways of relating to that land—existed long before the Spanish Crown or the Mexican government assigned that land to them, a matter I will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Five in relation to the ratification of the Zona Lacandona. What the Mexican legal system took for granted, even in the context of well-meant Agrarian Reform, was that Indigenous territory would continue to be bound up with the colonizing processes of Mexican territory through the State's proclivity for private property, the racialized practices of segregating space, and the momentum of capitalist interests. Time has proven that collective ejidos were never going to work within the context of Mexican national territory: designed around collective labor and a rejection of the idea of private property, they were fundamentally incompatible with Mexico's capitalist structure. Rural Indigenous communities formed in the context of colonization and the

spiritual conquest continue to experience encroachments on their territory, not only in terms of their ancestral lands but also in terms of customs, social structure, and language.⁴⁰

My objective for Chapters Three, Four and Five, and for my analyses of, *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital*, and *Cascabel*, is to demonstrate how this cinema probes the limits of the myth of Mexican territory. I perceive the three films in question as probing the limits of Mexican territory in myriad ways. Within each film, Indigenous territory is either a space in which agricultural reform laws are neither uniformly nor even sporadically enforced, and in which the law (theory) and material conditions of daily life (praxis) appear to exist in contradiction. Moreover, Indigenous communities are presented within these films as spaces onto which the epistemologies of Mexican territory and national identity reliably fail to be successfully projected. *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* and *Cascabel* capture the material processes by which Indigenous territory: land, language, and social relations, amongst other factors, are interpolated by politics, people, and practices that aim to bring the territory closer to the myth of Mexican territory. Interviewees, symbols, or discourses gesturing to the myth of Mexican territory are troubled by the emperor-has-no-clothes myth of Mexican national identity.

While the myth of national social unity was in decay by the 1970s, the myth of Mexican territory was not. Indeed, this myth has arguably had better staying power than that of national identity and become enmeshed with a new sort of national identity myth, predicated on the idea of universal pluriculturalism. In August 2001, the Mexican constitution was amended, taking on a liberal discourse of pluriculturalism to refer to the

⁴⁰ See Wolf, 5.

various Indigenous identities and experiences lived in Mexico. Article 2 of the Constitution states, “La Nación tiene una composición pluricultural sustentada originalmente en sus pueblos indígenas que son aquellos que descienden de poblaciones que habitaban en el territorio actual del país al iniciarse la colonización.”⁴¹ The Article also declares that Indigenous peoples should be recognized on the basis of their “conciencia de su identidad indígena” as well as the uniqueness of their social institutions, economies, cultures and politics, as well as ethnolinguistic affiliations. Yet Claudio Lomnitz astutely observes that the idea of a national identity rooted in pluriculturalism is still related to the national mestizaje myth, because it is predicated on the idea that a Hñáhñú or Tu’un savi may be Indigenous but they are all the more Mexican for it.⁴² The amended constitution certainly implies this is the case, since it ultimately affords practitioners of Mexican law the right to determine who is Indigenous and who is not, and to apply the law in accordance with this externally applied perception in dealing with territory, whether it be labelled Mexican or Indigenous. The question of Mexican territory and national identity is entirely relevant to Mexican national politics, culture, and cinema today.

⁴¹ *Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*.

⁴² Lomnitz, 10.

1 CHAPTER 1: VISUAL AESTHETICS AND SPACE, FROM NEW SPAIN TO MEXICO



Figure 1-1. Chapter Establishing Shot. *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* (Paul Leduc, 1977).

In this chapter I will discuss various spatial theories that are most pertinent to Mexican 1970s socio-politics and visual production. Once these theories have been discussed, I will specifically discuss the significance of space and territory in a Mexican context, also addressing how these theories relate to representation of contested Indigenous territories. I will demonstrate that race and other spaces cannot be treated as mutually distinct in representations of Indigenous territories and thus will lay a groundwork for the subsequent chapters, in which I approach distinct concepts of space and cinematic representations of space. Lastly, throughout the chapter, I will include examples drawn from artistic forms such cinema, painting, photography, literature, have engaged with concepts and representations of space in ways that problematize and highlight power relations, land control, and Indigenous marginality within Mexican territory.

1.1 The Screen as the Stage for Mexico's National Drama

Racialized, grotesque, impoverished, uneducated, or victimized Indigenous or dark-skinned mestizo peasant characters—living in an idyllic setting or offering comic relief—are consequences of cinema's relationship to ideas about Indigenous peoples and their relationship to a specific kind of landscape and lifestyle. Less obvious but equally significant are the ways the hegemony of national space—a phenomenon social and material—are brought to bear in films after the 1960s; in characters' gestures and travels, in architecture, human labor, language use, landscapes, and in the way the environment and industrial projects are represented. Given that cinema is an art form rooted in the creation of and negotiation with space, it is uniquely positioned to excavate the mechanisms of Mexican territory. As such, Mexican territories sustain a praxis extractivist spaces containing social relations grounded in the colonial idea of racial difference and inferiority of Black and Indigenous communities, driven by capitalist values, and characterized by the subsequent mediations of materiality and ideologies forthwith.

Daniel Nemser shores up the relationship between spatial politics in New Spain and racial categories, and his assertion is that the organization of space in colonial Mexico required the invention of racial categories in order to justify itself. Interventions into the physical landscape, therefore, drove the practice of racial labelling. Nemser identifies urban planning (e.g. roads, walls, buildings), cartography, and natural history, as some of the most potent driving factors behind the racialization of people inhabiting New Spain. It must be said that this dissertation does not attempt to refute or confirm Nemser's assertion that race

was invented out of the colonial spatial environment, as opposed to the other way around. Despite this, my dissertation does accept Nemser's assertion that the teleology of racial categories during the colonial period in Mexico was effectively that of justifying the privatization of land, as well as the right to own land, sell it, cultivate it, and the amount of taxes owed on that land.

Scholars would agree. Ilona Katzew, for one, offers an anecdote about New Spaniards of mixed heritage needed Spanish witnesses to help them prove that they were of mixed Indigenous and Spanish—but primarily Spanish—heritage, and that because of their Spanish ancestry, neither their forbearers nor they were obligated to pay tribute to the crown.¹ What this anecdote implied was that one's perceived race determined one's financial burdens, amongst other social determinants of economic status in New Spain. As Katzew also notes, in 1728, there were baptism records in cathedrals with separate books for castes—that is, for mestizos and mulatos—and Spaniards. One's future “depended” on the book in which one's baptism was recorded. As will be discussed further on, the caste paintings were one of the primary technologies by which the Spanish Colonial enterprise attempted to articulate the idea of racial difference through a spatially gridded set of portraits that would help the white elites determine how non-Spaniards fit within the social hierarchy and legal system, and within the Spanish Imperial territories.

Film, like oil painting, is able to articulate power relations within a finite space, a referent to a space in which humans exercise power: allocating spaces, resources, and the output of labor in a way that benefits some people over others. Like painting—or perhaps, I

¹ Katzew, 45.

daresay, even more so than painting—audiovisual media is constantly in conversation with physical space; built space, landscapes, geographies, and all else that exists within, or make a mark on, physical space are relevant to the medium. Filmmaking processes happen within physical space and are constantly negotiating the environment in which shooting happens. But films also make physical spaces: film sets are ad hoc physical spaces and, of course, the space depicted within a film frame is also built. Thinking about film in spatial terms is useful for addressing national cinema because Mexican film is necessarily film that has a relationship to Mexican territory. Film may reflect the epistemologies and teleologies of Mexican national identity and territory, but it also may cause trouble for both. Moreover, I propose to engage in media archeology of less mainstream or commercial cinemas, or cinemas that trouble the very idea of documentary, since I suspect that such film, mostly under looked in the field of Mexican film studies, also has something to say about national geography and ideology of state ideologies.²

² I am referring to the concept of media archeology articulated by Huhtamo et al., describing media archeology as the practice of constructing alternate histories of suppressed, neglected, and forgotten media that do not point teleologically to the present media-cultural condition as their “perfection” (3).



Figure 1-2. Landscape with Popocatepetl. Hugo Brehme. Mediateca INAH.

1.2 Landscape

Having discussed the aesthetic implications of linguistic territory, we must now consider landscape, an aesthetic treatment of space bound to the cinematic medium, not to mention painting and photography. Zannah Matson best articulates the relationship between power, ideology, and landscape art when she notes that,

In the Latin American context, landscape visibility was used in both the colonial and post-independence eras to reinforce and naturalize racial difference, categorize landscapes of the “other,” and portray racialized peoples as inhabitants in the landscape without their own subjectivity. The significance of landscape representation therefore goes beyond the thinking only of landscape painting as image and allows us to understand the continued impacts of visibility on land, resources, and environment all comprise sites of contestation in the Americas. (73)

Indeed, this assessment of the epistemic and teleological nature of mediated or artistically rendered landscapes in Latin America taps into a decades-old tradition in geography and

visual studies, grounded in Marxian theory. The same kind of historiography Foucault elaborates on the subject of sexuality is the sort that undergirds this tradition. Landscape not simply a genre or artistic trope, but indeed is a way of seeing—and thus a discourse—which has its own history and is most productively historicized by examining the broader political and social context of landscape’s trajectory. Social groups have used landscape to, quite literally, frame their relationships to the land and to other people.³ In other words, landscape is the discursive and symbolic expression of territory. We might say that it is analogous to ethnography in that it is a question of the gaze capable of rendering the subject or object of the image the exotic or scrutinized other. In this sense, landscape is not an object to be seen or a text to be read but instead is a process by which social and subjective identities are formed. What is of interest about a landscape is not only what it is or symbolizes but what it does—for and within cultural practice.⁴ Landscape as a cultural medium, “has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpolating its beholder” (Mitchell, 2). Relating this observation back to Mexico and Mexican space, we might apply this observation by noting that Mexican landscape is not simply the referent of a mural, a photograph, or a golden age film, but rather a process of national identity formation in which the spectator is encouraged to construct that referent mentally. Indeed, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, writing of pre-conquest Mesoamerica, cannot help but refer to the “Mexican landscape” when describing pre-

³ Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, xiv and 15.

⁴ Mitchell, 1.

conquest agricultural and architecture construction practices that are a segway into discussing the “Deep Mexico” of his monograph.⁵

Film, however, is the principal medium of interest in this dissertation, and Lefebvre writes about the relationship between landscape and cinema, noting,

landscape is a multifaceted and pluridisciplinary spatial object whose meanings and representations extend from real-life environments to art. It is 'practiced' or studied by, among others, architects...writers and literary critics, geographers, historians, urban planners....and of course filmmakers and film scholars. Furthermore, it is relevant to aesthetics as well as in economic and political debates over land development and exploitation, tourism, and national identity and sovereignty. (xiii)

He offers an example of landscape as something that might emerge when a person is hiking in a wildlife reserve, looking out of a plane window, or driving down a highway, and suggests that the hiker, flyer, or driver is a spectator looking at a natural environment as if it were framed, either by the extremes of our field of vision or by the viewfinder of a camera. This framed view, Lefebvre suggests, allows a natural environment to become a landscape. The frame, therefore, is the means by which nature becomes culture and land, landscape. Landscape is a space of aesthetic contemplation and spectacle: the staging of the idyllic Mexican countryside and striking mythicized volcanoes (Figure 1-2). It is logical that Lefebvre's theory—rooted as it is in film studies—might consider the implications of a spatial object bounded by a frame, and indeed his implication is that landscape is something created by artists, as well as other humans tasked with thinking about and representing space. What is absent from this theory, of course, is the teleology of landscape, as well as the implications of an anthropocentric perspective on natural environments as something from which humans may remove themselves by acting as spectators.

⁵ Bonfil Batalla, 12.

Lefebvre himself acknowledges that landscape art has, since its inception, been underpinned by a particular belief system. He locates the emergence of landscape-centered art within European art movements of the Renaissance period, during which colonization, new forms of land management, and the burgeoning of capitalism altered European conceptions of space and environment.⁶ The implication of such an assessment is that landscape art, at its core, is rooted in Western philosophy in the same sense as nation-states and the notion of land as a private property. In other words, cinematic landscape, and national space mutually comprehensible, and the former lends itself to depicting the latter. This observation appears to contradict the broader arc of Lefebvre's assessment: that the physical space captured in the pro-filmic moment can be purely aesthetic and thus devoid of symbolic meaning.

Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) does not engage directly with theoretical terms related to space but does point out limitations of the English-language term "landscape," and her critique of this epistemology might also be applied as a critique of Cartesian epistemologies of space. The notion that landscapes, as a representational mode, refers to a portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view (or viewfinder), she sustains, is misleading because it does not acknowledge—indeed, it may even erase—the relationship between the human being and their surroundings. The viewer—not a film spectator but a person looking at their surroundings—is not outside or separate from those surroundings.⁷ Even, we might content, when someone is looking out a window at the clouds from a view of 30,000 feet or when someone is looking through their windshield at forest hugging both sides of a winding road, they are still part of an environment, even if that environment has been

⁶ Lefebvre, *Landscape*, xv.

⁷ Marmon Silko, 265-266.

acted upon by humans such that the sensory experiences of outside the plane or car differ from those of inside.

The implications of thinking humans as a part of nature rather than outside or separate from territory underscores this thinking as a tool or justification for the colonial systems of spatializing territory, racializing the inhabitants of that territory, and converting both people and their territories into capital. Marmon Silko invites her reader to consider how language, as well as realist art forms, may fail to capture the complexity of the relationships between humans, land, and the way nature has allowed culture to emerge. This relationship is meaningfully captured, however, through oral traditions, as well as through pictographs and petroglyphs eschewing realism in favor of more open-ended images of animals like elk that allow for an expansive ontology of elk as more than simply dinner with legs, for example. Marmon Silko's observation about the limitations of perceiving landscape—as fragment of territory from which one is removed—calls into question the processes of colonialism,



Figure 1-3. Photograph. "Las lavanderas sobreentendidas." 1932. Manuel Álvarez Bravo.
Copyright Archivo Álvarez Bravo, S.C.

capitalism, and hegemony through which, according to Raffestin, humans have not only been exiled from nature but moreover attempt to produce it to serve human interest.

The landscapes in which Mexican national territory resides have been the subjects of cinema and of several amongst most prominent photographers in Mexican history. Esther Gabara writing of Manuel Álvarez Bravo's photography points out that "many of the spaces shown in Álvarez Bravo's photographs...only appear to be inhabited" (225) and that Álvarez Bravo relies on spectators to grasp the physical absence of the human presence gestured to in his photography. What, Álvarez Bravo's human-less photos seem to ask, is the consequence of the social relations within Mexican territory on space itself? His photograph "Las lavanderas sobreentendidas" (1932) (Figure 1-3) for example, offers a lavandera-less frame, yet the title of the photo gestures to the absent presence of a washerwoman while simultaneously de-emphasizing the human body in order to center the space itself. The agaves, draped with white sheets, are symbolically reminiscent of the chiaroscuro maguey plants in Eisenstein's "Apoteosis del Maguey" composing the oniric wide angle and deep landscape shots that would then inspire the quintessential Mexican landscapes in Gabriel Figueroa's cinematography. "Las lavanderas sobreentendidas" is, itself, a landscape photograph, participating in a broader tradition of the re-articulation by photographers and cinematographers during the first part of the 20th century who aimed to capture what they perceived to be the essence of human-land relations in Mexican territory.

As another photographer also known for his way of writing about space and treating space in both semiotic and entirely visual terms, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* reads "as if it were a photographic image, but more; it is as if a photographer had carefully planned the chiaroscuro, the contrasts of light and shadow..." (Rivera, "Writing," 19). Eduardo Rivera observes continuity between Rulfo's photography and his writing, imbued with what Rivera calls "photographic poetics." Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, for one, is tied to a specific rural town

called Comala, and his prose takes pains to describe the fictional town's crumbling buildings, barren landscapes, the oppressive heat, and the audible murmuring sounds enveloping the town. The town of Comala is a metaphor, but one that concerns itself with the materiality—and material decay—of rural Mexican space, and the consensus is that Rulfo's photography does too. Indeed, the subjects of Rulfo's photography are often: "destroyed houses, broken windows and doors, ruins; abandoned landscapes, solitary rites...he chooses as his theme the man of the countryside, preferably Indian.... the patient and imperturbable attitude of the photographed subjects denotes the noble acceptance of the photographer. Rulfo photographs a world that knows (or tries to know) that it 'inhabits,' ennobling it" (*Juan Rulfo's Mexico*, 31). Arguably, Rulfo's own artistic career can be situated within a habitus of attempting to communicate a sense of placeness that is impossible to locate within a specific part of Mexican territory. Like the fictional town of Comala, a fictional stand-in for every abandoned small rural town in Mexican territory, the spaces and landscapes photographed by Rulfo give the vague impression that the subjects of his photography in its totality is Mexican territory. The Mexican territory of Rulfo's photography is rural, Indigenous, decaying, yet noble at nostalgic. Víctor Jiménez situates both Rulfo's photographic and literary corpuses within an emerging project to construct a habitus of Mexican identity, space—and the people and landscapes within in—making them noble; culturally valuable—cultural capital.⁸

Photographic works by Álvarez Bravo or Hugo Brehme romanticize rural and Indigenous subjects and landscapes and lean heavily into the myth of national identity with an Indigenous past and a modern, mestizo, urban future. Rulfo's photographic works also gesture

⁸ Jiménez, "Juan Rulfo," 34.

to national identity, but center not on urban space as Álvarez Bravo or Brehme, but rather on rural spaces, abandoned by time, migration, and the shifting economic concerns of the Mexican government. In Rulfo's photography, the essence of Mexico and its national territory is clearly rural rather than urban and is characterized by the disintegration of architecture and social spaces. For example, Rulfo's photographs "Templo a Ehécatl en Calixtlahuaca" and "Danzante con mascara" offer, respectively, a deep shot situating the remains of a temple to wind deity Ehécatl within a flat grassy terrain, shot slightly from above, and an awkward medium shot of a danzante not close enough to the subject's face to be a portrait but also not far enough away not to be intimate: it offers a kind of coincidental intimacy.

Rulfo's photography reflects an awareness of this ongoing project, given that motifs like expansive landscapes, pre-conquest architecture, and racialized subjects abound. Both Rulfo's photographs and his writing, Jorge Alberto Lozoya suggests, mirror "the real realm of the Mexican countryside" ("Vocation," 23), and it is notable that this is how scholars conclude that Rulfo perceived Mexico. The Mexico of Rulfo's literature and photography reflects the idea of a Mexican landscape as an arrangement of architecturally and culturally distinct structures in various states of decay, but in contrast to his contemporaries, Rulfo insisted on emphasizing this idea and this space without cleaving to the fantasy of social unity and equality under the post-Revolutionary government. We need only read Rulfo's surreal, cynical literature to understand in prosaic terms what kind of social space Rulfo perceived existing in Mexico and how that social space had devastating ecological effects on agriculture and the environment. Rulfo's literary and photographic corpus seem to search for the essence of the rural Mexican landscape, which Rulfo links with parched, overworked agricultural fields, crumbling abandoned homes and pre-conquest architecture, and only occasionally a few,

mostly mestizo campesinos. Rulfo's Mexican landscapes are different from those of Álvarez Bravo, Brehme, or even cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa (whose work will be discussed in Chapter One), but they too situate landscapes as symbols for Mexican national territory, sovereignty, and politics.

Zannah Matson has addressed the ways landscape images, whether in photography or cinematography, mirror social space, observing that,

The continued working of coloniality in these landscape images can be read through both the direct influence of European landscape tradition, and in the depiction of indigenous and afro-descended populations as abstracted types to be communicated through the objective image. Conceptions and visualizations of landscape had further salience in the arrangement of people according to who has the right to look. The positioning of racialized bodies through landscape visualization happens in two distinctive ways: through the designation of a singular perspective of subjectivity and through an association of particular racialized bodies to particular landscape typologies. (78)

The framing of a cinematographic shot, in general, constitutes the aesthetic engagement of a particular world view shaped, in turn, by the material realities lived by the filmmakers. We see this in the framing Alfredo, the protagonist of *Cascabel*, uses to create a shot with a man in the foreground and a stone doorway with lush grass beyond; there is intentional continuity between the man and the landscape, as if to suggest that the Lancandón film subject is simply part of the landscape or invisible within it. Lefebvre speaks to this kind of cinematography when he notes that the framing or the form “of landscape also corresponds to the form of our experience of it, with the latter including representations of the different personal, cultural, and social functions it can associate to or serve” (xv). In order to enforce his argument about the social materialism of the film frame and of film landscapes, Lefebvre gestures to scholars such as Denis Cosgrove and Jay Appleton, who contend that landscape—in cinema and otherwise—is

in essence an allegory for how groups of people self-perceive and how they perceive their relationship to nature.



Figure 1-4. Still. *Que Viva México!* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1931). Image 2926. Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico.

1.2.1 *Que Viva México!* and the Invention of Mexican Landscapes

To discuss landscape in cinema made in Mexico, we would be remiss to gloss over Sergei Eisenstein’s 1931 classic, *Que Viva México!* (hereafter, *QVM*). Lefebvre mentions the film in his monograph on landscape and film, pointing out that not only score, but also landscape, is of keen importance in Eisenstein’s filmmaking. He writes: “for the great Soviet filmmaker and theorist, both film landscapes and film music share the ability to express, in cinematic form (i.e., on the image track or the soundtrack), what is otherwise inexpressible” (xii).⁹

⁹ For a thorough study of the history and production of *QVM!* see De los Reyes, *El nacimiento*.

The film as an event was edifying for aesthetics in subsequent Mexican film productions by directors like Emilio Fernández, who would encourage cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa to continue shooting landscapes the way he had in his prior work as a cinematographer on the set of *QVM*. The continuities between landscape representation in *QVM* and Figueroa-Fernández collaborations of the following decade, like *Flor Silvestre* and *María Candelaria*, underscore the impression the cinematic Mexican landscape in *QVM* would have on the landscapes in Mexican cinema for years to come. Importantly, these landscapes would become the space in which the national melodrama can be shaped to filmic discourse: the maguey and pillowy skies are the setting in which actors, dressed in turn of the century peasant costume, can reenact the national drama of the Revolution. The maguey silhouette and open sky landscapes are central to que *Viva Mexico!*'s chapter "Apoteosis del Maguey" and are evoked in the photography of artists like Álvarez Bravo as well as Brehme (Figure 1-4). "Apoteosis del Maguey" would inspire wide-angle shots of big pillowy clouds, giant maguey, and chiaroscuro lighting in films by Emilio Fernández and Gabriel Figueroa, consolidating thus the idea of the maguey and the flat arid landscape as quintessential Mexican national territory.

Prior sequences in *QVM!* articulate another facet of the national landscape, this one consisting of *callis* and archeological sites with which huipil-wearing film subjects are juxtaposed in extremely deep shots to evoke the Indigenousness of archeological features in the idealized Mexican landscape. The archeological *mise-en-scène* of *QVM*'s prologue is an allegory for the Mexico's Indigenous past (and mestizo present). This segway allows for Concepción and the hammocks and canoes in which she travels to be read as a utopic,

Indigenous (Zapotec) space that is Mexico's primordial space: already divided up on the basis of race, and thus marked for Mexicanization.

QVM centers an entirely different kind of setting as part of its broader portrait of Mexican landscapes in "La Sandunga:" this time the setting is a rainforest—an entirely different face of the Mexican territorial imaginary. Where the maguey is the flora that anchors melodramatic shots of peasants in white linen vestments, abundant palm fronds are the backdrop for the presentation of a cast of young, sensual Tehuana characters, embodied by the protagonist Concepción (Figure 1-5).¹⁰ Without much plot, and only the non-diegetic voice-over to anchor the sequences, spectators are given the vague impression that Concepción is a bride and that the great fanfare of dancers and procession are all part of her wedding, although they might as well be celebrating her coronation in an India Bonita pageant, as will be discussed further on in this chapter. The stoic older women in Tehuana clothing who look on from their market stalls or spots are purveyors of consumable crafts and jewelry. The conspicuous absence of any kind of machinery from the sequences, the Edenic mise-en-scène with its fertile and amorous parrots and young men and women, and the surrealist composition of the frames offer the impression that the characters and events in

¹⁰ For a discussion of the stylization and resignification of Didjzáa (Zapotec) women in Mexican popular culture and national discourse, see Zamorano Villareal.

“Sandunga”—in the re-imagined Isthmus—belong to Biblical time and to pre-conquest Isthmus society, but are still, somehow, all the more Mexican for it.¹¹



Figure 1-5. Still. Concepción Combs her Hair. *Que Viva México!* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1931). Image 2923. Filmoteca UNAM. Mexico.

If the kind of film space *QVM!* portrays is landscape, then it is not a landscape free from ideology or one chosen for purely aesthetic function. “La Sandunga,” situated within the broader montage of the film, gestures to territory, given the emphasis on human-land relations, scenes in the marketplace suggesting the acquisition of wealth in order to pay for a dowry. The emblematic of the film in its entirety, is an attempt to construct a visual economy of the idea of Mexican territory. Concepción, the Tehuana protagonist of “La Sandunga,” the first chapter of the film, is less a person for whom the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is a setting, so much as she is part of the landscape, the cinematographic space created by Eisenstein with the support and

¹¹ Lomnitz, 11.

inspiration of acquaintances like Adolfo Best Maugard and Diego Rivera, who were something of cultural ambassadors for Eisenstein and likely contributed to his elaboration of a taste-making visual economy.¹² The visual economy of the Isthmus, then, is one in which Indigenous people are part of the flora and fauna, beautiful, indolent, and exotic, and apparently in some separate time-space more closely related to the Garden of Eden than to Mexico City. In the decade before the film's production, political discourse emphasized the idea of Mexican national territory as a racialized, culturally, and politically uniform space with a vaguely Indigenous past. The *mise-en-scène*, gazes, and framing of "Sandunga" subtly trouble this discourse, presenting the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as visually unique from the spaces shot in the rest of the film. The distinctiveness is emphasized with intimate close-up shots, along with emphasis on flora and fauna, Tehuana-specific vestments, jewelry, and customs. The effect is not one of visual unity throughout Mexican film, yet the film's broader narrative implies that diversity-cultural and environmental-is the bedrock of Mexican culture in the twentieth century.

However, as Roberto Tejada reminds us, "the technology of the image ha[s] the capacity to betray the space of the nation as being a visual landscape discontinuous with the historical institution of the state" (26). Photographic—and film—subjects can trouble the racialization of objects, landscapes, and people along with the very idea of Mexican national territory by creating a landscape that rejects the national spatial imaginary and dissociates from the institutions that have populated physical space on that very premise. As we will see in this and following chapters, photography and film do indeed trouble visual economies

¹² For the history of Eisenstein's professional relationship with Best Maugard, see de los Reyes, "Informes," 162-164.

meant to represent the space of the nation by de-naturalizing or parodying landscapes related to state indigenismo or to the modernity project. Tejada's observation about the technology of the image having some direct relationship to space and landscape leads me to my next point which is that photography and film is creating by bringing a camera into a space, and then selecting and framing a part of that space within a screen or viewfinder. Both the film and video camera interact with space while also staging and producing it.

Film theorists use distinct terms to define the relationship of a camera to the space it enters and the way that camera then portrays that space. Physical space (Cairns, 155) is the term used to describe landscapes or built film sets (staged objects, artificial backdrops, architecture, or living spaces). Landscape, as I have now established, does not precede human intervention but instead is the consequence of human visual perception. Built film sets are consequences of human activity, albeit in another way. Even so-called unaltered sets or so-called 'real' sets are influenced from the spaces in which they are made. For example, Wim Wenders' sweeping desert landscapes in *Paris, Texas* (1984), are shaped by material practices and relations: they are shaped not by film crew or the director but instead by the animals, plants and weather that shape the Texan desert and by the few humans who live their lives under the harsh Texan sun.¹³ Even if it is not obvious, Wenders' desert landscapes relate to U.S. national space—especially the cinematic hub of Hollywood—in a very real way. Wenders, shooting the film far away from the elaborate sets and glamour of Hollywood, simultaneously conveys his protagonist's removal from Los Angeles life and the search for scenery that does not nod

¹³ Connolly referencing the scholarship of Thomas Elsaesser on Wenders, 50. I was unable to legally reproduce a still from Wender's film, but an excellent example of what I am discussion may be found at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087884/mediaviewer/rm522160384/>.

to its own artifice nor glamorizes the material reality of poverty or mental illness. Moreover, a film's choice of location or treatment of cinematic space can be a means of exploring economic and cultural exploitation as well as imperialism. *Paris, Texas* exemplifies the way in which film space is simultaneously the landscape contained by the screen and the filming location, both of which function as a commentary on cinema industries and their rootedness in U.S., consumer-oriented and elite spaces.

While there are potential contradictions between Lefebvre's theory surrounding autonomous landscapes in cinema and his cultural materialist analysis of landscape in cinema, the latter is extremely helpful when thinking about cinematographic spaces—especially in Mexican cinema. Consider, for example, that cinematic landscape may be composed of both nature and land, as well as humans and other aspects of material life, and is a central concept within the broader subject of spaces in cinema. Such a perspective is critically important, especially in the act of unmasking the metaphorical architecture of national space, private space, and space as commodity, and in fact aligns with Aguilar Gil's assertion that the Mexican government has attempted to impose the idea of nationhood, and with it, racialized homogeneity, and language, within a territory and ecosystem it claims for itself.¹⁴

Filmmaker interventions on a filmed space can occur in other ways besides set building and design: by framing nature—the artist imposes culture upon it, and by framing land, the artist imposes landscape on it, potentially in concordance with—or against the grain—of a government or intellectually-sanctioned discourse. As will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Five, architecture and flora-filled landscapes take on symbolic as well as aesthetic

¹⁴ Aguilar Gil, "National Borders."

significance in *Cascabel*, particularly in the sequencing during which Alfredo prepares to film a fixed frame of a Lacandon man at the Palenque archeological site speaks to the way archeological features in Chiapas are considered part of the Mexican landscape, and of Mexican national history. Conversely, the other sequences in which the camera contains a screening room in which a propagandistic anthropological film is projected for functionaries who fawn over helicopter shots presenting the Lacandón forests as impossibly green, uninhabited, and wild: available and ripe for exploitation.



Figure 1-6. 18th Century New Spanish Caste Painting. Anonymous. Mediateca INAH.

1.3 Racialized Space

Even before the independence of Mexico, the broad category of “indio” was deployed to create sociopolitical institutions, as Regina Martínez Casas et al. points out, “to regulate and control the souls of the native indigenous populations. They established “Reducciones,” “Encomiendas,” “Repúblicas de Indios” (Indigenous Republics) (1521), and “Repartimientos” (1542) so that the Spanish crown could colonize and control the territory

and population” (36). The establishment of Institutions designed to control populations based on their perceived difference—their race, in this case—has thus been a consistent trend in Mexican space since before its consolidation as a Nation State.

Racialization has been a tool for economic control over sectors of the population since colonial times and on physical space too, and I would add, for ensuring the systemic and cyclical poverty of racialized Indigenous peoples—the homogenous impoverished social and economic class.¹⁵ By denying Indigenous peoples land ownership, the Crown (and later the state) could ensure that environments could be extracted for their primary resources such as coal, silver, copper, water, grazing space and large-scale agricultural projects.

Furthermore, racialization is a tool for the planning and execution of policy in social space and on land. Under capitalism, a state’s relationship to territory is fundamentally one in which physical space—land—is turned into commodity.¹⁶ Historically, human bodies have also been turned into commodity through a process of their racialization so that these bodies can be forced to exploit physical environments and to extract resources. Recalling, again, Article 2 of the constitution, it is worth noting that Indigenous peoples should be recognized on the basis of their “conciencia de su identidad indígena” as well as the uniqueness of their social institutions, economies, cultures, and politics, as well as ethnolinguistic affiliations. Ultimately, the constitution still affords the practitioners of Mexican law the right to determine who is Indigenous and who is not, and to apply the law in accordance with this externally applied perception.

¹⁵ Revueltas, 222.

¹⁶ Aguilar Gil, “La defensa.”

This is one pertinent example of the way in which an institution of the Mexican State acts upon Mexican territory, deciding who is racially Indigenous or Afro Mexican and who is not. Yet there are others: in Mexico, the metrics for measuring Indigeneity has been quantified by the INI and other government institutions on the basis of linguistic affiliations, gesturing yet again to the ways non-Indigenous Mexicans attempt to determine the parameters of a semiotic concept that has always dealt in metaphor or proximity. For decades, the Mexican government has used spoken language as the criteria for determining Indigeneity amongst its population in census polls and for other statistical data analyses, however, this is not necessarily the basis on which people self-identify as Indigenous:¹⁷ naturally, the Mexican government's decision to measure Indigeneity based on languages spoken gestures to a fundamental understanding that race is a tangible fact and that it determines social relations in such a way that it dictates the languages that people will speak fluently.

The amount of scholarship explicitly breaching the subject of race (often equated with Indigeneity) in Mexico is vast. Some of that scholarship that has informed this dissertation includes writing covering the colonial period (Pagden 1982; Rozat 1993; Gruzinski 2002; Dean and Liebson 2003), the nineteenth -early twentieth century (Villoro 1950; Hale 1989; Lund 2009; Urías Horcasitas), and the post-Revolution (Aguirre Beltrán 1946 and 1981; Villoro 1950; Comas 1965; Knight 1990; Swarthout 2004; Dawson 2004; Urías Horcasitas 2005; Tarica 2008; Lund 2009; Taylor 2009; Sánchez Prado 2009; Antebi 2013; Palou 2014; Martínez Casas et.al, 2014; Janzen 2015; S. Lewis 2018; Dalton 2018; García Blizzard

¹⁷ Navarrete Linares, 14-15.

2020). Of the aforementioned only the most recent (Taylor, Palou, Dalton, and García Blizzard) comment directly on the relationship between Mexican cinema and racialization, and within the field, and none of these texts place space and spatial arrangements as products of racialization at their center. For this reason, the following chapters entail an original, interdisciplinary contribution to the study of Mexican film, hegemonic cultural practice and discourse, and space.

Several literary scholars have taken interest in the relationship between national territory and the part of the Mexican habitus related to national identity. Estella Tarica is one of them. She touches on the relationship between Mexican national identity and physical space, taking as her point of departure Étienne Balibar's concept of fictive ethnicity, which she observes is a as a metonym for the myth of national identity.¹⁸ For Balibar, fictive ethnicity is the ideological glue that manages to bind together people with no ancestral or cultural ties so that they compose the social body of the nation-state.¹⁹ Tarica broadens Balibar's definition of a fictive ethnicity to encompass not only race, but also language and land, noting that "race has been strongly territorialized, or, put another way, land has been racialized. It is through the intertwining of land and race that nations were formed in the late colonial and postcolonial periods, although these national identities may only have sedimented initially in a small segment of the overall population" (8). As an example of the way landscape was used in Mexican cinema prior to the 1970s in order to reinforce—and less

¹⁸ Tarica, 8. For more on Etienne Balibar's theory of fictive ethnicity, the "community instituted by the nation state," see Balibar, "The Nation," 349.

¹⁹ Balibar, *Race*, 49.

frequently, to trouble—cultural perceptions of Mexican National space, I would like to turn to examples in visual arts.

As has been gestured to in our inventory of terms related to geocritical studies, epistemologies of space, territory and landscape have historically been tied to the production and consolidation of power. The teleologies of otherness used to disregard and systematically dismantle Indigenous social spaces and territories indicate the importance of racial epistemology as a tool for the consolidation of colonial and neo-colonial power. Indeed, as Aníbal Quijano observes, within the last few centuries, “race became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world’s population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society’s structure of power [capitalism]” (535). Race has historically served as a tool for ordering social space and for determining labor roles of different racialized populations (Figure 1-6). The racialization of Africans and their descendants, for example, justified their enslavement and their lack of access to land ownership. The colonial period saw racialized Indigenous inhabitants of New Spain forced to labor on haciendas—though not formally enslaved, most were denied access to wages that would allow them self-determination in their affairs. Spaniards—racialized as white—were allowed a range of professions including merchant, farmer, or artisan.

Labor, race and space form a concept triad that is central in decolonial debates.²⁰ Although racializing categories were never as neat as Spaniards wished them to be, they still were used to determine legal rights and well as space itself within New Spain, and the effects of these policies remain in the spatial distribution of Mexico City and across Mexico, in

²⁰ Luiz Lara, et al., 17.

which Afro-descended and Indigenous communities are often the most marginalized from national politics, economics, and infrastructure. We might discuss whether race is a spatial category all its own, and certainly, it has had and continues to be both an epistemology and teleology embedded in politics, social life, and economics in Mesoamerica, and now Mexico.

This dissertation is less interested in proving or quantifying the degree to which racial teleology is perceptible in physical and cinematic space than it is with acknowledging the ways racial teleology has informed or nurtured epistemologies of space such as labor, agriculture, landscape, gridding, and even water. The relationship between racial teleology and spatial epistemology may exist through their similar use as tools serving the purpose of allocating or distributing power. Conversely, spatial epistemologies—particularly anti-colonial ones—may productively undermine both the epistemology and the teleology of race, troubling, for example, the very idea that Indigenous territory can be quantified through its geographic dimensions. The understanding in this dissertation, grounded in a literary and visual archive, is that racial teleology must be part of any discussion of space—and its artistic representations—in Latin America. To recognize the ways teleologies of race have, within the territories, spaces, and landscapes of colonization and coloniality, become bound up with other epistemologies of space, we must first address these teleologies of race themselves.²¹

1.3.1.1 Racialized Space and the Image

How do visual media like photography and film relate to the idea of race? Mark Reinhardt offers that “as ideology, institution, or lived experience, race is of course not made only by visual means, but its inequities and indignities remain tightly bound to ways of seeing human

²¹ For a more in-depth historical summary of the racialization of Indigenous peoples and the justification of private property laws over land, see Castellanos Guerrero, 100- 103.

difference and organizing the perceptual field” (175). In other words, the idea of race is always already bound up with social hierarchy and thus, informs all contributions to the visual economy of a race-informed society. Roland Barthes theorized that any repeated presentation of a semiotic code for spectators inculcates the logic of that semiotic code in those spectators: in this case, the semiotics of racialization presented repeatedly through visual media could contribute to the consolidation of the idea of race on a mass scale. Deeply influenced by Walter Benjamin’s idea of the optical unconscious, Reinhardt finds the common thread linking photographer, subject, audience, and the Bordieuan habitus. For Reinhardt, the unequal power relations established between humans on the basis of racialization play out in photography, but the way they play out may not reproduce hegemonic power structures. Indeed, a photograph’s discourse may be challenged both by photographic subjects and spectators: photography can uphold hegemonic perceptions of human difference or undermine it, either through the efforts of the photographer or in spite of them. It can make claims to the sovereignty of a nation-state, as seen in the cover image of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, or it can disturb the very act of looking at bodies racialized and commodified under capitalism and colonialism, such as photographs of the Kara Walker sculpture of a giant black female body in a sphynx pose carved entirely from cane sugar, titled “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby...”²². Cinema can operate similarly; it can be designed to articulate the idea of race to national identity, but through the *mise-en-scène*, acting or other components, disrupt both.

²² Reinhardt, 206.

The history of racial discourse or “raciology,” among other political events, has been traced to the Inquisition.²³ From this, we can already deduce how racial discourse gains importance within what later will become Mexico through the arrival of the Catholic soldiers and clergy in the Mexico Valley. The twin projects of colonization and the African slave trade contributed further to a consolidation of ideologies of race, thereby underscoring the utilitarian function of racial discourse in government policy, and to Francois Bernie’s *Nouvelle division de terre par les different especes ou races qui l’habitent* (1684). Importantly, Bernie tied race to land ownership, cautioning his French readers that Mughal India and the Ottoman empire were purveyors of injustice and barbarism because they did not exercise rights of private property over land. In this way, Prashad dually gestures to the racial other (non-French person) as barbarous and as having a different (read as inferior) relationship to land. This move by Bernie helps us understand how racial discourse and physical space have been bound since racial discourse emerged.

The Project on Ethnicity and Race in Latin America (PERLA) took stock of years’ worth of surveys across Latin America and concluded that “skin color is a more consistent but overlooked dimension of ethnoracial inequality in Latin America” (Telles, 4). In other words, the racialization of people on the basis of their skin color has material consequences, especially for people labeled as Afrodescended or Indigenous. The Mexican case is highlighted in the very first chapter of the PERLA publication, which further illustrates the manner racialization has created unequal access to basic human resources.

²³ Prashad, 15.

However, it has also been noted that people moving within Mexican space can “attain different racial status by moving proficiently through society” (2). That this ability to become re-racialized because of one’s location in society (and, I would add, physical space) is additional evidence that “race is a political construct tied to specific sociohistorical context rather than any genetic reality” (Dalton, 2). I would add that the political construct of race most explicitly manifests in the sociohistorical context of Mexico as geographic and spatial arrangements. In a manner of speaking, race is “reassigned” through the re-arrangements of people within society: how might moving through society occur if not through physical rearrangements of people within physical space, including travel, clothing choices, social interactions, and preference for particular places over others? In response to this question, Lund proposes addressing race in Latin America from a constructivist angle: that is, “wherein race names not objective difference but rather the practice of producing categorical human difference as race” (*Impure imagination*, 41). Racial difference builds social and physical environments and then those environments recapitulate that racial difference. For Lund, race in a Mexican context (and in a Latin American one) is most usefully understood as a concept that becomes a tool for “producing and naturalizing cultural difference historically” (*Impure imagination*, 32). Arguably, the use of race in this way even predates the conquest (the narrative surrounding Moors in the Spanish peninsula, for example. In Mexican Space, the teleology of race can must be traced back to the conquest.

Race informed spatial arrangements in Porfirian Mexico, too, as Palou points out in his read of Justo Sierra’s *The Political Evolution of the Mexican*. Sierra’s vision for how to create a Mexican National identity is explicitly grounded in physical space. Sierra never employs the words ‘indígena’ ‘indio’ or even ‘mestizo,’ instead referencing a binary between

the “*hombre de la tierra*, this man of the field or inhabitant of the land” (21), and a first-person plural (“our own apathy”, “his spirit and ours”). Palou underscores this racialized concept of space put forth by Sierra, noting that Sierra’s proposed treatment of the *hombre de la tierra*, “would require de-territorializing him, removing him from his land, recasting him into an urban subject, and de-racializing him through the very use of racial discourse, therefore neutralizing him. By turning him into a mestizo, the indigenous would be erased” (20). Palou does not gesture to his own understanding of race but does imply that the first-person plural from which Sierra enunciates is racially identified or self-identified as Mexican, while the *hombre de la tierra* must be Indigenous. For Sierra, the *hombre de la tierra*—a person tied to a particular place within Mexico without identifying as nationally Mexican—is necessarily Indigenous.

Attempts to make people—racialized as Indigenous within Mexican territory by Mexican intellectuals—come to identify as racially mestizo and Nationally Mexican, would be less a process of de-racialization, a term perhaps derived from Guillermo Bonfil Batalla’s own term, “de-Indianization,”²⁴ and more a question of re-racialization. So much of Mexican racial discourse, past and present, hinges on discussions of place, in this case the question of ancestral (apparently rural) land versus what Sierra calls “intensely cultivated land,” that is, urban space. Mexican intellectuals like Sierra understood race as a fundamental building block for Mexican territory: Indigenous was the person that lived on his or her ancestral land or in rural space, but move an Indigenous person to an urban center, and not only would that urban center—a non-Indigenous racially white space—become racially

²⁴ Bonfil Batalla, 17.

mestizo, but so would the Indigenous people who moved there through their interactions with an urban environment; Justo Sierra's pre-Revolution vision of a Mexican national territory.

Scholars date the dovetailing of photography with racial discourse to the late 19th century. Amos Morris-Reich, for his part, names *Races of Men*, first published in England in 1876 and penned by Carl Victor and Friedrich Wilhelm Dammann, as “arguably the most influential racial photographic book of the nineteenth century,”²⁵ noting that the photos of people, mostly individuals from colonized communities on various continents, are arranged such that the portrait photos are intended to be treated as specimens, and that they are arranged to convey the “primitive” qualities of the photographic subjects on the basis of anthropometrics. This kind of arrangement, capitulating photography to early anthropology, would pave the way for the use of various visual media within the field in Europe and in the Americas. Early adopters—all European, white, and male—of photography as an anthropological tool include Alphonse Bertillon, Francis Galton, and Rudolf Martin.²⁶ They used photography, Morris-Reich explains, to try to capture their imagination, that is, what they believed to be “both the visible and invisible features of race...to make it look real” (21). In essence, they aimed to prove the fact of race through the image photographic image, the implications of which proved deadly. Morris-Reich traces a direct line between this late 19th century practice of deploying photography as a way of trying to claim the veracity of race to the Nazis and to settler colonialist practice of racializing photography by European Jews in Palestine.

²⁵ Morris-Reich, 35.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 38-59.

These ideas and uses of photography for racializing ends would pave the way for the genocidal project at the center of Nazi science but would also spur debates about racial determinism within the U.S. academy. Opposition to racial determinism (though not to the factuality of race) was led by anthropologist Franz Boas, mentor to two budding anthropologists from Mexico named Manuel Gamio and Moisés Sáenz. However much opposed to racial determinism Boas or his pupils might have been, racial discourse was inevitably at the core of debates in the U.S. anthropologist milieu, and these debates also circulated within Mexican intelligentsia thanks to Boas' pupils and others during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Mexico. Debates about race and racial determinism centered on the polemic of anthropological photography and the classification through photography of racial types, and the attempt to prove the truth value of race through the photographic medium. Experiments carried out by Europeans travelling in the Andes, like the Crequi-Montfort, as well as Mexico-based anthropometric research like that conducted in 1894 by Francisco Martínez Baca and Manuel Vergara on criminal types in Puebla's penitentiary attempted to find correlation between ethnicity and criminality, using photography as a tool to achieve these ends.²⁷ The classification of humans based on photographic images had its roots in social Darwinism as well as course racial determinism.

²⁷ Dorotinsky Alperstein, "Photographing," 482.



Figure 1-7. Photograph. “Desfile de carros alegóricos durante la coronación de Viviana Primera.” India Bonita Contestants on a Parade Float Designed to Look like a Pre-Conquest Pyramid. Agustín Casasola, 1922. Mediateca INAH.

Although a perfectly analogous case did not transpire in Mexico, it is worth noting that one of the early adopters of Darwinian and Lamarckian racial discourse in Mexico, anthropologist, and author Vicente Riva Palacio, did display images and representations of people in a way that was meant to convey their indigeneity, and that the images were used to highlight the subjects’ teeth, skulls, and jaws.²⁸

The entanglements of photography with both race and national space are seldom detailed in scholarship on photography in Latin America, less often still are they related to European anthropological photograph. Deborah Poole’s scholarship on Andean photography is one exception to this general scarcity. She comments on the entanglement of the image with race and national space observing that, “to understand the logic, and to a certain extent, the origin of a modern understanding of ‘race’ we must look to the spatializing regimes, typological discourses, and comparative practices through which...visibility was ‘isolated’

²⁸ Áviles Galán, 98.

and the gaze ‘inscribed in social space’” (84). Her Foucauldian approach drives her to examine the way Humboldtian anthropology deployed photography as a tool for determining—or rather, proving—racial categories on the basis of telluric environments and anthropometrics.²⁹ Poole also suggests that, though an image may serve to consolidate regimes of race-as-truth, in some cases, “portraits of the popular classes seem to dismantle and subvert the framing devices inherent in studio photography...in these portraits of working-class and peasant subjects, the embodying and enframing technologies of race, type and photography itself have been rerouted and resisted” (213). In essence, the photographic space, as an extension of racialized Andean space, can be subverted by the very subjects of the image through their influence on the space within the image and physical and social space in which the image is created.

One of the most salient examples of the use of ethnographic images for commercial and popular purpose was the 1921 India Bonita beauty contest, advertised in newspapers across Mexico and a National public spectacle. The newspaper *El Universal* listed characteristics organizers sought, “such as an oval face, dark skin, braids, perfect teeth, and a ‘serene’ expression.”³⁰ The fragmentation and classification of Indigenous visual subjects recalling the anthropological narratives undergirding turn of the century photographic studies. The qualities listed in the India Bonita advertisements, however, were considered positive Indigenous characteristics, and thus were enjoyable to visually consume. The aim of the campaign was to reorient public opinion about the place of Indigenous people (and Indigenous non-whiteness)

²⁹ Poole, 82.

³⁰ López, 34-35.

within the nation: the photographic subject racialized as Indigenous was to be the subject of spectatorship, entertainment, even (Figure 1-7).

This project had direct links to Mexican National Institutions: Manuel Gamio, the pupil of anti-racial determinist Franz Boas, was one of the judges and he doubled down on the consumability of Indigeneity through his participation, as well as the notion that biometrics were an appropriate benchmark for determining Indigeneity. Gamio declared that he “was prepared to compare [winner María Bibiana Uribe's] physical measurements to Jenk's Anthropomorphic Index, a table of the ideal bodily measurements of each race" (Lopez, 41-2) in ‘defense’ of her selection as the most beautiful Indigenous woman. This widely publicized beauty pageant concretized the idea that Indigeneity could be visually determined and also converted into spectacle. María Bibiana Uribe’s photo circulated in national newspapers in Mexico after the pageant ended, further promoting the idea that “desirable Indianness” could exist within Mexican mestizo national space. Likewise, images of desirable racialized subjects could be commodified into consumable images to distribute nationally, furthering a habitus of Mexicanness and mestizaje through a process of codifying Uribe, a Nahua girl living in Puebla, within Mexico City as part of an emergent national visual economy symbolize national space.

Photography and cinema alike reference physical space and social space, with all social space implies from class and race identity formations to relationships between the researchers and the studied, and between photographers and the photographed. Visual economies produced within the power dynamics of such relationships, or simply within the context of broader social relations dictated by race and class categories, are mirrors held up



Figure 1-8. Photograph. "Pareja de danzantes con instrumentos musicales." in Popular Types Series. Hugo Brehme. INAH Mediateca.

to social space, but they can also be the medium through which these relations are dictated.

As Poole notes, photography in places like Cusco, Peru, during the early 1900s, "...the photographic portrait played a pivotal role in sedimenting the ideological construction of race—as a supposedly biological and physiological boundary that separates and thus constitutes distinct populations." (209). Material and corporeal arrangements within the photographic frame, the attempts or ability to render illegible any symbols of rural or agricultural space within the space of the photograph, are according to Poole a consequence of racial discourse and are an attempt to distance the photographic space from a space that future spectators—including the posing subjects—might racialize as highland, thus peasant, and thus Indigenous. We see this in the photography photographers like Hugo Brehme, whose *china poblana* and *charro* portraits, along with his portraits of posing *danzantes* (Figure 1-8) lent credence to the myth of national identity by giving form to "popular types," one of which was the millenary Indigenous dancers who evoked the pre-conquest Indigenous roots of mestizaje and the very idea of *Mexicanidad*.³¹ Photography and film alike—particularly images related to national identity, race, and the categorization of types—take on new meaning when addressed through visual critical race studies. Both photography and film can be analyzed in terms of their visual economies and the way each medium allows racial otherness to be staged and framed.

Critical race film studies as a discipline emerged in the 1970s—notably, around the same time as geocritical studies. This line of inquiry emerged in slightly more than a decade of marches, boycotts, protests and sit-ins protesting the ways race was used deterministically

³¹ Mraz, 4.

in social—and physical—space.³² What critical race film studies achieved as a means of drawing attention to film technique, in particular, it invites film researchers to consider physical position, that is, “how spectators’ visual perspectives are shaped using a combination of shot scale, *mise-en-scène*, music, and point-of audition sounds. This places viewers in specific spots in the diegetic space” (Sim, 33). Critical race studies, therefore, invites a consideration of the ways physical position, a construction of cinematic space, influence empathy, distancing, and proximity—emotional and spatial—to particular protagonists and their activities. The implications of this theory are significant, and they invite us to consider how Mexican territory, cinematic or physical, might be productively complicated with the use of physical position, inviting spectators to empathize with Indigenous or Afro-descended film subjects who overtly critique or undermine the aesthetics, politics, social arrangements, or work conditions within Mexico.

It is also important to acknowledge the points of contact between ethnographic audiovisual material in relation to race and racializing discourse. In the introduction to their edited volume, Dorotinsky Alperstein et al. draw on Banks et al. to establish the relationship between visual anthropology, ethnographic audiovisual material, and difference.

Se considera el cine etnográfico... aquellos productos audiovisuales que ejemplifican el registro de datos de culturas otras—por antropólogos y no antropólogos—o bien, se valen de las características de ese tipo de registros documentales para proponer una reflexión sobre los sistemas visuales que manifiestan la diferencia cultural. (13)

In other words, ethnographic film’s exchange currency is a discourse of cultural difference. However, as the coordinators continue in clarification, some of the most prominent purveyors

³² Sim argues for a postcolonial film analysis based less on visual analysis on the representations of race as such and more on the ways representations of race interpolate or overlook the intersections of race with class. See page 2.

of audiovisual material dealing with “cultural difference” in Mexico were the SEP, the DAI and its successor, the INI, and later, in at the end of the 1970s, the Archivo Etnográfico Audiovisual (AEA) and most recently the Comisión para los Derechos de Pueblos Indígenas (CDI).³³ Since Indigenous communities are the immutable subject of the audiovisual material these institutes produced and continue to produce, is impossible to discern where cultural difference ends, and racial categorization begins. It is the human subject of the material’s visual economy—typically from a racialized ethnic group or community—, the way the subjects are observed as objects of study, the kind of gaze deployed both by the creators and spectators of the audiovisual material, and the deployment of authoritative or scholarly discourse in, for example, the use voice overs, montage, or even or in on-screen text.³⁴ That ethnographic film can be a receptacle for or even a spring board for official Mexican policy towards Indigenous communities is undeniable, as is the fact that some ethnographic film conveniently reiterates cultural difference and social otherness along perceived lines of racial otherness. Yet rather than understand ethnographic cinema as a regurgitation of ideology, its value lies also in its ability to serve as an audiovisual archive—

a document—which permits spectators to perceive the processes through which the semiotics of Indigeneity and of alterity, more broadly, are socially and spatially produced.

The mention of ethnographic film in this dissertation is one that will then allow me to turn to the broader question at hand, which is that of where ethnographic film, racial discourse, and space meet. These three become entangled, it could be argued, through some combination of dialogue or voice over, the setting or *mise-en-scène* for shots and sequences,

³³ Dorotinsky Alperstein et al., 17.

³⁴ Dorotinsky Alperstein et al., 13.

the way human bodies are situated within frames and the background or setting, a particular type of voice-over paired with a film frame, or a gaze. look like in film? Reflecting on film landscapes in a U.S. context, Hollywood cinema has historically used landscape to racialize human beings and to symbolically code homes, land, and material objects on the screen (for U.S. and Mexican cosmopolitan audiences) as primitive or barbarousness, sometimes to unintentionally parodic effect.³⁵ They point out that “the colonialist inheritance helps account for what might be called the tendentiously flawed mimesis of many films dealing with the Third World. The innumerable linguistic, historical, and even topographical blunders in Hollywood films are illuminating in this regard. Countless safari films present Africa as the land of ‘lions in the jungle’” (Stam et al., 6). The racialized imaginary of a colonized space forecloses reality for the sake of symbolism. Nonetheless, as comical as these fantasy-based

³⁵ Stam et al., 6.



Figure 1-9. Photograph. "María Sabina, retrato." Huautla de Jiménez, 1970. Nacho López. Mediateca INAH.

mimeses might appear to the critical eye, they gesture to a deeper phenomenon in the ideological ties between film and space.

We find an example in Nicolás Echevarría's *María Sabina, mujer espíritu* (1979), which at once protagonizes María Sabina (Figure 1-9), Mazatec woman from Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca, as an authority figure on the basis of her ample knowledge of plant-based medicines and hallucinogenics. The lack of an omniscient narrator lends her additional centrality within the exegesis, yet the absence of the filmmaker also obfuscates the unequal power arrangement between the woman and the Mexico City-based film crew. Moreover, the film has an uncomfortably intimate relationship with the occidental habitus when it comes to the inclusion of Sabina's monologues regarding hallucinogenic drugs: her practice is represented within an occidental, consumerist cultural framework thus folklorizing plant

knowledge and paving the way for the appropriation of hallucinogenics as a recreational activity.

Arguably, a documentalist like Echevarría would never have had the gumption, nor the authority, to enter a Mexico City elite elder's home to interview her at length, barraging her with questions and shooting her with multiple cameras. Through such an ethnographic film, non-Indigenous audiences gained unapproved access to the intimate home space of María Sabina: this only affirmed the actions taken by ethnomycologists and hippies who had, since the 1950s, had entered Huautla in the Sierra of Oaxaca and effectively invited themselves to her home, which was actually burned to the ground as a result of unrest in Huautla due to the constant influx of non-Indigenous tourists hoping to consume María Sabina's mushrooms. *María Sabina, mujer espíritu* is an ethnographic film involving both the participation of María Sabina and represents her medicinal knowledge as essentially folkloric, a-historical and consumable, rather than acknowledging its immanent ties to Mazatec culture and spirituality, to the Sierra Mazateca and to the Mazatec communities whose internal structure and claim to ancestral land were being tested in unprecedented and devastating ways during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

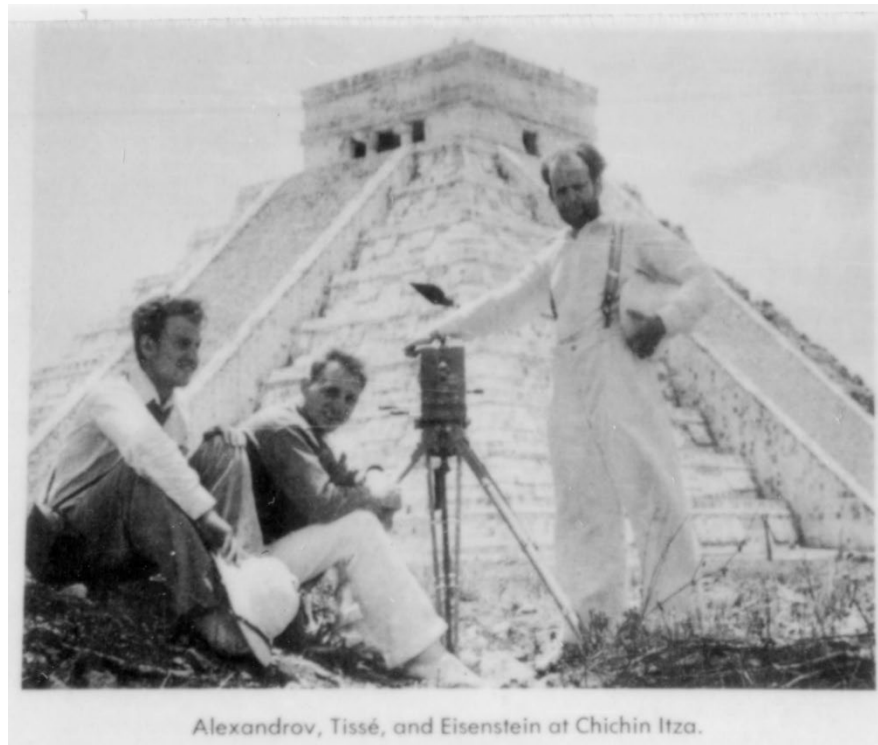


Figure 1-10. Still. Eisenstein and Film Crew at Chichén Itzá. *Que Viva Mexico!* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1931). Image 295. Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico.

1.4 Architectural Space

Although it may not superficially appear to serve Mexican National Space teleologically, archeological sites, preconquest architecture and pre-conquest aesthetics may be understood as part of the project of national space consolidation and power arrangements. Indeed, architecture was one of the means by which Mexican Institutions of Sovereignty deployed indigenismo within physical spaces.

Serge Gruzinski presents the idea of mestizo space as that in which the production of churches, roads and vicerojal buildings are planned for by European colonizers but physically created by Indigenous laborers, and that the reliance on Indigenous builders and tile makers resulted in the creation of mestizo buildings, mestizo tiles, and mestizo cities. He

also reads as mestizo the loas organized by Catholic missionaries, often written in, or translated to Indigenous languages, and acted by actors that Gruzinski racializes as Indigenous. He suggests that the Indigenous people who built the sets and acted in these plays engaged in a misappropriation of Spanish theatrical practices, by applying Mexica epistemologies of performance in which the actor and the character must be entangled. While Gruzinski labels these practices as mestizo in an attempt to reframe mestizaje away from its signifiers within the Mexican State project, I believe mestizo as a term deployed in a contemporary context cannot be thought of as a floating signifier. It is a term with racial implications. We must not downplay the compulsory, violent context in which racialized Indigenous peoples during the colonial period were obliged to participate in the elaboration of a colonial state. Yet it is also productive to read interventions of architectural space by people racialized as Indigenous against a hegemonic understanding of mestizaje, as Gruzinski attempts to do.

Even prior to the Revolution and the consolidation of mestizo national identity, architecture and pre-conquest archeology was beginning to serve as a tourist attraction, especially for European tourists. A slew of French and British travelers wrote of their visits during the nineteenth century, and highlighted the pre-conquest architecture of Mexico, of Chiapas, of Yucatan. This writing, predating the Revolution, situated pre-conquest architecture within Mexican national and regional space. Only later would pre-conquest architecture within the Yucatan Peninsula begin to be referred to as “Maya.”³⁶ The idea of a racialized architecture gesturing to a national racialize subject predates the Mexican

³⁶ Ramírez Potes et al., 43. They specifically cite “John Lloyd Stevens y Frederic Catherwood: ‘Incident of travel in Yucatan’ (1843, a partir del cual se popularizó la denominación ‘maya’)”.

Revolution: indeed, they reference an 1899 journal publication in which one Luis Salazar declares "La arqueología nos ha enseñado los estilos arquitectónicos de los antiguos pueblos de nuestro suelo; utilicemos sus datos y de la observación de monumentos hoy ruinosos, tomemos los principios y distintivos de nuestras futuras construcciones" (in Ramírez Potes et al, 44). The physical space, now "nuestro suelo," or our space is Mexican, and Salazar seems to suggest that Mexican built space ought to reflect the pre-conquest-built space (though we do not learn how he suggests this continuity be created).

Given the way indigenismo, as has been previously discussed, constituted an important race-centered teleology within Mexican space and racialized Indigenous space, it is sensible to conclude that neo-indigenista architecture was also grounded in racial thinking and attempted to consolidate Mexican social space through the construction and design of buildings.³⁷ The neo-indigenista architectural movement is every bit a spatial attempt to consolidate a sense of national space informed by the notion that Mexican national space is former Indigenous space but is now mestizo space.

Art deco and neo-indigenista architecture coalesced to create symbol-laden Mexican built space. One prominent example of a built space that reaffirms the racialization of Mexican space is the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. Ramírez Potes et al. offer a detailed description of the neo-indigenista elements of Bellas Artes: among other elements they identify as "prehispanicos" include the tiger and eagle warriors, the snakes and the Mayan deities carved into marble by Italian sculptor Gianetti Fiorenzo.³⁸ Moreover, the columns abetting the

³⁷ Interestingly, Ramírez Potes et al. suggest that neocolonial architecture was more common in Mexico in the 1920s and 1930s, and that this was the architectural style championed by José Vasconcelos, rather than neo-indigenismo. This dissertation will not further explore this apparent contradiction, but it would be a fascinating topic for future research. See page 45.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 45.

theater entrance are topped with bronze Chaac masks, while the doors to the theater display four Tlaloc masks in an obvious nod to Maya Yucatec and Nahuatl portrayals of rain gods. The deployment of racialized architectural design is evident in Mexico City, but also in Yucatan, where in the 1930s and 40s architects working on behalf of the local government built the *palacios municipales* of Hunucm and Oxcutzcab as well as the municipal market in Tekit in what Ramírez Potes et al. refer to as the Neo-Maya architectural style.

The use of racialized aesthetics in Mexican architecture in regions from Mexico City to Mérida underscores once more the role Indigenismo played in the racialization of space. Neo-indigenista structures created a visual and spatial dialogue the callis, the frescos, cities, and stelae from which they gathered their inspiration. By adding neo-Maya and neo-Indigenous elements to government buildings, the Mexican government could signal a kind of Mexican mestizo architectural space, and formally gesture to the land as previously inhabited by Maya and Nahua peoples and still market by architectural features predating the conquest and formation of the Mexican State, without having to acknowledge the processes by which the land had come to be divided into municipalities, allotted to politicians or wealthy developers, and made into spaces that symbolically and physically contained the administration of the law and of material resources. Moreover, continuity between Mexican art-deco architecture and pre-conquest architecture within Mexican cities functioned to symbolically confuse the cultural meaning of pre-conquest architecture: rather than existing as a challenge to Mexican space and the hegemony of a mestizo teleology, the callis and monuments could now be read as part of a Mexican landscape, and as spaces not attributable or affiliated with living Mexicans racialized as Indigenous.

Importantly, it is within the official indigenista movement in Post-Revolution Mexico that we may situate a specific architectural style in Mexico drawing on architectural elements and moldings meant to be legibly Indigenous. Preceding this aesthetic turn, the proverbial architects of Mexican Nationalism itself were deeply interested in pre-conquest archeology as a way of better studying Indigenous cultures, or as Miguel León Portilla suggested, to “conocer el pasado indígena, para comprender mejor su presente e incluso enriquecerlo con el antiguo legado” (Gamio et al., 11). Inevitably, this ancient legacy, the study of which was funded through the Escuela Internacional de Arqueología y Etnología Americana and later through the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, was fashioned as the Mexican National Legacy and its spaces, in turn, as Mexican National Spaces. This reinforced the notion that cultural practice, artifacts and archeological spaces racialized as Indigenous were at the core of Mexican National identity and, by extension, were emblematic of Mexican space. Manuel Gamio was one of the most fervent promoters of archeology in Mexico. He was also one of the organizers of the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano of 1940 that took place in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. Gamio’s legacy, then, lies at the intersection of archeological work on pre-conquest spaces and Official indigenismo.

Material evidence of the continued symbolic importance of claiming archeological sites as Mexican space exists in abundance: the Zona Arqueológica Teotihuacan, for example, run by the INAH and declared part of national cultural patrimony. Ingrid Kummels, writing of Teotihuacan, alleges that in 2010, the director of the INAH declared that “Teotihuacan es nuestra Grecia y nuestra Roma, la base de la cultura mexicana.”³⁹ She adds

³⁹ Kummels, 370.

that this statement, tying millennia-old, preconquest architecture to the nation state, is part of a broader trend in which various government functionaries and institutes (ranging from Gamio and the Dirección de Antropología, to the esoterisms of the 1970s) have described Teotihuacan as a place where Mexicans can go to be charged with spiritual energy or to perform New Age rituals.⁴⁰ Moreover, it is a site that has been indigenized through sequential decades of discourse and racial thought to the point where it has arguably come to represent the “indígena universal:” that is, the idea of a universal, and universally accessible Indigenous identity and way of being that is a stand-in for all practices and bodies racialized as Indigenous.⁴¹ As of 2021, the government website for Teotihuacan declared that the ancient city “Teotihuacan se ha convertido en un estandarte para los mexicanos en la defensa y resguardo del Patrimonio Cultural Nacional, su monumento principal, la Pirámide del Sol, es un icono de la identidad nacional, sobre todo como un elemento relevante del pasado prehispánico.”⁴² Access to the site is controlled, and the website identifies the government-owned property as having an extension of 264 hectares available to the public.⁴³

The archeological zones “under the INAH’s care” (bajo su resguardo) are 193 in total.⁴⁴ The politics of declaring sites National Patrimony are not the primary subject of this dissertation, but it is the interpolation of the Mexican mestizo state onto pre-conquest buildings and found objects that is of interest, as is the way that access to these buildings and spaces is strictly limited to those with money, with credentials, or high status within a government institute.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁴¹ Kummels, 400.

⁴² <https://www.inah.gob.mx/zonas/23-zona-arqueologica-de-teotihuacan>

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ <https://www.inah.gob.mx/zonas/5410-red-de-zonas-arqueologicas-del-inah>

The political, nationalist, and even esoteric significations of sites like Teotihuacan demonstrate how pre-conquest architecture is coopted achieve different political, social, and even economic ends, not the least of which includes the validation of a cultural patrimony. Teotihuacan repeatedly has served as a symbol for mestizo state subjectivity for fictive ethnicity and fictive shared ancestry, or even for the idea of Raza. This process inevitably involves the discursive and symbolic application of the idea of race to land, buildings, and people. It also makes assumptions about continued ties—or a lack thereof—between land appropriated by the state as archeological sites and people racialized as Indigenous. As is made evident in films like *Cascabel* or in the research of scholars like Kummel, the nationalization of archeological sites serves to reinforce or even prove national sovereignty to the inhabitants of Mexican territory and to the world.

Architecture in Mexico during the early to mid-twentieth century was based on some racial past or interest.⁴⁵ It was important to early 20th century Mexican intellectuals and architects that their architecture reflected the ontology of a national race—mestizaje. SEP director, essayist and intellectual José Vasconcelos described how all of South America would become its most modern self simultaneously through the consolidation of a continental, mestizo race and through the creation of a superior, unique architecture in its future city of Universópolis. He argued that architecture should reflect (and also encourage) social behaviors of miscegenation.⁴⁶ As such, the architectural style that emerged was a revival Spanish colonial architecture built with local materials and forms. This architectural style, Vasconcelos declared, would see the pyramid develop again, the erection of

⁴⁵ Carranza, 155.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 142.

colonnades in “useless and ostentatious displays of beauty.”⁴⁷ In a sense, architecture was supposed to visually metaphorize the racial mixture of Latin America’s population, and in fact the Spanish Colonial style was perceived as particularly apt for the project of creating a mestizo architecture. Carranza offers the example of the SEP. It is interesting that Vasconcelos leaned into the colonial style, since its hybridity was not necessarily qualified by designs in which Mexica, Tlaxcalteca, or Totonaco builders used their own society’s materials, symbolisms, or even culturally significant buildings. The colonial style architecture may have been subtly and visually influenced by its Indigenous builders, painters, and wood carvers, but the architecture itself was not necessarily designed to invite Indigenous families or city dwellers to move freely through the city.

Early to mid-20th century Mexican architects and intellectuals redeployed “the architectural elements, traditions, and practices of an uncontaminated race and ethnicity to both highlight the colonial difference and the destructive violence—the denial of non-European practices—through which it operated and legitimized itself” (Carranza, 157). On the one hand, the redeployment of pre-conquest architectural elements, traditions and practices were an attempt to undermine the architectural hegemony of European style, which had dominated during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, and that had been and continued to be equated with modernity as a means of excluding non-European histories and art forms. On the other hand, proponents of a decidedly non-European architecture tended to both essentialize the range of architectural styles utilized in pre-conquest and post-conquest times by Indigenous peoples. For example, architect Manuel Amábilis claimed that pre-conquest

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 145.

architecture—an essentializing category at best—was the most reliant architectural means to consolidate national identity because it would be familiar to racialized Indigenous peoples. This posture of course, assumed that all racialized Indigenous peoples living within Mexico were versed in a universal vernacular: an imagined, authentic pre-conquest architectural style. This architectural style, he sustained, would help racialized Indigenous inhabitants of Mexico City feel reflected in the buildings and architectural designs amongst which they moved in their day-to-day activities. By a similar token, Francisco Mujica believed that skyscrapers could represent a unique Mexican identity rooted in authenticity—that is, in nature and pre-Hispanic arts.



Figure 1-11. Photograph. Monumento a la Revolución. Mexico City, 2022.

Fundamental examples of this architectural style may be found in two monuments situated at the heart of Mexico City. These are the Monumento a la Revolución and the Monumento a la Raza (Figure 1-11). The former, located just blocks from the Porfiriato-era avenue Reforma, was intended to serve as the Palacio Legislativo Federal, initiated in 1910 under Porfirio Díaz. The ruin of this once-future palacio became the site for an entirely different architectural project—an arch in commemoration of the Revolution. The project was culminated under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, and the logic of building such a monument fit neatly within his presidency’s attempt to consolidate national identity. According to the official newspaper of the National Revolutionary Party (later the PRI), the monument should be “not one that satisfies a faction, but rather something that consecrates the great success of our racial, cultural, and economic integration, an essential fact of our civilization” (Benjamin, *La Revolución*, 127). As spatial theorists have observed, physical spaces may be shaped and molded by social behaviors and space, and indeed, the habitus of the 1930s politicians, artists, authors, and architects located in Mexico City had embraced the mestizo nationalism, and the National Revolutionary Party’s assertion that a monument to the revolution should stand as a testimony to Mexican racial segregation reflects that thinking.

The architect of the monument to the revolution, Carlos Obregón Santacilia, had grown up in Mexico City and had spent years envisioning the monument. The very materials themselves were decidedly regionally specific: chiluca stone and black, volcanic rock, practically ubiquitous within the Valley of Mexico. The design also included two observation decks and elevators—which are still used today by tourists and sightseers who must pay six dollars to ascend: an amount prohibitively expensive for working-class families. Each of the four columns sustaining the monument’s arches display a sculpture. These sculptures, created

by Oliverio Martínez, mimicked the geometric art-deco lines of the monument's architecture, and featured men, women, and children, families, and soldiers, broad faced and broad-shouldered, with high cheekbones, almond eyes, and straight hair.

According to Thomas Benjamin, the four sculpture groups have distinct meanings: one corner symbolizes Reform, in which the standing figure holds a sword, while two sitting figures hold books, perhaps indicating that reform arises through education, law, and armed resistance. Then there is the Redemption of the Peasant, in which the figures, identified as campesinos, hold a scroll that may be a land title, one reads a book, and the other, a mother, holds a child. On another column, which is said to symbolize the Redemption of the worker urban laborers hold machine parts or a hammer or display their physical strength. Lastly, there is a corner with what Benjamin describes as a “stoic” Indigenous figure flanked by a mother and child and a kneeling man holding a shattered chain. We might ponder why it was important for the revolution's national monument to dedicate its fourth section to figures whom a spectator might identify as vaguely Indigenous, rather than mestizo. Was this an attempt to gesture to the role of the revolution in bringing the Indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica into the Mexican social body? Or was it a reminder that the Indigenous struggle was somehow still seen as distinct from that of the peasant, national reform, and urban labor?

Regarding photography in Mexico during the 20th century focusing on architecture or archeology dating to before the conquest—that is, pre-conquest architecture—research is scant. However, Susan Sontag comes close to a general theory of what she calls the architecture genre of photography. Albeit the link between space and race does not factor explicitly into her theory, the social incubator for the architecture genre is clearly outlined as

pertaining to an enlightened, rationalist discipline (the same point of origin for anthropometric, eugenic photography classifying racialized types). Photographing ruins, she points out, is a practice that emerged from “the eighteenth-century literati’s discovery of the beauty of ruins” (79) and she adds, a photograph of architecture creates an artificial ruin—that is, a built space perceived as belonging to the past. This logic, of course, undergirded early to mid-20th century Mexican anthropological discourse about Indigenous peoples. Sontag adds that this photographic genre assists to “deepen the historical character of a landscape, to make nature suggestive—suggestive of the past” (80). It is difficult not to spot the relevance of Sontag’s observation for the Mexican State’s project of national identity. The cementation of a national Mexican History is rooted in physical space and material objects, to which photography as consumable object also adds a layer of truth value.

Photography and film alike—depicting temples and other sites of non-European architectural design and labelled as photos and films of and about Mexico—tap into this visual suggestiveness of the landscape as having an Indigenous past, but a mestizo present: Mexican space is racialized along a linear chronological axis. John Mraz alludes to this when he writes that during the 19th century and into the early 20th, photography and paintings by European artists attempted to capture Mexicanness through the genre of type photos for European consumption and interpretation of the idea of Mexicanness. These photos had “the aesthetic preconditions for representing Mexico as a picturesque land abounding in exotic types” (28). Later, Mraz adds, the de facto social currency solidifying an idea of Mexicanness was transmitted through the circulation postcards depicting pre-conquest ruins and colonial architecture meant to convey to national and international visitors the idea that Mexicanness was a national identity rooted in a common past. German photographer

Hugo Brehme was another photographer instrumental in crafting a photographic environment designed to normalize racialization and the organization of Mexican space on the basis of race. Brehme was a German emigre with a photography studio in Mexico City who, whether intentional or not, interpolated his understanding of Mexicanness into his photography. His images are relatable to images produced under the auspices of the Mexican government and with the collaboration of Mexican Newspapers, who very deliberately attempted to fashion a visual index of Mexican Space, with the tacit understanding that racialization was key to a consolidation of this space. Mraz analyzes one of Brehme's photographs in which a boy poses for the camera. The boy, is already racialized so that Mraz, thinking within the habitus of Mexican visual culture, identifies him as "an Indian boy posed so as to be completely enveloped by the reconstructed Mixtec ruins at Mitla, Oaxaca, his ragged clothing absorbed by folkloric yesterdays" (80). Mraz reads the image as it was intended: a gesture to the idea that nature is a quintessential element of Mexican space, and that racialized campesinos and working-class subjects of the state are meant to be understood as always already having a specific relationship to the land. As Mraz puts it, "campesinos are portrayed as products of the earth and sky: they seem to grow out of the land—like the magueys which frame them from below..." (80). What Mraz gestures to without naming outright is the visual production a narrative that within Mexican space, racialized people are linked to an austere, remote, static, or decrepit landscape: this is the twin narrative of associating built, urban space with racial whiteness or light skinned-mestizaje.

The space in which a photograph or film is shown is as important as the space that the medium captures and creates. Sontag makes this point when writing of W. Eugene Smith, a white photographer in Minamata, Japan. She points out that the photos might "seem

different” depending on the location and manner in which they are displayed, such as in a gallery, in a political demonstration, or in a private living space.⁴⁸ Indeed, what Sontag and Mraz gesture to is the way that photography, while a product of space—social and physical—is also perceived in a way determined by the architectural space in which it is perceived. These spaces might be the Iturbide Palace, the Palacio de Bellas Artes, or the homes of elite inhabitants of artist-friendly San Miguel de Allende, in an ayuntamiento, or in a university space such as the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural. Sontag’s point is an important one that may be extended beyond photography to film: what impact does architectural space have on the perception of cinema that is screened within it, and what impact does cinema have on architectural spaces in which it is screened?

The creative process of cinema is conditioned by the environment—which we will understand as territory—which the creators inhabit.⁴⁹ This observation aligns with theories of landscape as a representation of territory that is in fact a social referent as much as it is a material one. Indeed archeology—pre-conquest architecture—plays a critical role in the collective Mexican imaginary.⁵⁰ While some films include archeological sites as setting, others include them as intentional landscapes woven into the film narrative.⁵¹ A number of documentaries made under the auspices of Manuel Gamio at the archeological site in Teotihuacan conveyed some sense that Mexican national identity was being unearthed: displayed as a vestige of the past but also a testament to the acumen of contemporary archeologists, the documentaries lent credence to the concept of a collective history for the

⁴⁸ Sontag, 106.

⁴⁹ Vela, p8.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p9.

⁵¹ For more on visual studies’ distinctions between setting and landscape, see Lefebvre, *Landscape*, 20-24.

nation. Of course, Teotihuacan was a city belonging to a society that had fractured well before Tenochtitlan was built, but the intent to claim Teotihuacan as Mexican territory required Tenochtitlan be assimilated into a narrative of pre-conquest greatness that Mexico had inherited.

Gamio's aim was for film to serve as a means to communicate an official version of national history to the general public, including what Aureliano de los Reyes calls "la gran masa inalfabeta de la Sociedad mexicana" (34). His preferred means for conducting this project entailed dovetailing film with his research on "características raciales, en modalidades de cultura material e intelectual...de las condiciones geográficas, climatéricas y biológicas que habitan" (De los Reyes, 44). Cinematographic documentation and analysis would allow state subjects to "rediscover" the marginalized racialized Indigenous peoples of Mexico and their lived spaces as symbols of Mexican national identity: this was the route to forging the nation, both demographically and geographically. In this way, early Mexican ethnographic film served the purpose of affirming the existence of racial difference within what Gamio himself called "el territorio mexicano."⁵²

⁵² De los Reyes, 1983, 41.

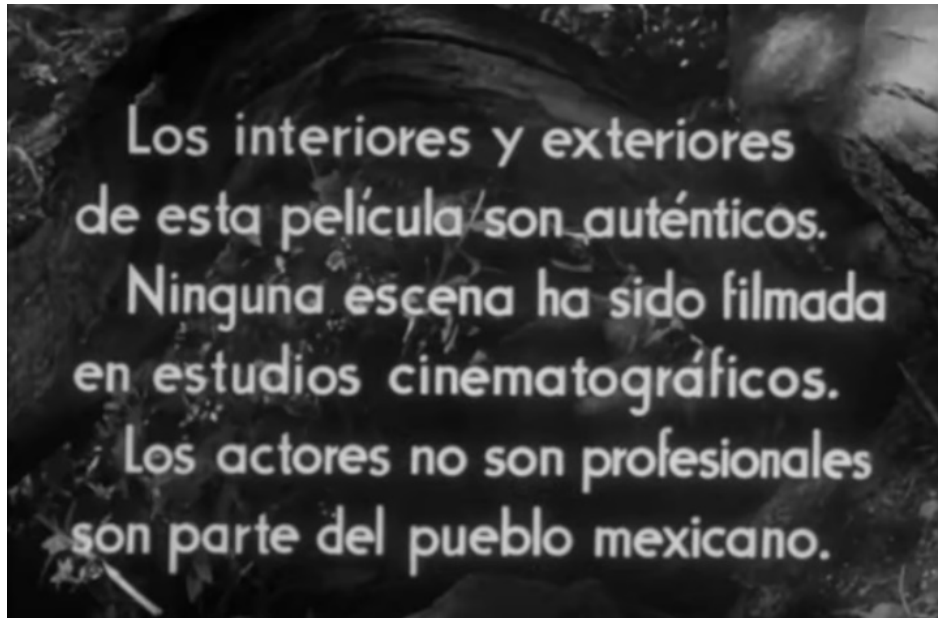


Figure 1-12. On-screen text. *Que Viva Mexico!* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1931).

Gamio filmed the inhabitants in the Teotihuacan Valley where he had been conducting archeological digs. The timing of this filming was auspicious: silent film had become popular. This coincidence arguably allowed for a general public interest in the new medium to dovetail with anthropological interest in quantifying and historicizing race and pre-conquest history in Mexico. No medium was better suited to the task of articulating an idea of both race and nation in a way that could appeal to—and convince—mass audiences.

Arguably, all archeological sites in Mexican film are intentional landscapes because, since early in Mexican fiction film history, they have served as a referent for a collective past and partial Indigenous ancestry. *Zitari* (1931, Miguel Contreras Torres), was filmed partially at Teotihuacan, and *QVM*, was filmed at Teotihuacan and Chichén Itzá, treating Teotihuacan and Chichén Itzá alike as referents for Indigenous architecture and thus Mexican patrimony. A paragon of mid-century Mexican cinema dealing in national space and gesturing explicitly to racial discourse, *Raíces* establishes a spatial concept mere minutes into the film: opening

credits roll against a montage of deep and wide-angle shots beginning with a crane shot of the Paseo de la Reforma, framed on both sides by skyscrapers. The first cut, a jump cut, is to a 45-degree shot of the Avenida de la Independencia, followed by additional jump cuts to a dutch angle in which the horizon is actually on a downward slant from the left side of the screen to the right, and pans vertically from a streetcar up to a skyscraper. Another jump cut and a fixed frame, dutch angle, deep shot of pedestrians hurrying towards the camera.

Another jump cut and a dutch angle with UNAM students hurrying past, the UNAM's iconic central library façade in the background. More jump cuts: from a dutch angle, a young man squints into the viewfinder of a movie camera; a spinning panning shot at a dutch angle captures the towering tanks of an oil refinery, then a crane shot panning across the same; Popocatepetl, luminous and snow-peaked, filling the frame; roaring waterfalls shot in a fixed frame; close-ups of dew-covered lilies; then a cut to a forest, with gnarled tree roots twisting their way down towards the corners of the frame. Suddenly, the title screen, and then an on-screen message directed at spectators informing that the spaces, interior, and exterior, in which the film is shot are “authentic” and that the actors are non-professional and “parte del pueblo mexicano.”

As with its contemporaries such as *Tarahumara, cada vez más lejos* (Luis Alcoriza, 1965), *Raíces* engages in ethnographic film technique by including montages of shots that linger over archeological sites, allowing spectators to eye the sculpture as if visiting the sites: these sites, human-made interventions in the landscape are signified by archeologists, anthropologists, and of course, filmmakers, as national identity, are meant to be observed as spectacle. Indeed, as Carl J. Mora suggests, *Raíces*' appeal to European critics was probably a result of its long, traveling shots of archeological sites and human movement, as well as the

crane shots making both space and the people within it seem exotic and distant. This ethnographic treatment, which Mora describes as anthropological, consistent with examples offered earlier in this chapter, is no better emphasized than in the on-screen message during the opening sequences: a clarifying statement alleging that the physical spaces of the film are, in fact, real, and not the product of set design, and that the actors who move within them are not trained, thus making the Brechtian insinuation that the actors are re-enacting, on some level, their lived experiences within the physical spaces they stage the film sequences. As such, the film appears to narrow the gap between physical space and cinematic space. The homes, churches, and henequen fields are not only settings for the melodramas of each vignette: they are part of the visual economy established at the start of the film linking “el pueblo mexicano” to geographic and architectural spaces.

Such architectural and labored spaces, carefully shot and arranged in the opening minutes of the film, and during the opening montage of the fourth and final vignette, “La Potranca,” are meant to instruct, including through the behaviors of the French archeologist Don Eric, who sexually harasses Xanath, the young woman whom he employs as an errand girl. The spectator is primed to perceive the subsequent landscapes, settings, and spaces in relation to the larger idea of Mexican national roots as being fixed within pre-conquest architectural space, a space that must be defended from foreign predators both of women and of archeological digs, which has already been established as a source of national patrimony. The labyrinth, multilevel space of the archeological site and the final sequence of the vignette, the cinematographic space of which is constructed based on crane shots of *voladores de Papantla* in the center square of the town, area configured as microcosms of national space insofar as it is these contexts in which the conflict between white-identifying,

French urbanites and racialized townspeople play out over reproduction rights and bodily autonomy, which is also tied to the ability to move through space.

Jumping to present day, I would like to offer a personal example. In late December 2021, I found myself at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, in Tlatelolco, Mexico City. I was surprised to encounter a flyer advertising an open-air screening for the film *499* (Rodrigo Reyes, 2020), a film in which a Spanish soldier—a colonizer who has participated in the violent colonial apparatus—suddenly awakens, 499 years later, and tries to comprehend the interpersonal violence in twenty-first century Mexico. The film's grappling with layers of historical violence dating from the conquest to the present recalls a particular moment of violence that took place in the same location where the film would be screened. In a sense, the film space, and the architectural space in which the film was screened both reinforced the architecture of the space, with its visibly absent marks of the violence that occurred within that space on October 2nd, 1968 and invited us to consider how architectural space in Mexico has both served as a stage—and an eraser—for violence past and present.



Figure 1-13. Photograph. “Trabajadores durante la reconstrucción de Teotihuacán.” Anonymous. 1910.

Mediateca INAH.

1.5 Labored Space

Labor is both a product and a shaper of space. Raffestin’s theory of territory posits that labor is what creates power within territory as well as being the very force shaping territory. He describes labor (*travail*) as the very network that keeps territory in existence, an informed energy that builds everything, but also changes everything, and maintains human relations. In other words, labor is the means through which social space interacts with physical space. Labor allows a society to mine energy sources such as coal or materials for batteries such as lithium, it keeps the electrical grid functional, keeps babies fed and children educated, and makes sure we keep our coffee cups filled and meat in the grocery stores.

A “labor/racial axis” structured—and indeed quite literally built—the colonial matrix of power during the centuries of Spanish imperialism.⁵³ This matrix of power, it is argued, did not simply disappear when haciendas did. Indeed, the construction of ultramodern concrete shell architectural designs in urban, postwar Mexico, at which dark skinned mestizo and even Indigenous workers represented the labor force, were contemporary manifestations of this same matrix, and arguably of the labor/racial axis as well.

Space—its invention, its design, and its architecture—is labor, or at least this is the argument María González Pendas makes when writing of trendy concrete shell architecture built in Mexico City in the 1960s. This assertion invites a deeper examination of how so-called modern spaces have been constructed, by whom, and at whose cost. When we consider space in terms of labor, and when that labor is conducted by racialized Indigenous and dark-skinned mestizo workers without the availability of workers compensation, job security, a union, or social security, the theory of space as labor allows us to consider the ways modern architecture and built spaces depend on the labor of Indigenous migrants.

The concrete shell architecture style to which González Pendas refers when writing of spatialized labor is, even by today’s standards, considered a novelty. The most globally circulated example of this architectural style is the Sydney Opera House, and the newness of this style, which was adopted for various mid twentieth century projects in Mexico, was seen as evidence of Mexico’s economic development. However, architectural feats such as these were made possible only through the underpaid, high-risk labor of mostly mestizo and

⁵³ González Pendas, 119.

Indigenous migrant laborers. The concrete shell technology, González Pendas contends, relied on what she deems a “racial extractive economy...where value from the indigenous body of the worker was mined...” (132). A space reliant on a racial extractive economy and on the labor of Indigenous bodies is hardly a new concept in the scale of Mexican history: the hacienda is undoubtedly one labored space, as are the latifundio and the *plantación*, which were considered at one time emblematic of Mexican wealth and power. Magnus Mörner notes that by the end of the eighteenth century in rural regions of New Spain, the majority of people living in rural areas resided on haciendas, and the system endured into the twentieth century.⁵⁴ The indentured servitude economy that was the foundation for securing hacienda labor effectively tied the land to laborers.⁵⁵ Indeed, the debt system ensured that peons might be required to work for nearly a year without buying food or supplies from the *tienda de raya*

⁵⁴ For more on haciendas in the 20th century, see Alson et al., and Mattiace et al.

⁵⁵ Mörner, “La hacienda hispanoamericana,” 32.



Figure 1-14. Still. *La casta divina* (Julián Pastor, 1977). Filmoteca UNAM, México.

in order to pay off their debt. Contracts were verbal and payment was largely given in material goods rather than money.

The hacienda was its own species of social space, orchestrated through the arrangement of the peons' homes in relatively proximity to the mansion and the chapel, which was a natural point of convergence for peons as well as the hacendados and a theatrical space in which the social and economic hierarchy of white or light-skinned hacendados, overseers (mayordomos), and mostly Indigenous peasants could be reinforced. In certain cases Indigenous laborers who were not peons performed migrant or seasonal labor on haciendas and lived near but not on them. The hacienda system was, at times, dependent on the willingness of Indígenos locals to work: as one Spanish hacendado complained in a letter in 1694, "El alto precio el trigo se debe a la escasez resultante de la pereza de los indios

en el Valle que se rehúsan a trabajar en mi hacienda”.⁵⁶ Historic anecdotes suggest that until the nineteenth century, peons could not inherit their parents’ hacienda debt. On the other hand, if they did not pay the tribute assigned to the based on their racial categorization, they could be forced to work on haciendas or jailed.⁵⁷ Particularly detailed fictional representations of these labored spaces may be found in literary works like Rosario Castellanos’ *Balún Canán* and *Juan Pérez Jolote* (Ricardo Pozas) or films like Julian Pastor’s *La casta divina* (1977) that fictionalizes an episode of the *Guerra de Castas* in Yucatán, in which hacienda workers—mostly Maya—waged a decades-long rebellion against the Yucatec oligarchy.⁵⁸

1.5.1 Labor, Ethnography, and Indigeneity

Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky uses the term “process genre” to categorize cinema that may or may not be ethnographic, is interested in manual labor, and that depicts the step-by-step processes through which this labor conducted. This theory is useful in thinking about the ways labor may be represented in film, and especially the kinds of labor linked to the production of power within a territory. It is especially so because Aguilera Skvirsky’s theory deals with New Latin American Cinema, which, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, was concerned with matters like poverty and labor exploitation. She points out that “Marxist filmmakers from Latin America have also adapted the process genre to their romantic anticapitalist political projects. [The chapter surveys the implications of] the process genre's frequent treatment of the relationship among nation, development, and civilization through

⁵⁶ Mörner, 92.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁸ See Canto López, 1976.

an extended analysis of the early nonfiction process films of the New Latin American Cinema” (Aguilera Skvirsky, 49). Mexican film is not amongst the transatlantic selection of films serving as case examples in the book, but both *Ayautla* and *Etnocidio* may be usefully considered in terms of this film category, since both explore aesthetics of labor within the context of development and infrastructure projects as a counterpoint to industrial mechanization and extractivism.

Visual deconstructions or meditations on tasks point to the coexistence and contradictions between industrial labor—a burgeoning sector of labor for non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous people in Mexico in the 1970s—and artisanal labor, a sector adapted from rural and often Indigenous artistic practices and adopted by the Mexican government as national patrimony renamed “folklore.” Aguilera Skvirsky writes that the process genre represents “distinct modes of organizing labor that are rarely treated together: artisanal and industrial production” and she points out that “artisanal craft production and industrial mass production seem to belong to different worlds—the one 'primitive' and hand-bound; the other capitalist and machinic. But the process genre brings them together in a single representational project” (Aguilera Skvirsky, 4). Aguilera concludes by adding that the process genre represents society's mode of production. Indeed, in the cases of *Ayautla* and *Etnocidio*, the juxtaposition of weaving and spinning with road building and machine supervision questions the valorization of modes of labor over others. Moreover, it seems that this juxtaposition emphasizes the way land use and collective versus individualized labor are two touchstones for the treatment of Indigenous communities and indigenous space.

On the urban photography of Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Roberto Tejada notes that the photographer “deprivatized public space as enacted by the new revolutionary elites, in order

to make arguments about the workday transit of modern subjects in Mexico, often nameless figures” (114). Álvarez Bravo, active in the 1930s, sensed how the post-revolutionary government’s promises of economic parity, modernity, and working-class national identity had been thrust most directly upon urban space and working-class laborers with the intent of consolidating a culturally homogenous and nationalized proletariat. Álvarez Bravo’s visual codifications of economic class acknowledge the shared experience of laborers in early 20th century urban Mexico while refusing to engage in racializing gestures common in amongst his contemporaries engaged in ethnographic or picturesque photography. In revealing the contradictions of industrialism and precarity under capitalism, Álvarez Bravo’s images gestured—albeit subtly—to the effects of the revolutionary elite project for national consolidation on the organization of space, on transit, on labor, and on discourses of sameness or otherness.

Ayautla and *Etnocidio* both struggle to articulate the positionality of artisanal labor. Both avoid the common Mexican ethnographic film trope linking artisanal labor to national culture. It would have been incongruous—or semiotically near impossible—for Mexican filmmakers to frame artisanal labor as a metaphor for Indigenous political agency at the time, given the dominance of ethnographic discourse in Mexico with respect to artisanal labor. As previously mentioned, by the time José Roviroso and Paul Leduc were active on the filmmaking scene, the Mexican government had already been promoting artisanal labor as a symbol for homogenous mestizo nationalism for decades. Given this longstanding government policy, if Roviroso or Leduc or their colleagues had attempted to uphold the New Latin American Cinema tendency to resignifying manual labor, they would likely have been perceived as underscoring national cultural policy.

In Mexico, the discursive centering of a racialized mestizo national subject was already decades old. Long before the New Latin American Cinema movement, Mexican cinema had begun imagining a racialized, mestizo working class or campesino community that represented the national body. That imagination was revolutionary in the early twentieth century, but within a few decades had been molded into a product of the state. Indigenous communities within the national space were imagined in one of two ways: they were either assimilated to the point where they were bilingual or even monolingual in Spanish, practiced syncretistic or Catholic rituals, and participated in the national economy through agricultural offerings, or they were mostly non-Spanish speaking, continued to practice syncretistic religious rituals, and participated in the national economy through the sale of artisanries or through the tourist industry, but only through state interventions and coercion.

While racialized labor and relations to land are New Latin American Cinema themes, they are also ethnographic. Just as *Ayautla* and *Etnocidio* share themes and techniques with Third Cinema but do not necessarily fit neatly within the genre due to a subdued critique of any national government, it also finds common ground with ethnographic cinema. *Ayautla* includes multiple sequences featuring subsistence activities and other scenes gesture to ritual through sequences depicting funerals,⁵⁹ and *Etnocidio* engages with the Mexican ethnographic film tendency to tie present-day populations to pre-conquest architecture and archeological, as if to prove the millenarism or exoticism of contemporary inhabitants of the Valle de Mezquital. Moreover, the ethnographic mode presents itself as an authoritative

⁵⁹ Fatimah Rony points out that the prevailing idea of ethnographic film is that it “portrays whole cultures within the span of an hour or two...with subsistence activities, kinship, religion, myth, ceremonial ritual...an ‘ethnographic’ film becomes a metonym for an entire culture” (7).

source of knowledge, relying on techniques such as non-diegetic voice overs and non-diegetic on screen-text.

Both films eschew the use of an academic, authoritative, non-diegetic voice over, but do rely on both the soundtracks from interviews and on-screen text to present information meant to be taken as fact relating to matters like morality rates, historical events, and migration rates. Indeed, Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky appraises films that may or may not qualify as New Latin American Cinema, and that treat labor with ethnographic cinematic formulas, as ones “that have often also plotted nations or peoples or the societies they depict along an evolutionary timeline of human history that supposedly leads from a 'primitive' past to a modern present” (Aguilera Skvirsky, 148). The trouble with ethnography, ultimately, is its inability or unwillingness to disturb a status quo informed by the idea of racial difference and Otherness in which the racial and cultural Other is categorized as millenary or even backward as a justification for interventions by the state or other power-structuring institutions.

Rovirosa treads a fine line in the short film *Ayautla* between depicting the injustices of agricultural labor for rural, Mazatec, coffee-growing communities on the one hand, and absorbing, mesmerizing, romanticizing depictions of labor on the other. Sequences like the ones depicting dozens of men preparing a field for sowing that depicts inhabitants performing labor and conducting tasks, sometimes are accompanied by a non-diegetic voice over from the interview that is only partially included in the film strip but stretches on into other shots. Still, the film does not simply offer spectators a chance to observe the lives of Indigenous Others living a “simpler” lifestyle: rather, the film implies that such simplicity is not necessarily a choice, but a necessity forced by the conditions of hundreds of years of

disenfranchisement, underpayment for labor, and territorial displacement. These realities, as will be discussed further on, have very real consequences for the landscape and the inhabitants of San Bartolomé Ayautla.

The pairing of ethnographic techniques and aesthetics with the political and social critiques as in the case of *Ayautla* and in other films of the New Cinema tradition is an apparent contradiction since one upholds a colonial gaze while the other mounts an attack on imperialism and capitalism. Inevitably, some New Latin American Film romanticizes “a simpler way of life prior to the irreversible destruction imperialist globalization has wrought for so-called primitive peoples and non-industrialized ways of life” (Aguilera Skvirsky, 148). The New Latin American Film genre was, after all, birthed by a generation of mostly bourgeois filmmakers, and many of their films reinforced status quo ideas about African diasporic and Indigenous communities across the hemisphere far more often than its acolytes have been willing to accept. Nonetheless, some New Latin American Films with ethnographic elements—like *Ayautla*—disrupt viewer expectations or pre-suppositions of “supposedly 'primitive' lifeways of indigenous and African-descended peasants, they thwart the spatiotemporal logic of much ethnographic filmmaking...by insisting on the dynamism and innovation of the depicted craft production” (Aguilera Skvirsky, 149). Indeed, it might be contended that Rovirosa and Leduc needed to approach labor from not only a materialist perspective but also from a culturally specific one in order to disrupt the capitalist notion that industrialization is directly correlated to increased social and economic wellbeing. Indeed, what is particularly evident in *Etnocidio* is that there is no correlation between industrialization in the Mezquital Valley and ameliorated poverty, illness, or racism for

Hñáhñú communities. What politically charged films like *Etnocidio* and *Ayautla* offer, amongst other observations and commentaries, is the opportunity for bourgeoisie or aspiring middle-class spectators enchanted by promises of a modern, industrial utopia to rethink the relations and means of production and to consider who these relations stand to benefit. As Aguilera Skvirsky points out, films attending to “[task] sequences tend to produce...absorption in the spectator...Furthermore, they all depict labor, capaciously understood, and they do so in such a way as to evoke something of the sensuous encounter of the human body, instruments, and materials. Finally, the sequences provide—or convey the impression of having provided—knowledge about the world” (Aguilera Skvirsky, 15). Sequences depicting labor as a process that follows a series of steps has the potential to make labor seem easy or elegant to perform. Leduc, in particular, turns this mode of representation on its head by refusing to visually separate labor and task-related sequences from the spaces in which they are carried out and the bodies that supervise them or engage in them. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, it is precisely Leduc’s manner of locating labor within space allowing spectators to appreciate the exploitative nature of industrialized labor on the human body as well as the environment.

Ayautla and *Etnocidio* examine mechanized and artisanal labor in a way that troubles the perceived unskilled nature of artisanal labor by underscoring the dexterity with which corn is rinsed, or mesquite is shaved and then spun into chord. In acknowledging the skill required to complete all manner of tasks, these films each contribute to a larger debate about the value of labor—particularly that of labor conducted by racialized communities—and of artisanal or non-mechanized tasks.

In particular, the emphasis of film frames and sequences on domestic labor performed by women in both Ayautla and on the small homesteads around Izmiquilpan underscore these activities as pertaining to the specific place in which they are performed. It is as if these activities, randomly edited into the montage, could somehow capture the essence of life in these places, and that somehow reveal some fundamental truth about Mazatec or Hñáhñú spaces and lifestyles in those spaces in general. The other implication here the kinds of labor performed on screen divide Ayautla and the communities of the Mezquital Valley from Mexican national space: the films implicitly suggest that when space is used industrially and labor is mechanized, it ceases to be part of that space in which weaving, clothes washing, and mesquite chord-making tasks are performed. As we will see in subsequent chapters, this consideration of spaces and labor becomes particularly pertinent in *Ayautla* and *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital*.

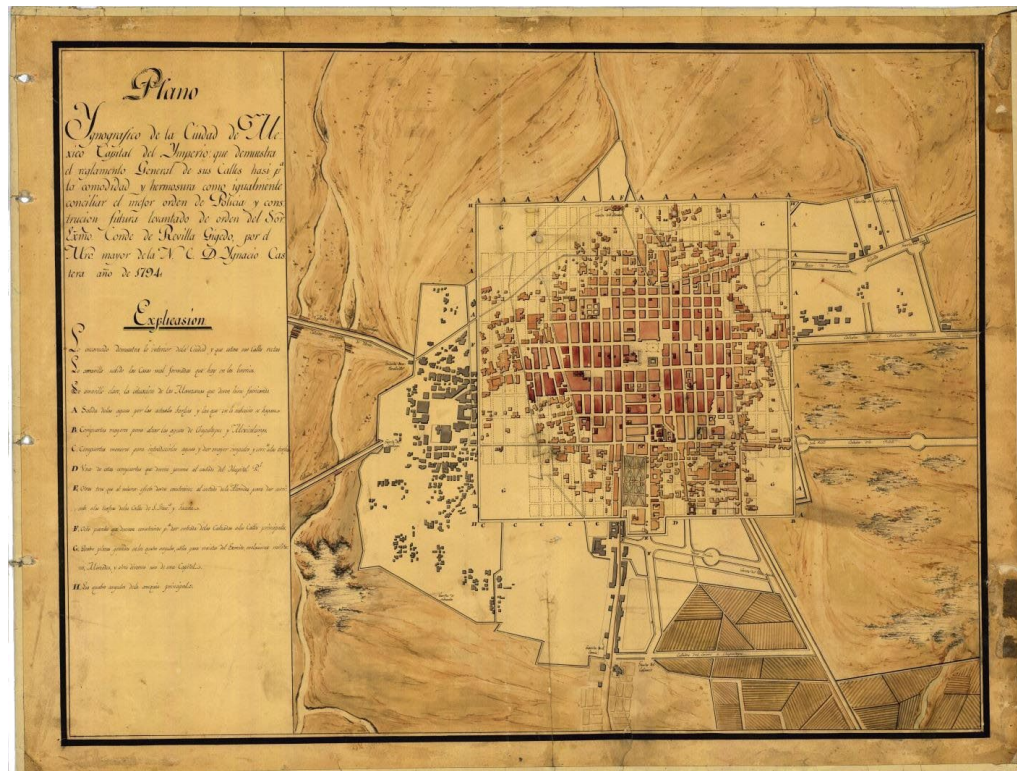


Figure 1-15. “Plano ynográfico de la ciudad de México.” Ignacio Castera, 1794. Mapoteca Manuel Orozco y Berra.

1.6 Gridded Space

The grid is a spatial tool predating the conquest of the Americas, a fact made evident when one considers the textural and architectural maps archeologists have recreated of Tenochtitlan.⁶⁰ The very quadrangular shape of the Templo Mayor, situated in parallel fashion to other temples, and the neatly layered blocks of stone that fit together, or separate carved serpent heads evoke grids. Yet such grids were not designed to divide space or distribute power within it, but rather to create a spiritual space that would invite direct contact with the environment and the various deities of Mexica society. The teleology of

⁶⁰ León et al., 24.

grids used by the Spanish, however, was the distribution and representation of power.⁶¹ Also linked to this use of grids was the ontology of private property and privatization and individual ownership of land as a vehicle for the accumulation of capital. Square townships, die-straight property lines and field boundaries, which characterize both agrarian landscapes and the cities established or re-established under the Spanish Crown originate within a European context in which citizenship was predicated on owning land, an immobile property that might or might not be proportionate in size to the owner's political, economic, and social status.

The grid system for organizing land in New Spain constituted a spatial process through which land could be owned, quantified, purchased, and expropriated, but it also constituted a formulation of social space that had ramifications for physical space. The division of land into grids and the gridding of people within the emerging colonial society allowed for social space to stratified: people were quite literally allocated a place within the social, economic, and political system.⁶² By 1563, royal decree prohibited the cohabitation of Indigenous peoples with Spaniards, deemed as white, with Africans, those of African descent, and mestizos. The gridded urban design of Mexico City lent itself to divided people spatially: around the same time, it was decreed that Indigenous people would have to live in their own neighborhoods, removed from Spaniards, criollos, and mestizos. Since Spaniards controlled the center of Mexico City, Indigenous residents of the city would have to move to the extremes of the grid or even beyond. Yet inevitably, commerce and the dependence of

⁶¹ León et al., 25.

⁶² Luiz Lara et al. 13.

colonizers on Indigenous labor implied the movement of Indigenous workers in and out of the Spanish and Mestizo neighborhoods.⁶³

The aesthetics of colonial grids in locations like Mexico City were made evident in cartography, which constituted idealized birds eye view representations of the gridded space. We can appreciate how maps made of Mexico City rendered the city as a perfectly rectilinear grid composed of rectangular buildings. One particularly compelling map of the city, dated from 1794 is described as having been commissioned by the viceroy of the time, Conde Revillagigedo. The map, a trace or projection of the city, offers a key in the margin with an explanation labeling the various sections of the city painted on the map. Specifically, the key distinguishes between the interior of the city—the portion most neatly organized into a gridded structure—and the barrios, stating “lo encarnado demuestra lo interior de la Ciudad y que están sus calles rectas” while the portions of the map colored in bright yellow represent “las Casas mal formadas que hay en los barrios.”⁶⁴ But the mapmaker also projects a vision for the extension and reconfiguration of the city into a more gridlike arrangement than what he describes as the ill-constructed barrios. Drawing dashed lines over the existing cartography of the city, the mapmaking imposes a suggested re-organization of the expanding city, one that will align itself with the grids in the center of the city. The map’s margin, by way of an introduction, also declares that the map “demuestra el reglamento General de sus Calles hasi para la comodidad y hermosura como igualmente conciliar el mejor orden de Policía y construcción futura...”⁶⁵ What makes the viceroy’s commissioned

⁶³ Katzew, 39.

⁶⁴ Castera, “Plano ygnográfico.”

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

map so compelling is that it demonstrates how, over 270 years after the Spanish empire began building Mexico City atop Tenochtitlán, the crown was still interested in adhering to the grid system as a way of enabling the discipline of the city's inhabitants and ensuring the application of the law, as well as the straight lines of the streets, which were symbolic of both legal and social order.

The tracing of future construction in the city with dashed lines was a projection of colonial aspirations upon the former Tenochtitlan. T.K. Dang confirms that this practice falls very much in line with the European colonial tradition pointing out that “by abstracting vast tracts of land, represented as orderly grid squares on paper, colonization can be systematically implemented, facilitated by maps” (1009). Gridded maps were, as we have seen with the 1794 map of Mexico City, a tool for abstracting and claiming irrigation systems, built space and even the people and animals within the projected space as part of the metropolitan seat of the New Spanish empire.

While the aesthetic implications of maps like the *Plano ygnográfico* are tangible, other kinds of aesthetic production, painted and gridded, might be said to attempt to map a projection or aspiration for the way social space and with it, physical space ought to be arranged within New Spain. Most notably, perhaps, the caste paintings, created in New Spain during the eighteenth century like the *Plano ygnográfico* (Figure 1-15), imposed a gridded vision of society upon the very heterogeneous population of New Spain and Mexico City. As León et al. explain, caste paintings were “gridded taxonomies meant to depict the progressive ‘dilution’ of Spanish blood in a series of combinations with Indigenous and African peoples... These paintings were most often organized as a grid in which every new racial combination or caste (*casta*) occupied a space. The caste paintings thus used the grid to

imagine racial categories as distinct and discrete” (32). The caste paintings, divided into quadrants in which a father, a mother, and a child were depicted and their races each identified, illustrated the grid’s use as a tool for the organization of social space, materialized in these works with oil on canvas. Within the logic of caste paintings, people were labelled on the basis of their perceived race, and each quadrant of the caste paintings was spatially situated with respect to the quadrants depicting so-called pure-blooded Spaniards in a way that would serve as a visual reference to the spectator. The farther away the quadrant from the so-called pure Spaniards, the less white the child in the quadrant.

Not only were these paintings designed to validate the classification of racial categories, some with improbable names like “torna atrás,” “lobo” and “coyote,” but indeed the paintings were also reminders of the implications that racial labels had for economic opportunity. Classification of people as Indigenous rendered them taxable for tribute to the crown. Moreover, the classification of Africans and Blackness was used to justify the denial of rights to this entire population, such as property ownership, even when Black Mexicans were not enslaved. The racial categorization of inhabitants of New Spain implied, therefore, the colonial government’s authority to permit or deny a person’s right to own property, as well as person’s obligation to pay tribute to the crown. Reflecting the logic of the caste paintings, cathedrals, and churches where baptisms would be held would keep records of baptisms in books: there were books for Mestizos and people of African descent, and there were separate books for Spaniards.⁶⁶ This system allowed a racial classification, one iterated

⁶⁶ Katzew, 45.

through aesthetics and the organization of urban and agricultural space, a deterministic role in the lives of people soon after their birth.

In the century following the appearance of the caste paintings that cropped up across New Spain, another mode of representation emerged that broadly expanded the possibilities for representing space through individual iterations or through the collection of these media into a single volume. I am referring, of course, to photography. The photographic medium would inherit the teleologies of classification inspiring caste paintings—arguably, photography surpassed caste paintings in its aim to visually arrange and to categorize human subjects within a particular visual field, on a page in a photo album or, later, in a series of lecture slides, in order to point to some perceived truth about the subjects. Photography of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century deployed first by Europeans and soon after by Latin Americans was used quantify or prove race, highlighting so-called racial features or unique characteristics to the community subject to these portraits. Spectators considering such a photograph could interpret this new representational medium by drawing on visual genres and allegories already familiar to them—such as painting.⁶⁷

Each photograph, rarely rounded and most frequently rectangular, might be thought of as a quadrant in a conceptual as well as material grid. However, as I have already observed, individual photographs were not as useful to the researchers individually as they were arranged collectively: in order for these amateur photographers to make their comparisons, that is, to derive what they believed to be proof and defining characteristics of race, they needed to gather photographs together to allow their subjects to be compared. This

⁶⁷ Willmot, 309.

led to the creation of a kind of photo album in which headshots and profile shots of photographic subjects would be arranged on a page to facilitate the spectator's comparison amongst numerous images: thus, the formation of a grid of photographs. One notable example of this practice, conducted upon Apache and Pima Natives, as well people of both European and Native descent, came not from a European practitioner but from a U.S. born man, Albert Ernest Jenks, who arranged headshots and profile shots of women and men, including of community elders, into photographic grids containing sometimes three, sometimes four images on a page, each with their discreet borders and forms, and divided spatially on the page, yet make a collective whole.⁶⁸

Photography, for Susan Sontag, is a slice of space as well as a slice of time.⁶⁹ But it is not merely a part of space and time: it is a consequential element capable of articulating both. That is, it is not solely mimetic, but also didactic. In her words, to understand the real world, we must understand as part of it “an ecology of images” (180). Like an ecology of mammals, for example, which acknowledges the way these mammals inhabit space, interact with their environment (social and physical), an ecology of images would allow us to understand images, similarly, as interacting with their environments. Photography, and, I would argue, film as well, inhabits physical and social space and has the power to have consequences for that space: to normalize the arrangement of bodies or living spaces within it, for example, or to disrupt categorizations of race and social class. Sontag believes that the centrality of images is symptomatic of capitalism, and she contends that “the production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology” (178). Where does cinema relate to the gridding process and grid

⁶⁸ Jenks, see page 10 in the digitized copy housed by Hathi Trust.

⁶⁹ Sontag, 22.

aesthetics of photography, painting, and cartography? Fatimah Rony remarks on how strikingly similar early ethnographic film is to the iconography of anthropological photography in terms of conveying “anthropological types,” conveyed through profile shots or head shots, images easily organized into a grid for scrutiny.⁷⁰ As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, the talking head framing of a film shot might be likened to an ethnographic profile shot, and when considered in the film strip within a montage of numerous talking head shots, such cinematic style approximates a grid. This is, of course, not to mention the gridlike nature of a film strip or of film negatives, of course.

Though the gridding of image frames in cinema is less obvious than it is in other media such as photography or painting, the intertwining of ethnographic visual production with grids invites a consideration of how early film inherited both the ethnographic photography tradition and, perhaps the emulation of a gridded and ordered way of representing racialized Indigenous peoples as well as other subjects whose bodies, lived spaces, and social spaces were othered within Mexico. Not only was early film filmed with fewer frames per second so that each discreet film frame held importance in conveying information, but early theatrical, ethnographically inspired films about Indigenous protagonists gravitated towards fixed frame shots, which gave scenes the impression of emulating ethnographic photography. Some early theatrical films that illustrate this point are early films like *Cuauhtémoc* (Manuel de la Bandera, 1919), which Manuel Gamio found wanting and that partially inspired his documentary film, *Tlahuicole* (1923), which he scripted and published in the journal *Ethnos*, but ultimately adapted to live theater rather than

⁷⁰ Rony, 67.

cinema (though the film adaptation was filmed).⁷¹ Likewise, *QVM*, *Redes* (Emilio Gómez Murciel, 1934), and even later, Golden Age films like *Maclovía* (Emilio Fernández, 1948) have been argued to adhere to an ethnographic narration style (that is, the employment of



Figure 1-16. Still. *La India María Selling Oranges in Mexico City*. *Tonta pero no tanto* (Fernando Cortés, 1972). Image 3. Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico.

omniscient, off-screen narration carried out in a language suggesting high education level) and staging style (head shots or medium long shots allowing entire bodies to fit on the screen, as well as surrounding flora and architecture).⁷²

Though more latent than explicit, ethnographic film techniques, gazes, or methods of observation have found their way into Mexican cinema of the 1970s and beyond, and some

⁷¹ De los Reyes, 14-16.

⁷² See García Blizzard, *The Indigenismos*, 58-9 and Boas, 243 and 530.

scholars have taken notice. For one example, scholars have acknowledged *La India María* films as exceptions to the general rule of Mexican dramatic film, in which racialized Indigenous characters are always secondary or tertiary. *La India María* films rely on the familiarity of their spectators with the nationally consolidated stereotype of the Mazahua woman, either selling on the street or seeking employment (Figure 1-16), but always an outsider visiting the city out of necessity rather than desire. Though the *India María* films double down on stereotypes about Mazahua people and racialized Indigenous people more generally (such as dress, speech patterns, and fatalistic attitudes) they simultaneously and insidiously anatomize not just a Mazahua woman's condition—her story of origin—but also the attitudes and social degradation of the white and upper-middle class inhabitants of Mexico City. In early *La India María* films like *Tonta tonta pero no tanto* (Fernando Cortés, 1972), *la India María* is rendered the archetype of the Mazahua woman forced to migrate to the city due to untold hardships and to work as domestic laborers and within the informal economy of Mexico City.⁷³ Notably, the film does not shy away from portraying racist exchanges with Indigenous migrants, discriminatory law enforcement practices, and intergenerational cycles of poverty and wealth for racialized Indigenous and white people, respectively.⁷⁴ One scholar, taking these factors into account, interprets *Tonta tonta pero no tanto*, the first film with this character, as an ethnographic film. He surmises,

María Elena Velasco created *la India María* character with the ethnographic goal of racially and to a lesser degree economically and culturally representing the Mazahua ... Velasco's María Nicolasa Cruz wears the Mazahua's long colorful satin skirts, sash (or rebozo) and at times ribbon-adorned braids... María seems to represent both

⁷³ Zatarraín Tumbaga, np.

⁷⁴ See Carreño, "Entre flechas," 56.

Indigenous and agrarian-mestizo rurality, a common conflation in 1970s anthropological and political thought.⁷⁵

Importantly, Tumbaga's analysis helps lay bare the continuity between early ethnographic Mexican film like *Peregrinación a Chalma*, concerned with articulating the fact of race, customs, and the purported syncretistic soul of Mexico, and late twentieth century Mexican cinema like *Tonta tonta pero no tanto*, which is borderline parodic insofar as it relies on spectator familiarity of stereotypes surrounding racialized Indigenous film subjects, only to make those stereotypes seem ridiculous by putting them in the mouths of pompous, selfish, and unlikeable white and mestizo protagonists. However the film does not extrapolate on the reasons why this migration is necessary or on what has happened to Mazahua ancestral lands. La India María's incursion into the city is temporary, and at the end of *Tonta* she is relieved to return to her hometown and her burro, Filemón, but also her time spent in the city has

⁷⁵ Zatarraín Tumbaga, np.



Figure 1-17. Still. María Elena Velasco as La India María. Image 11. Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico.

helped her to internalize the belief that a SEP-style education is the key for her community to be able to move fluidly through the city and to interact with the rest of Mexican society.

La India María aims to represent a Mazahua protagonist by resorting to racialized tropes about the northern part of the state of Mexico, and about Mazahua women's migration (Figure 1-17). Tumbaga's assessment that the ending of *Tonta* gives credence to the Mexican state's campaign to educate Indigenous communities as a way of lifting them

out of poverty but also assimilating them into a single national habitus. The films discussed in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation negotiate the racialized spaces of Mexico through ethnographic film techniques and documentary film techniques. *Cascabel*, for example, blends state-sponsored footage, newsreels, and interviews with non-actors with scripted, staged sequences. It makes a spectacle out of Lacandon children's' fascination with airplanes and includes interviews with academics about the Lacandon forest and the struggle for land rights in Chiapas. *Ayautla*, for its part, enhances and overlays diegetic sounds with non-diegetic ones, enhancing the strangeness of the Mazatec-language songs, and relies on an English-speaking community organizer as the purveyor of facts for the community. The film also emphasizes ways of carrying labor framing that labor within the landscape, gesturing to a connection between space and living practices.

Visual cultural production in a Mexican context, both photography and film, sustain a dialogue with the idea of national landscapes, including buildings, racialized identity, cultures and languages, types of labor, and art. Photography is not synonymous with film, but I argue that much of the observations made about the relationship between space, race and photography hold true for Mexican film, indeed, as I have previously noted, there is a clear visual—and symbolic—continuity between the photography of Manuel Álvarez Bravo, Hugo Brehme, Juan Rulfo, and the cinematography of artists like Sergei Eisenstein and Gabriel Figueroa. These continuities extend to the depiction landscapes, built spaces, plants, and people. However, it is also true that the technologies are distinct. Moreover, the relative primacy of film as cultural capital—especially commercial films—and the distinction between how photography and film are consumed means that film, and whatever relationship it may have to space and to the racialization of space, creates a space all its own.

Theatrical film, like non-theatrical film, appropriated the ethnographic gaze as a way of articulating racial discourse and racialized cultural practices within a Mexican national context to national masses. Moreover, as will be discussed in the following section on film and space, ethnographic film also gives credence to the idea that space can be—and is—racialized into Mexican national space dominated by mestizaje, and to space considered marginal, or available for colonization because it is linked to communities racialized as Indigenous.

The effect of visual grids—inviting the comparison, classification and categorization of people—along with the effect of cartographic grids has been the emphasis of this section, but there are other versions of territory-producing grids. In the most literal of terms, the electrical grid is one of these: as territory does, the electrical grid directs and controls flows of power from one location to another, occasionally bypassing some inhabited spaces and favoring certain regions of a territory over others. I will not delve too deeply into this last kind of grid since it will be discussed extensively in Chapter Five but will simply note that the electrical grid behaves in a similar way to the kind of territory-arranging network Raffestin describes when he writes of “la red” or “la maîtres” as a kind of territorial organization,⁷⁶ always an image of power, composed of points or nodes both reflecting and generating hierarchization and distribution of people, wealth or the like. Indeed, the diagram Raffestin offers to elucidate his matrix theory is a series of triangles, composed of nodes which, when connected, form a grid pattern of diagonal lines. The nodes, places of power, are connected by a network that may be invisible, just as electricity is in its grounded form, or visible, in the

⁷⁶ Raffestin, *Pour une géographie*, 142.

way that above-ground cables or well-illuminated streets are hard to overlook.⁷⁷ The kinds of power-distributing and organizing grids both sustaining and reproducing Mexican national territory in the 1970s are related to communication and transportation, to energy production and distribution, but also to the very way land is divided and used and the people who have access to that land, that energy, and to transportation. As we have seen in Chapter One, there are centuries of precedent for the kinds of territory producing and pre-producing practices made apparent in 1970s Mexican-made cinema.

⁷⁷ Raffestin, *Por una geografía*, 110-112.

2 CHAPTER 2: THE 1970S: MEXICO, TERRITORY, AND FILM



Figure 2-1. Photograph. "Movimiento estudiantil mexicano 1968." Image B43. Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico.

Struggles for territory and territorial autonomy persist within Mexico's political and territorial borders. Some of the most high-profile examples on the world news stage are the caracoles—the EZLN's autonomous communities—and cases in Guerrero like Ayutla el Libre. However, not all racialized communities in Mexico identifying as Indigenous, Afro-Indigenous or Afro-Mexican engaging in resistance to colonialism seek the de-territorialization of their ancestral and sacred land from Mexican territory.¹ Indeed, generalizations about Indigenous communities as 'oases' from Mexican territory romanticize

¹ Ñuu Saavi writer Emiliano González Izaguirre criticizes what he calls "esta visión romántica de lo indígena y lo comunitario...con afán de encontrar o desarrollar un proceso organizativo con una súbita definición política frente al Estado, el capital o la occidentalización de la vida."

racialized communities as the obligatory torchbearers of radical anti-capitalist and anticolonial resistance.

The struggle for territorial sovereignty or for territorial self-determination in Indigenous territories does not *de facto* imply a desire for exclusion from Mexican territory, from laws and access to a global economy. The desire for autonomy implies a rejection or problematization of the ways social space and physical space are organized within Mexican territory—for example, the politics of decision-making and the allocation of resources may look quite a bit different in Indigenous territories, as may the organization of tasks and labor. Schooling, in theory, implies the pedagogical incorporation of Indigenous languages and the inclusion of culturally specific histories as opposed to solely emphasizing master narratives of national History.²

Autonomy, as we have seen since the EZLN officially ended its revolution, does not imply autonomy or immunity from capitalism, from national Mexican politics, nor from environmental concerns. What it can and does imply is a constant negotiation with the concepts of Mexican territorial sovereignty and with Mexican national identity because these autonomous communities, simply by existing, demonstrate the failure of the state to account for them, or for their cultures, histories, and languages. As discussed in the introduction, the Mexican government spent the twentieth century attempting to carefully manage narratives about national identity in the classroom, the movie theater, in government buildings, architecture, museums,³ and in photography. On the one hand, these narratives were meant to

² Nuttall critiques official, Western narratives of history, “History,” and argues that History uses archival material to evince so-called facts while centering power-holding classes, and men, consequently marginalizing “the non-Western world, subordinate classes, and women.”

³ Bustamante calls museums an “enciclopedia territorial.” See *Regímenes de alteridad*, 9 and 14.

help mestizo and white Mexicans feel kinship with one another through shared ancestry and through the shared cultural and material history of Mesoamerica. On the other hand, these narratives were also adapted for use in government projects and campaigns conducted in Indigenous communities and territories by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista. Certain projects and campaigns aimed to increase Indigenous communities in activities like basketball, teaching them to dress in Western, mainstream fashion. Others trained Indigenous youth as cultural promoters who would be tasked with increasing their communities' engagement with INI programs and with other government campaigns.⁴ Until the 1960s, artists, anthropologists, and other Mexicans with social and political clout enthusiastically participated in these INI projects, even producing a number of ethnographic but also propagandistic films lauding the INI's role in improving Mazatec, Chinantec, Tzotzil and Tzeltal lives with voice-overs declaring that the INI's efforts had been successful. Films like *Todos somos mexicanos* (José Arenas, 1958) and *Nuevos horizontes* (José Arenas, 1956) enjoyed the technical support of Nacho López, who supplied the stills for both documentaries, and indeed the INI would continue to var celebrated photographers like Graciela Iturbide for future film projects, like *Papaloapan: Mazatecos II* (Luis Mandoki, 1981).

By the 1970s, however, there was a deep cynicism for indigenismo's praxes, at both its anthropological and nationalist angles. Partly the cause for such cynicism and partly its consequence, the INI lost most of its funding in the mid-1960s, and some of its most famous employees, including Rosario Castellanos and Juan de la Cabada, had quit. At the same time,

⁴ On the cultural promoters, see Lewis, 42 and 46.

the INI—and the federal government that oversaw it—was trying to reinvent itself as an organization aimed at training young Indigenous people to function as intermediaries between the government and the communities (Figure 2-2). While there are assorted reasons why the government undertook this project, what is clear is that the government, whatever its claims of support for Indigenous communities, did not support nor did it acknowledge, at times, Indigenous territory, and space. On a local level, the government looked the other way while strongmen dictated which land was available to Indigenous farmers, hid *ejido* and *propietario* documents, or even sent sicarios to murder Indigenous activists. On a federal level, the government permitted factories, such as the Tula electrical plant, to be built on land technically belonging to Hñáhñú peasants.

Indeed, as Stephen Lewis points out, by the mid to late 1960s, the Mexican federal government's priorities with respect to the INI and to Indigenous populations was no longer about simply making Indigenous peoples feel Mexican or making non-Indigenous people consider Indigenous peoples Mexican. Instead,

Indigenista policy would now be expected to contribute directly to Mexico's plans for industrialization, which required an expanded internal market, a larger labor force, and cheap and abundant food grown in the countryside (to feed the cities cheaply and allow for low urban wages). Mexico's political class also wanted the INI's help in relocating Indians when their homes and lands were affected by large hydroelectric projects. (8)

Thus, upbeat representations of Indigenous communities funded by the government's INI or later the Archivo Etnográfico Audiovisual were contradictions, given that the same funds used to create these films came from a government that had received these same funds from taxes paid by refineries illegally situated on Indigenous lands.

In the midst of the implementation of such policy and developmentalism, the Echeverría Administration postured itself as Indigenista by very publicly designating part of the Chiapas jungle the Zona Lacandona and legally granting over 600,000 hectares—2,000 square miles—of the jungle to the Hach Winik peoples. Similarly, President Luis Echeverría apparently insisted on granting ownership of the Isla Tiburón, located in the Gulf of California to the Konkaak (Seri) peoples after watching Felipe Cazals documentary *Los que viven donde sopla el viento suave* (1973).⁵ Telling in this instance was Echeverría's subsequent intervention when the Konkaak attempted to sell the island to a Canadian hotel chain—an act from which the Konkaak would evidently benefit but that would compromise the appearance of Mexican territory as integral and controlled immanently by the government alone.

Ayautla, *Etnocidio*, and *Cascabel* share in common their skepticism about the Mexican government's involvement in Indigenous territories. These films, each in their own way, are indebted to a Marxist-materialist tradition, and as such, think of Indigenous territory in terms of the commodification of land, the control of means of production, and cultural hegemony. Each film gestures to the links between labor and land, between the treatment of the state and the precarity of Indigenous territories—including communities, traditions, language, and health.

It is Inés Durán Matute who best articulates the effect of development discourse, ancillary to Mexican national territory, upon Indigenous territory, when she notes that

the rhetoric of 'development' operates over the economic realm, but also on the social and cultural spheres and upon spaces reinforcing capitalist/colonialist structures and relations that perpetuate dispossession. Moreover, together, they set up an

⁵ See González Rubio et al., 93.

epistemological frame that acts as a catalyst in the minds of peoples to guide aspirations towards the 'escalation' in the social structure and promote the looting and exploitation of lives and territories. This frame legitimates and sustains hierarchies and structures rooted in colonialism while promotes the transformation of indigenous peoples into 'modern' subjects. (259)

Both in *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio*, *notas sobre el Mezquital*, and *Cascabel*, we shall observe the ways this very phenomenon unfolds, in contexts of exclusion from infrastructure and economy on the one hand, and of land expropriation for industrial and extractivist purposes

The myth of national Mexican territory becomes troubled when the photograph or video camera enters spaces inhabited by people who do not consider themselves to be living in Mexican territory but in their society's own territory. Destabilizing the myth of national territory also has implications for the myth of national identity codified by race: if national territory is a myth, then the very idea of some inherent shared experience or identity amongst those living in that territory falls apart.



Figure 2-2. “Trabajadores del INI y lacandones conversan.” Nacho López. Mediateca INAH.

Since the 1970s, the ethical objectives of regional and economic policy not only in Mexico but in Latin America revolved primarily around: equality, stability, growth, efficiency, and the participation of citizens.⁶ The 1970s in Mexico were a particularly important moment in that, while these policies were of great interest, one of the primary state organisms through which the state had already been working towards these aims was losing funding and the support of anthropologists, artists, and activists who had once sought employment within it.

One of the most thorough recent pieces of research on the INI’s relationship with filmmaking up to 1970 was penned by Claudio Arroyo Quiroz, who convincingly argues that

el cine de la primera etapa del INI, en tanto que constituye una de las fuentes mediante las cuales se puede investigar la forma en que la política indigenista de los años 1950s a los 1970s contribuyó a la construcción del discurso oficial en torno a la

⁶ See López V., 16, and Cuervo, 10.

identidad nacional y la alteridad. Este discurso se inscribe, en términos amplios, dentro de la ‘formación nacional de alteridad’ que se desarrolló en México... (228)

When Arroyo Quiroz writes of alterity, she refers to the idea of the person or people occupying a position of otherness with respect to the national body. Of course, one of the principal communities occupying the symbolic position of alterity Mexico with respect to national identity in twentieth century were Indigenous communities, and this fact has not fundamentally changed despite changing political discourse reframing national identity in terms of pluriculturalism.

In 1970, Alfonso Caso was dying. Since the foundation of the INI, he had been its only director, and running the INI had effectively been his life’s work. Days before his death he stated that he believed incoming president Luis Echeverría could ensure the resolution of the “Indigenous problem” in 25 years—by 1995—if he invested enough in the matter.⁷ What Echeverría’s presidency actually did with respect to Indigenous communities is deeply bound up with questions of national territory, and particularly with the pursuit of economic interests rooted—literally—in the development of infrastructure designed to jumpstart Mexican agricultural, energy (petroleum, electricity) and manufacturing industries.

2.1 Apertura: Filmmaking in the Echeverría Years

Ayautla, *Etnocidio*, and *Cascabel* were filmed during the Echeverría presidency (1970-1976). To understand what makes these films politically audacious for their time, it is worth considering the political environment of their creation. As Ignacio Sánchez Prado has pointed out the Echeverría administration had the paradoxical policy of allowing filmmakers to take

⁷ Lewis, 233.

certain political liberties, including overt social commentary and critiques of the state, while having almost exclusive financial and regulatory power over the industry.⁸ He notes that the political commentary in at least three high-profile films from this period lies in the critique of the Echeverría administration's attempt to treat subjects of the Mexican state as one homogenous group with similar needs and political ideologies. In fact, Sánchez Prado observes, films like *Canoa: memoria de un hecho vergonzoso* (Felipe Cazals, 1976), *Calzonzin inspector* (Alfonso Arau, 1974) and *Mecánica nacional* (Luis Alcoriza, 1972) explore how rural and urban working populations may have wildly different politics amongst themselves and certainly from a social and political elite. As one UNAM economics student interviewed in *Cascabel* states, the Mexican people are generally apathetic because, “ya no creemos...no hay fe ni de quienes están en el gobierno ni de quienes van a aplicar la ley.”

The rural, and particularly the rural Indigenous struggles in Mexico during the late 1960s and 1970s are thematically central in *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio*, and *Cascabel*. Each film offers a window into the social, political, and even linguistic gaps between the State—which ignores, or actively permits, the confiscation and exploitation of Indigenous lands and labor—and the affected Indigenous communities. As Andrea Noble has pointed out, the staged *apertura democrática* of Luis Echeverría's six-year presidency, practically bookended by *Ayautla* on one end and by *Etnocidio* and *Cascabel* on the other, had much to do with the use of space—its opening, its accessibility, and its control—and is evident in filmmaking of this period.⁹ Noble explains

⁸ Sánchez Prado, “Mestizaje,” 51.

⁹ See Noble, 116, Ayala Blanco, *La condición*, 604, Ramírez Berg, 151, Pascual Gutiérrez, 24-26, and Rodríguez, “Renovación,” 101 and 105. Another foundational monograph on the subject is Paola Costa's *La 'apertura' cinematográfica: México 1970-1976*. (UAP 1988), which I was unable to obtain.

simultaneous emergence of the EZLN and NAFTA are, nonetheless, vectors of the same phenomenon of apertura... a very different moment from the stage-managed apertura democrática of the Echeverría sexenio. An essentially spatial concept, insofar as it signifies the opening up of space within an already existing entity, as we have seen, apertura and its opposite 'closed-ness' are loaded terms within the context of family melodrama, particularly as they related to the masculine. (116)

Within the context of Echeverrismo, spaces such as towns or ancestral lands, along with film schools and museums, are opened into Mexican national space. This opening entails increased infrastructure linking towns across broad swaths of land, but it also entails the opening of spaces to commerce, to tourism, and to new modes of political subjectivity.

The matter of being perceived as open or closed is, in these films, bound up with the forces of national and international capital and liberalism shaping the conditions of aperture for racialized and ethnically marginalized Indigenous communities situated within Mexican national space. The pueblo, especially the pueblo in which an Indigenous language is spoken, and ethnically unique customs are observed, is closed, impermeable, suspended in time, where the metropolis is open, receptive to movement and commerce, ideas, and travelers. This is something we see clearly in a film like *Canoa*, in which the film doubles down on the notion that pueblos like San Juan Canoa, which are Nahuatl-speaking, are insular and uneducated, such that they cannot understand that the young men passing through are not students and are certainly not Marxists. Jorge Ayala Blanco assesses that in *Canoa*, provincial reality is constituted by a horrendous backwardness caused by internal colonialism, the sedimentation of a catholic religion imposed with violence, and the sedimentation of various offenses by the right wing over the history of class struggle.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ayala Blanco, *La condición*, 202-203.

Ayala Blanco's analysis gestures to the ways the town of San Juan de Canoa has been both shaped and isolated ideologically through an ongoing history of violent material and religious colonialism. This analysis, notably, makes no mention of a government presence in *Canoa*. The townsfolk, portrayed in the film hiding behind shuttered windows and doors, fearful of outsiders, judge them through the sensationalist, partisan rhetoric espoused by their pastor. The town is quite literally depicted as closed—for business, for engagement with tourists, and closed to the entire student movement of the late 1960s in Mexico. The isolation of the community is not a consequence only of willful ignorance but of systematic isolation aimed, as Felipe Cazal's film so clearly demonstrates, at converting Indigenous communities into the foot soldiers of conservative political and religious causes. *Canoa* astutely pinpoints the lethal consequences of closedness: the death of innocent outsiders, national notoriety, opportunity for a repressive state to vilify, incarcerate, and even torture both students and rural farmers. Aperture, in the context of the 1970s in Mexico, is highly staged. Indigenous lands are linked to the metropolis for the benefit of tourists and power corporations and meat packing plants are encouraged to establish themselves in Indigenous territories. Meanwhile, for the communities whose land is opened to national and international interests, aperture means a shift in language use, in ritual, in labor practice, and impulses migration to other regions or even to the United States.

Ironically, this territorial aperture was partially the consequence of a response to migration during the previous decade. As María L. Muñoz has surmised, the “resurgence of mass migration of Indigenous peoples from rural to urban spaces in the 1960s led to the rise of public interest in indígenas and indigenismo policies” (46). By the time Echeverría took office in 1970, then, it had become obvious to the Mexican government that some sort of

official policy and program ought to facilitate the transformation of Indigenous populations—rural and urban—into national subjects and thus to carry out economic development of Indigenous regions—spaces the government officials and indigenistas deemed to have been neglected for the past thirty years.¹¹ Moreover, within the context of Echeverría’s sexenio, a policy with respect to towns identified as Indigenous, often referred to as “Indigenismo participatorio,” attempted to open up Indigenous communities politically and economically through the education and training of cultural promoters.¹² Some Indigenous communities perceived this opening up as an opportunity to reconfigure the terms of their engagement with the Mexican government, and to reimagine their roles in the social, political and economic facets of national life.¹³ To return to the words of physician-turned-anthropological researcher and INI regional director Aguirre Beltrán,

[cultural promoters] constitute the link between the indigenous communities and the national community...They are not well viewed by their peers, because their behavior is unorthodox for the society that they live in—they charge their neighbors for their services, they receive salaries for the jobs they perform for state or regional authorities, they are at the service of the national political machinery,...But in exchange they fill an inescapable function--they facilitate the relationship between a *closed* and subordinate community with outsider.¹⁴

Aguirre Beltrán’s comments reveal the prevailing attitude of the Echeverrista administration towards Indigenous, rural communities, which were seen as closed off from the country, an angle that placed responsibility for isolation, exploitation, and poverty on the communities themselves. The administration’s cultural promotion project, predicated on the idea that

¹¹ Muñoz, 49.

¹² Lewis, 46-61.

¹³ Muñoz, 11.

¹⁴ Quoted and translated by Lewis, 61, emphasis mine.

Indigenous agricultural communities needed to be converted from closed space to open—and thereby Mexican—space, entailed ideological as well as spatial interventions. For example,

cultural promoters had to begin by persuading their communities to set aside land for a new schoolhouse, a teacher's house, a basketball court, and a gardening plot...once the schoolhouse was built, the INI tried to provide it with a map, a flag, and a clock...as well as language primers, pencils, notebooks, portraits of Miguel Hidalgo and Benito Juárez...and some publicity about vaccinations.¹⁵

The schoolhouse was of course both spatial and ideological: ideological in the sense that, as an althusserian ideological apparatus, it aspired to inculcate national History amongst students, Spanish language proficiency, as well as occidental and Christian concepts hygiene and fitness, the latter of which was perceived as an overlooked yet fundamental element in achieving national progress.¹⁶ Spatially, cultural promoter projects allowed the Echeverría administration to literally shape the geographic terrain of communities by determining how houses and traffic flows would interact with schoolhouses and basketball courts: essentially deciding where to situate a town center. The justification for these projects was humanitarian in theory, but has been pointed out, by the 1970s, INI policy was designed to support and enhance Mexico's industrialization processes, which included opening Indigenous communities to national and international industrial interests, increasing the labor force, and to relocate Indigenous towns at times to make room for hydroelectric dams and other environmentally disruptive projects.¹⁷

Given the nature of Indigenista policy under Echeverría, film policy was something of a paradox. While INI policy aimed to convert Indigenous communities into exploitable

¹⁵ Lewis, 46.

¹⁶ For more on the connection between Mexican post-Revolutionary politics, racial discourse, and sports in a Chiapanecan context, see Lisbona Guillén, 36-38, and Torres Hernández, 44-46.

¹⁷ Lewis, 8.

territories minable both for their natural resources and for their labor, the cinema industry was enjoying a kind of renovation thanks to government policy. Echeverría's brother Rodolfo, appointed head of the Banco Cinematográfico, overhauled the film industry by cutting financial credits to private producers and by consolidating national funds for filmmaking by creating the Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica, or CONACINE, and the Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica de los Trabajadores y el Estado (Conacite) I and II.¹⁸ This government funding presumably came with strings attached for filmmakers, yet counterintuitively, the films created and released during the sexenio dovetailed with hemispheric film tendencies such as Third Cinema and New Latin American Cinema, both of which were known for their close examination of social ills and their adoption of Italian neorealism. Cinema of this age is described by film historians as “socially aware.”¹⁹ As we will see in Chapter Five, this social awareness came back to haunt the Echeverría apertura, by demonstrating that the Echeverría administration, while financing films that examined the conditions of poor and Indigenous communities in Mexico, simultaneously contributed to the exploitation of those communities.

2.1.1 On Censorship Laws

Federal law on filmmaking and circulation in Mexico were designed in part to support a national film industry, but they also reserved the right for the government to exert substantial control over films. In 1948 under the presidency of Miguel Alemán, Comisión Nacional de Cinematografía began to legally structure the film industry under Mexican law, and the

¹⁸ Mistrón, 219.

¹⁹ Mistrón, 219.

culmination of those efforts was the creation of the Ley de la Industria Cinematográfica in December of 1949. The second article established that the Secretaría de Gobernación would be tasked with “Fomentar la producción de películas de alta calidad e interés nacional, mediante aportaciones en efectivo y celebración de concurso...Intervenir en la elaboración de películas documentales y educativas que a juicio del gobierno convenga exhibir en el país o en el extranjero” and also to found the Cineteca Nacional as well as to oversee the construction and operation of production studios.

These laws enabled the creation of Estudios Churubusco, the state-owned movie studio based in Mexico City, in 1950. Likewise, Mexican law made possible the creation of government funding organizations created during Echeverría’s presidency—CONACINE, and Conacite I and II, which was an organization overseen both by the government and by the National Film Worker’s Union. With control over both funds and the biggest film studio in Mexico, the Echeverría administration had unique power over the national filmmaking industry.

This authority was compounded by additional articles to the Ley de la Industria Cinematográfica giving the Mexican government something of a moral authority over films and their circulation in Mexico. Article 69 was key in this regard, stating that

La autorización para exhibir públicamente películas cinematográficas en la República, ya sean producidas en el país o en el extranjero, se otorgará siempre que el espíritu y contenido de las películas en figuras y palabras no infrinjan los límites para la manifestación de las ideas y la libertad de escribir y publicar escritos sobre cualquiera materia, establecen los artículos 6º y 7º. de la Constitución Política de la República.

Articles six and seven stipulate that attacks on morality or public peace are violations of the law, as are attacks on private life, defined, incongruously, as instances, “Cuando se

desprestigie, ridiculice o se proponga la destrucción de las Instituciones fundamentales del país” or “Cuando se injurie a la nación mexicana o las entidades políticas que la formen.” In other words, the Echeverría government, like prior and subsequent governments, had the legal authority to prohibit the circulation of films perceived to slander the Mexican government, its nation, or its institutions.

In 1975, the *Manifiesto del Frente Nacional de Cinematografistas*, signed by both Paul Leduc and Raúl Araiza, in addition to making statements aligning this *Manifiesto* with the earlier publications of Solanas and Getino, Julio García Espinosa, and Jorge Sanjinés, denounced censorship. The authors declared:

rechazamos todo mecanismo de censura que impida la libre expresión en la creación cinematográfica, que no solamente puede ser ejercida desde la Dirección General de Cinematografía sino en cada uno de los pasos subsecuentes que debe seguir cada proyecto ya sea en los renglones de financiamiento, producción, distribución, promoción y exhibición. (110-111)

On the one hand, the *Manifiesto* noted, the nationalization of the film industry had afforded affiliated filmmakers certain undeniably attractive financial benefits, but the strings attached were not a small matter. In subsequent years, Araiza would most directly test the lengths to which Mexico’s censorship apparatus would go when he created *Cascabel*.

Cascabel is a film directly implicating government censorship in theater plays and cinema alike. Funded by CONACINE, the film was, of course, overseen by government functionaries, that thus demonstrated a kind of freedom of speech unavailable to the protagonist, Alfredo, whose play, sympathetic to taxi driver unions, is censored by the authorities. Araiza’s *Cascabel* also takes a jab at ethnographic, documentary filmmaking produced by the Mexican government, noting the double standard of politicians who claim that under Echeverría people may now speak freely, while censoring documentary content

that acknowledges the root causes of Indigenous poverty, displacement, and political disenfranchisement. The gaslighting and groupthink displayed by functionaries in the 1970s is hardly a subtlety in *Cascabel*: early in the film, in fact, a functionary employed by the government argues that “respetar ciertos puntos de vista” cannot be called censorship because, the government would be censoring something it controlled. A film like *Cascabel*, which underscored the hypocrisy of the government’s claims of promoting free speech, tested these laws. This film is proof that some amount of critique—albeit indirect and fictionalized—was permitted even if the 1975 Manifesto had raised legitimate concerns about the limits of that permission. *Cascabel*, partly funded by CONACINE and overseen by the Dirección General de Cinematografía, enjoyed moderate success in national and international awards competitions. *Cascabel* was a litmus test for how far the Dirección, and the rest of the censoring apparatus identified in the Manifesto was really willing to go to sculpt government-funded film narratives.

In the three films discussed over the subsequent three chapters, we encounter three perspectives on the Echeverría government’s political and cultural aperture, albeit ones which examine the sexenio indirectly. Each of the films or an attempt at such by the Mexican government, by corporations, or even by townsfolk, at two moments in this opening process. *Ayautla* deals with the case of a community in the high, misty mountains of Oaxaca, in which a coffee-growing community deals with high mortality rates and hangs its hopes on the construction of a road to connect it with Huautla de Jiménez and thus with a slew of federal agricultural and INI programs. With no support from the government in this project, townspeople must set aside time from their other responsibilities to work on this major project with nothing more than farming tools.

On the other, *Etnocidio* deals with a Hñáhñú community whose ancestral lands, legally acknowledged under Mexican law, have been stolen for the site of the Tula electrical plant, affecting Hñáhñú farming practices, social structure, job opportunities, and the environmental health of their ancestral lands. In this film, we perceive the gap between the promised benefits of nationalization of the petroleum and mining industries and the reality of this policy shift under Echeverría: that this nationalization did nothing to alter the economic and social status quo of the country, nor did it ameliorate the labor exploitation and pollution that had been the legacy of foreign companies, active in the region for centuries. And lastly, *Cascabel* deals with the ratification of the Selva Lacandona, described by the federal government as a territory measuring over 600,000 hectares. The ratification of the Selva is purportedly intended to ensure that the Hach Winich (Lacandon) peoples have unlimited access to their ancestral territory, but as the film's narratives and settings travel between San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico City, and Lacanjá, we quickly are presented with a reality far less humanitarian and indeed implies the coherence of the Selva Lacandona's creation with other pre-existing and concurrent neo-Indigenista policies. Moreover, as Charles Ramirez Berg notes, *Cascabel* deals with this while also questioning Echeverría's so-called democratization and the claim that freedom of speech was now possible in Mexico.²⁰

Cascabel's cynicism about the nature of truth under Echeverría's presidency was hardly unfounded: less than a decade before the film's release, the Mexican Armed Forces opened fire upon thousands of students protesting the government's ill-treatment of protesters and students Tlatelolco plaza in Mexico City. Activists, journalists, and historians

²⁰ Ramirez Berg, 150.

considered President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz responsible, along with Luis Echeverría Álvarez, Minister of the Interior and the man tasked with keeping Mexico appearing orderly on the eve of the 1968 Olympics. As if to further trouble the matter, official death count was far underreported, if eyewitness accounts had any merit. Some attribute this discrepancy to inefficient government, others perceived the government's version of events as a gaslighting of the public and an obfuscation of the truth. Luis Echeverría had been pivotal in this government version of events, so it was logical for Mexicans to be skeptical when he founded the Premio Nacional de Periodismo, to be handed out each year on the "Día de la libertad de expresión en México."²¹

Appallingly, this was not the extent of state violence and repression conducted under Echeverría's supervision: indeed, in 1971, college students from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and the Instituto Politécnico Nacional, took to the streets to protest in solidarity with students from the University of Nuevo Leon. These students were marching when they were ambushed by government trained paramilitary forces, known as "Los halcones," who were in fact young, mestizo working class men from migrant-dominant, disenfranchised and satellite sectors of Mexico City. The death toll from what was dubbed the "Halconazo" was reported by the government at one hundred and twenty.²² Notably, the halcones were brought into the city center from the city's margins by the government for the purpose of punishing protesters occupying the downtown space—a fact not to be ignored in

²¹ "Día de la libertad de expresión," np.

²² "Matanza del Jueves de Corpus 'El Halconazo,'" np.

this broader conversation about the nature of Mexican territory and the manner in which the spaces it claims are controlled and divided.

2.2 New Latin American Cinema, Documentary Film and Radical Posturing

The control exercised by the Mexican government over film circulation both domestically



Figure 2-3. Plano picado. *Yawar Mallku/Sangre del cóndor* (Grupo Ukamau, 1969).

and abroad meant that filmmakers could not always share their films with their intended audiences.²³ It was precisely within the environment of state censorship in Mexico and political upheaval on a hemispheric level that New Latin American Cinema emerged—a tendency that would influence Mexican cinema, including the films discussed in this dissertation, in important ways.²⁴ New Latin American Cinema, broadly speaking, was a tendency of the late 1950s to early 1970s concerned alternately or concurrently with the aesthetics and procedures of armed resistance and revolution, with the extreme economic and

²³ Schiwy, *The Open Invitation*, 21-22.

²⁴ See Guerrero for a discussion on the limits of what she describes as vanguard, but not revolutionary, cinema.

social inequalities across Latin America, and with the formation of revolutionary, proletarian governments. Moreover, this general trend in cinema offered counternarratives of Latin American history that decentered the landholding, wealthy male subject, encouraged collective filmmaking, and eschewed Hollywood melodrama.

New Latin American Cinema was actually not one cohesive cinematic movement but rather several political and aesthetic tendencies in Latin American filmmaking. One of these emerged in Cuba and was protagonized by the likes of Santiago Álvarez, Julio García Espinosa, and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, who founded the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográfica (ICAIC) in the months following the Cuban Revolution in 1959. The *Manifiesto del Grupo Nuevo Cine* (Mexico, 1961) argued for greater freedom of expression in the Mexican film industry and for a rejection of Hollywood style melodrama. As Freya Schiwy points out, *cinema novo*, *estética da fome*, *tercer cine*, *cine imperfecto* and *cine junto al pueblo* were all theories and praxes of New Latin American Cinema's variants, and these manifested in a wealth of films.

New Latin American Cinema drew upon Italian neorealism to address development and underdevelopment, terms that inevitably referred to poverty and a lack of infrastructure, and ultimately to the modernity projects of Global South states.²⁵ Some tangible examples of films bridging themes of development, labor, and inequality included *Yawar Mallku* (Jorge Sanjinés, 1969) (Figure 2-3), *El coraje del pueblo* (Jorge Sanjinés, 1971), *Chircales* (Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva, 1966-1972) and even earlier films such as *Araya* (Margot Bencerraf, 1959). These films emphasize both the dexterity of tasks such as pickaxe mining,

²⁵ Hess, 104. See also Wayne, 5.

brickmaking, and salt mining, but also underscored the precarity of working in these industries, not to mention the non-living wages they afford and the impact of extractive industry on the landscape and on communities. Some films dealt with class struggle (*Lucía* [Humberto Solás, 1968], *Antonio das Mortes* [Glauber Rocha, 1969], *La hora de los hornos* [Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 1968]), racialized spaces (*Yawar Mallku, Now!* [Santiago Álvarez, 1965]), and the precarity of labor (*El coraje del pueblo, Araya*).

Diagnostic voice overs and editing designed to pair a symptom with its cause were common to these films, as were calls for revolution, explicitly proposed as the solution to neocolonialism and capitalism in *Antonio das Mortes, Yawar Mallku, El coraje del pueblo, Now!, Lucía, Hanoi, martes 13* (Santiago Álvarez, 1968).

In 1969, Argentine directors Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino coined the term “Tercer Cine,” in their manifesto, “Hacia un tercer cine.” Solanas and Getino’s manifesto took stock of the South American film tendencies of the moment and proposed to name those films ascribing to a certain anti-colonial aesthetic and ethics they described as Third Cinema, reflecting Third-World political and economic struggles. Third Cinema, they wrote prescriptively, should ascribe to “provok[e] with each showing, as in a revolutionary military incursion, a liberated space, a decolonized territory” (247). The camera, they argued was a metaphorical rifle and the projector a gun—weapons for combatting colonialism. Ironically, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino seem to gesture to an understanding of the impact of national habitus on the ability to think about the intersection causes of perceived problems when noting that “just as they are not masters of the land upon which they walk, the neocolonialized people are not masters of the ideas that envelopment...the intellectual is obliged to refrain from spontaneous thought...he generally runs the risk of doing so in

French or English—never in the language of a culture of his own” (234). Still, they perceived, as did others, that the nature of national identity, as well as national politics, deserved to critical examination—through observation enabled by a camera lens—in order to take a revolutionary and decolonial stance.

The tendency to envision a national culture beyond imperialism, was another defining characteristic of New Latin American Cinema and a trope often paired with a critique of the state. As Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky points out, what made these films directed and produced by filmmakers with European Marxist and leftist sympathies so radical was that they centered “a new national-popular, non-White subject potentially capable of transforming an inequal or starkly hierarchical society” (184). The new national political subject the filmmakers envisioned would be Afro-descended or Indigenous-descended, Aguilera Skvirsky notes, and there would be open acknowledgement of the ways slavery and racial ideology had shaped the kinds of labor and salaries available hitherto to racialized subjects of the state.²⁶

Notable New Latin American Cinema films gesturing to a national culture and to a national subject (that is, to a subject of the state) included *Antonio das Mortes*, *Las aventuras de Juan Quin Quin* (Julio García Espinosa, 1967), *La hora de los hornos*, and *Lucía*. Though Solanas and his counterpart, Getino had initially downplayed the importance of national context in the creation of Third Cinema, Solanas later acknowledged that Third Cinema ideologically aligned with a national culture of popular classes.²⁷ The national subjectivity promoted by this kind of cinema film aimed to de-center the white national subject. But it

²⁶ Aguilera Skvirsky, 148.

²⁷ Chanan, 66.

also rested on the assumption, as Marxism often did, that marginalized, racialized populations inherently shared the same economic interests and that coalition-building could transcend ethnic and cultural differences, as well as prejudices.

Films like *Antonio das Mortes* or *Lucía* might be considered attempts at envisioning national popular culture within a Brazilian or Cuban spatial context, and they interrogate vestiges of anti-Black sentiment but do not even engage the relationship of Amazonian, Indigenous populations with respect to the national cultural imaginary. *Macunaíma* (Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, 1969), based on the eponymous novel by Mário de Andrade, is one of the few films of this era to even approach the question of Indigenous participation in national political subjectivity. Third Cinema mostly eschewed centering on racialized Indigenous populations subsumed by National space—and the state. The films of the Ukamau group and Jorge Sanjinés exemplify the kind of Third Cinema that proposes an alternative national political subjectivity in which the Aymara or Quechua community would be a collective state subject, in line with the Katarista tradition.

The Ukamau Group spearheaded by Jorge Sanjinés, its co-founder and most outspoken participant, argued for a revolutionary filmmaking praxis *junto al pueblo*. The Ukamau stance was that revolutionary film can only be made when filmmakers "acercarnos al pueblo, conocer su cultura y elaborar un lenguaje afín a sus necesidades, creando junto al pueblo...el instrumento que al servirle de medio expresivo contribuya a elevar su conciencia" (88). The pueblo in question was, for Ukamau Andean Quechua and Aymara society, not only within Bolivia but also in Peru and Ecuador, where Sanjinés would continue filmmaking in exile. Ukamau was one of the few New Latin American Cinema participants that had an explicit stance on national culture and indigenismo, perhaps because, unlike Argentina,

Cuba, or Chile, the Indigenous population of Bolivia constituted a sizable percentage of the total population and a sizable percentage as well of the labor force engaged in precarious forms of labor such as mining. In *Ukamau: para un cine junto al pueblo*, the Bolivian collective made their posture clear, stating "para conocer nuestra América es necesario desprenderse del paternalismo indigenista que solo ve en los indios harapos y despojos humanos y que lleva su canto de piedad judeocristiana o que ensalza sin conocimiento al indio 'etéreo' mandando a comprar cigarrillos al indio de carne y hueso" (87-88). The revolution and by extension revolutionary cinema, Ukamau group waded, was a lost cause if it did not center Indigenous protagonists and detangle itself from colonialist practices amongst activists—especially those filmmakers looking to consolidate a proletarian cause—such as paternalism and exploitation.

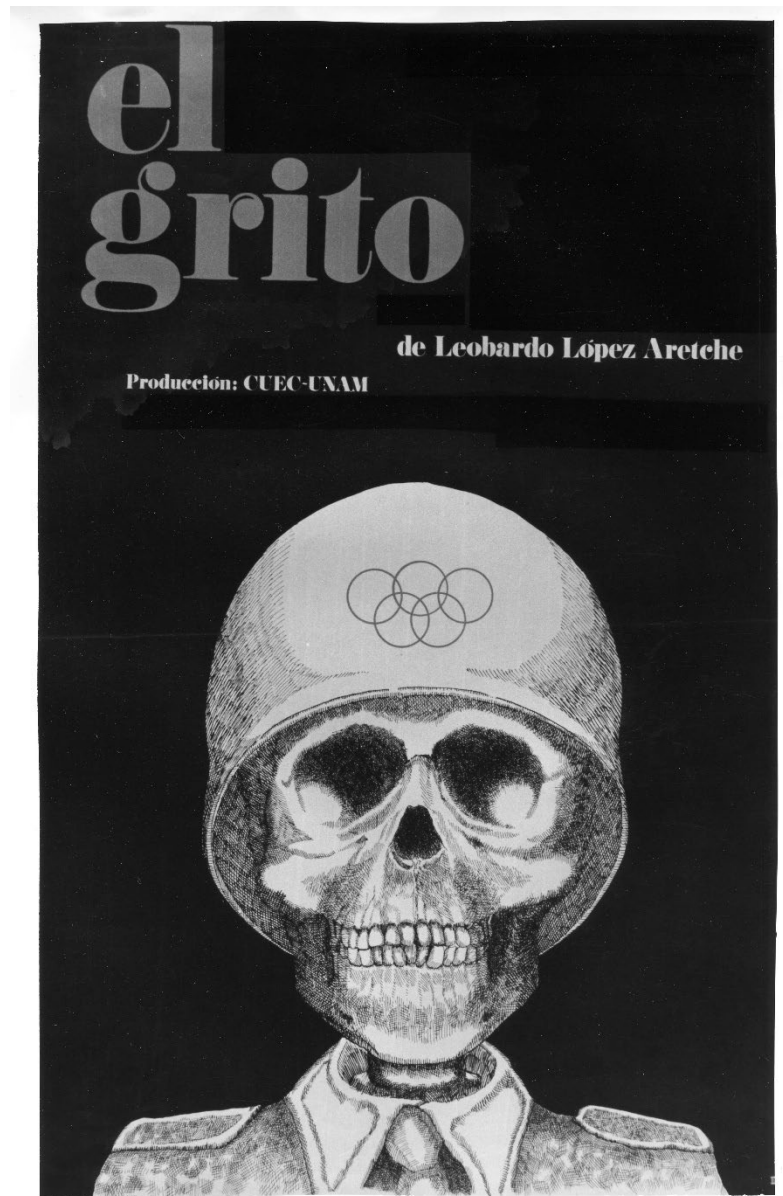


Figure 2-4. Poster. *El grito* (Leobardo López Aretche, 1968). Image 2. Filmoteca UNAM. Mexico.

2.2.1 New Latin American Cinema in Mexico

During the 1960s, Mexico City's cine-clubes screened films all related to the New Latin American Cinema wave.²⁸ Consumption of this cinema was formative for a rising politically-

²⁸ Schiwy, 2019, 24.

charged cinema in Mexico, but some Mexican filmmakers were eager to join the fray, and one of the most prominent participants or affiliates was Paul Leduc.²⁹ Leduc was one of the only Mexican filmmakers (besides Leobardo López Aretche) who participated in the Mérida, Venezuela festival of 1968, having submitted his film *Que se callen* (1965) for participation. This festival was a keystone in New Latin American Cinema because it brought filmmakers together from the entire hemisphere, including Jorge Sanjinés, who took note of Leduc's work and would refer to it in his later writings and comments. Moreover, Leduc and CUEC-trained film editor Rafael Castanedo edited the footage for another Mérida festival offering, *Testimonios de una agresión*, compiled by the Consejo Nacional de Huelga's documenting the student movement in Mexico. Freya Schiwy and Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón both argue that the 1968 student movement in Mexico, documented in cinema, linked Mexican filmmaking to the politics of New Latin American Cinema.³⁰ Jorge Ayala Blanco, writing of the politically charged film of Mexico during the 1970s agreed, stating, "este cine independiente surgió a raíz de la politización de ciertos núcleos de clase media como consecuencia del movimiento estudiantil de 1968. Con vocación de testimonio contrainformador y de conciencia política-social" (*La condición*, 13). Castanedo, who would edit *Etnocidio*, was part of the Cine Independiente de México group, formed in 1969 along with Arturo Ripstein and Felipe Cazals, and in their 1972 manifesto the group argued the need for independent and politically charged cinema that could be made at a lower cost than that associated with films shot in 35mm, which along with 70mm was the commercial standard of the time.

²⁹ For more, see García Riera, 271-295.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 24, and Vázquez Mantecón, 285-310.

José Rovirosa trained professionally in Mexico and all of his funding was sourced domestically. Paul Leduc was trained in France and at least in the case of *Etnocidio*, received funding from the Canadian government. Araiza was an autodidact, thus lacking the networking, collaborating and theory-exchanging opportunities of the other filmmakers, but of the three he was the one with closest ties to the corporate television industry, having spent decades working with Televisa. Unsurprisingly, *Etnocidio* presents a more overtly ideological, anti-capitalist thesis on the exploitation of labor and land in the Mezquital Valley, while also offering subtitles in French, lending credence to the idea that the film's themes are organized in accordance with a French Marxist school of thought. *Ayautla*, for its part, approaches the question of development and artisanal labor in a descriptive rather than prescriptive way, and *Cascabel* is the most direct of the three films in its attack on the Mexican government's indigenista policy.

Paul Leduc and José Rovirosa, unlike Raúl Araiza, participated in the late 1960s wave of audiovisual artmaking with socio-political conscience that emerged in direct response to the student movement of 1968 and even more specifically, to the massacre of student activists in the Tlatelolco Plaza on October 2 of the same year. Their participation was fairly organic, since both had ties to the UNAM and López Aretche, CUEC alum and friend to both, and each contributed to the making of *El grito* (López Aretche, 1968-1970) (Figure 2-4). According to one interview with Leduc, he had purchased a camera with high-quality sound recording in Europe and became the unofficially appointed sound-recorder of the 1968 student movement.³¹ López Aretche was imprisoned and tortured over the making

³¹ García Ancira, "Entrevista," 268.

of the film, a fact that ostensibly contributed both to his and other CUEC alumni's mental anguish and substance abuse. Indeed, in 1997 Carlos Illescas called the late Rovirosa a "mezcal de un amigo colocado en el afecto y el socialismo."³²

The direct and violent repression of filmmakers involved in the making of *El grito* was a flex not only of the Mexican government's censorship power that Mexico's Ley de Industria Cinematográfica afforded, but of the single party system's ability to directly harm anyone whose film was too revolutionary for the PRI's taste. 1968 was something of an awakening for New Latin American Cinema in Mexico, and it was really in the early 1970s, when Mexican filmmakers began to think of the Mexican government—and Echeverría's presidency—as authoritarian in a parallel fashion to other authoritarian regimes in Latin America. It was also around this time that filmmakers began to address conditions of underdevelopment and internal colonialism in Mexico. It is precisely out of this reframe that *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio*, and *Cascabel* would emerge.

Indeed, in the early 1970s Jorge Sanjinés was paying close attention to the new burst of filmmaking emerging in Mexico focused on social issues. Jorge Ayala Blanco, in fact, acknowledges parallels between Sanjinés' films and *Ayautla*. He notes,

[*Ayautla*] impone su orden poético y su irreductibilidad: hablada en lengua original y comunicándose con nuestra conciencia a través de una gama de diferencias, de reflejos arcaicos, políticos, culturales, genuinos y oprobiosos, como en *Yawar Mallku* del boliviano Sanjinés. Los valores del trabajo comunal y el simple testimonio de una comunidad aborígen segregada. El anticipo acaso de un nuevo y a la vez muy antiguo sistema de representación fílmica. (*La búsqueda*, 258)

Ayala Blanco's observation is important because he gives credence to the idea that *Ayautla*, is part of, or at least in dialogue with, the offshoot of the Tercer Cine genre actually centering

³² Illescas, np.

Indigeneity within analyses of human rights and anti-imperialism on a national level.

Ayautla, like *Yawar Mallku*, centers Indigenous testimony, includes some amount of dialogue in Indigenous languages, and centers the utterances of Indigenous protagonists and interviewees over other voices. The comparison Ayala Blanco draws is also important insofar as it underscores the point also made in this chapter; that *Ayautla*, like *Yawar Mallku*, is gesturing towards Indigenous social, economic, and geographic segregation, and exclusion from national subjectivity. In sum, *Ayautla* and *Yawar Mallku* both belong to a film tradition breaching the manufacture of precarity in Indigenous spaces at the hands of local politicians and their henchmen, while also inserting a narrative of resilience through collective labor and action, even when that action is in opposition to the state. *Ayautla* and *Etnocidio* are both linked to *Yawar Mallku* in this way, but where the latter is concerned with Indigenous rights to bodily autonomy and liberation from U.S. biopolitical imperialism, the two documentary films are concerned with land use, development projects, and labor. Up until now, I have hardly mentioned Araiza, since he was not a part of the film festival or film school milieu, but he did comment, in 1999, on a belief that film “se hace para el pueblo,”³³ a comment vaguely reminiscent of New Latin American Cinema manifestos from the likes of Sanjinés or Solanas and Getino. *¿Ayautla*, *Etnocidio*, *Cascabel*, bear resemblance to the broader New Latin American Film and Third Cinema movements in that they take ideological postures (e.g. anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism) and make contributions to debates about labor and poverty.

³³ Pérez, np.

In 1975, both Leduc and Araiza signed the “Manifiesto del Frente Nacional de Cinematografistas,” which influenced heavily by the New Latin American Cinema movement. Echoing language of earlier manifestos, the brief statement conveyed concern for inequality and exploitation in Latin America, but specifically in Mexico. The message was clear: “el cine mexicano ha sido hasta hace poco tiempo uno de los soportes ideológicos principales de un orden social injusto y dependiente. Que ha sido un activo agente del colonialismo cultural explotando la ignorancia, el analfabetismo y el hambre del país y del continente.” The Manifiesto continues: “el cine no puede ni debe permanecer ajeno y muy por el contrario nuestro compromiso, como cineastas y como individuos es luchar por transformar la sociedad creando un cine mexicano ligado a los intereses del tercer mundo y de América Latina, cine que surgirá de la investigación y del análisis de la realidad continental.”³⁴ Latecomers to the Third Cinema movement though they might have been, this small band of filmmakers had made their ideological posture abundantly clear. Even if the manifesto itself would receive little attention in the film criticism world, not to mention the already-waning New Latin American Film movement, its words echoed in *Cascabel*, released one year later and in *Etnocidio*, released the year after that.

In a 1988 interview, Sanjinés identified the Cooperativa de Cine Marginal and its short film *El año de la rata*, along with the Taller de Cine Octubre’s *Mexico Insurgente* and Leduc’s *Etnocidio* as films created in Mexico engaged in a New Latin American Cinema tradition.³⁵ Along with *Etnocidio*, I argue that *Ayautla* and *Cascabel* are part of this coming to conscious in Mexican filmmaking. *Cascabel*, as I will discuss, was most closely tied to

³⁴ Leduc, et al. “Manifiesto del frente,” 109-111.

³⁵ Sanjinés et al., *Teoría y práctica*, 76-79.

government funds and most simulated commercial cinema, but even now the film has retained certain notoriety for its explicit critique of the Mexican State.³⁶ The three drew on New Latin American Cinema traditions but also benefitted from being latecomers because they could draw on various aesthetic and theoretical traditions from the wave rather than starting from nothing. In all three films, as I will discuss in the following chapters, development, Indigeneity, territory, and capitalism are core themes linking them to broader New Latin American Cinema trends. What links the three films I discuss in my subsequent chapters to each other and to the New Cinema wave is their rootedness in theory and filmmaking practice committed to denouncing social injustice, centering testimonial, forms of labor, and marginalized Indigenous communities.

Despite differences in film narrative, technique, budget, film crew size, and distribution, *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio*, and *Cascabel* share key thematic and aesthetic elements. Both are, of course, documentaries engaging with a collective, Indigenous film subject, both contain ethnographic film sequences emphasizing manual labor and on-camera interviews. Moreover, both films are contributors to the Mexican non-commercial cinema tradition, were filmed during the Echeverría sexenio, and are loosely tied to the independent, neorealist auteur cinema of the Nuevo Cine movement and the militant political cinema of the Tercer Cine film movement that captivated the Latin American independent film scene during the 1960s and 1970s. Rafael Aviña, for his part, categorizes *Cascabel* as presenting a similar style to that of the politically-engaged films being created in the CUEC at the same time.³⁷

³⁶ On a recent visit to the Instituto Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas or INPI, formerly the INI and housed in the same building, I mentioned that I was writing about *Cascabel* and the INPI employee immediately recalled the film as the one which critiques the INI (it does not do so explicitly).

³⁷ Aviña, 1999. Np.

Very much in the spirit of such films belonging to the broader tradition of New Latin American Cinema, Rovirosa's *Ayautla* and Leduc's *Etnocidio* carried the torch of socialist realism by observing symptoms of social and economic inequality. In 1972, the same year as *Ayautla*'s production, Alberto Híjar published *Hacia un tercer cine: antología* through the UNAM. The volume included reprints of Third Cinema manifestos from Mario Handler (Uruguay), Glauber Rocha (Brazil), Carlos Álvarez (Colombia), Jorge Sanjinés (Bolivia) and Miguel Littin (Chile), as well as an anti-imperialist essay written in Vietnam, an interview with Ousmane Sembene (*Black Girl*, 1966) and other commentaries on the status of Third Cinema in Mexico. If international interactions and dialogue between Mexican political filmmaking and that of other regions in Latin America were not evident before 1972, this book affirmed the awareness of the Mexican independent film community about broader Third Cinema trends, hemispherically and globally. Paul Leduc also contributed to the exchange of ideas about New Latin American Cinema between Mexico and the rest of the Americas, co-editing a volume titled *Hojas de cine: testimonies y documentos del Nuevo cine latinoamericano*, and including interviews from filmmakers like Jorge Sanjinés.

Leduc and Rovirosa were part of an international film community built upon personal relationships as well as shared political and professional concerns. As previously mentioned, it is also worth noting the ways so many Mexican, Cuban, Argentine, and Colombian filmmakers, situated across the Americas, were aware of each other and driven by the same ideas about what film could aspire to create and accomplish. As one notable example of collaboration, in 1986, filmmaking couple Patricia Coronado Nóbregas and Federico Weingartshofer worked together with Fernando Birri, Julio García Espinosa, and

author Gabriel García Márquez to establish the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión, or EICTV, in San Antonio de los Baños.

3 CHAPTER 3: LABORED SPACE AND THE SOUNDS OF SPACE IN AYAUTLA (JOSÉ ROVIROSA, 1972)



Figure 3-1. Photograph. “Hombre y mujer cruza un puente de alambre sobre el río Santo Domingo,” Believed to be taken in San Bartolomé Ayautla Anonymous. 1950. Mediateca INAH.

3.1 Synopsis/description of *Ayautla*

The thirty-two-minute film opens with a travelling shot of the sky. Non-diegetic sound nods to the fact that human life is present, if only off-screen. As the camera pans across the cloudy, wooded hills of Ayautla, the sounds of an old man chanting in Mazatec while a baby cries, add a sense of movement to the already moving film frame. The environmental effect of this soundtrack is an augmentation of the film’s energy and rhythm, which is the rhythm

of daily life. The film has no subtitles, and for the non-Mazatec speaking spectator, the effect of the non-diegetic sound is a rhythmic urgency. From this first sequence, presenting spectators with the landscape and inhabitants of Ayautla, the film stays in motion. The camera supplies some of this movement: tracking shots follow people walking down mountainous trails, and other shots move along streams, populated by swishing skirts, and arms that vigorously scrub clothing, rinse corn, or beat animal skins in the flowing water. At other moments, the camera is fixed, and movement is provided by lines of linen-clad men march towards the camera, talking, laughing, and mostly avoiding the gaze of the lens and cameraman. The soundtrack is also filled with movement; non-diegetic spiritual and profane song are layered with conversation, a near-symphonic cacophony of farm animals, the beat of drums, and the rhythmic thump of machetes or hoes making contact with organic matter.

Ayautla's visual field is populated with the mundane activities and scenes of daily life, and the collective nature of these activities, carried out in the company of others or even with the help of others, is a recurring theme. As a sort of rupture or coda to the rest of the dialogue-less documentary, a man speaks slightly over the camera from his porch, coffee cup in hand. The speaker, using Spanish, explains to the camera how Ja Nguifi work. He describes the Ayautla custom of conducting collective work both in terms of the Mazatec word used and in terms of *tequio*, a word borrowed from the Nahuatl *tequitl*. The film toys with ethnographic film conventions common to Mexican documentary shorts of the time, particularly those representing Indigenous communities. For example, the soundtrack does supply an authoritative voice over in Spanish, but that voice is not of an academic or of a hired voice actor reading a script but is that of a bilingual community member offering his own definition of *tequio* and narrating the history of the highway construction project in

Ayautla. We might call *Ayautla* a report-documentary in keeping with Carlos Mendoza's categorization of documentaries he describes as "representacion[es] basada[s] en una exposición informativa que puede contener elementos de opinión y de análisis, y debe ofrecer una visión pretendidamente *objetiva*" (Mendoza, 40). This description gestures to the film's relative distance from Third Cinema, which is intentionally subjective and politically sympathetic to leftist, working class causes.

Tequio is an activity pursued within Ayautla's territory, but it is also an activity concerned with sustaining and reinforcing that territory, with its physical geography, its social fabric, and its politically imposed limits. The tequio portrayed in *Ayautla* may be most productively divided into three space-related categories: watered space, labored space, and sound space, which I will discuss further on in this chapter.

3.2 Context

José Rovirosa (1934-1997) was born in Orizaba, Veracruz, and worked in public health and social wellbeing education programs before pivoting his career in his early thirties to join the very first generation of students at the UNAM's Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos, or CUEC (today the Escuela Nacional de Artes Cinematográficas). Rovirosa completed his studies in 1966, at the cusp of the emergence of the student movement in Mexico and of anti-war and labor rights movements around the globe.¹ Rovirosa's career, overall, reflected a commitment to independent, socially committed cinema and to the formation of generations of filmmakers who would look to careers beyond commercial filmmaking.

¹ De la Vega, 18.

Speaking at a round table hosted by TV UNAM in 1994, Rovirosa described documentary as “...el cine del hombre, es el cine que viene mientras nos comprometemos con la vida del ser humano...va a ir surgiendo más pese a la censura y sus problemas de exhibición.”² Rovirosa ascribed to the notion of *cine comprometido*, a tenet of the hemispheric wave of socially-aware cinema that would clearly shape his career as a director. Rovirosa’s belief that documentary was tied to the human experience is humorously complicated by the fact that Rovirosa’s life essentially revolved around filmmaking: in 1972, only a few years after graduating the CUEC film school, he took on a teaching role at the same institution and later became its director (from 1978 until 1984).³ Rovirosa used his position as a respected and institutionally important documentary filmmaker to publish volumes of interviews with both Mexican and foreign documentary filmmakers including Nicolás Echevarría (*María Sabina, mujer espíritu*, 1979, and *Eco de la montaña*, 2014). The linking theme of these interviews, published as two volumes titled *Miradas a la realidad I y II*, were documentary films made within the context of 1960s and 1970s political cinema.

At a time when commercial films like *Tonta pero no tanto* poked fun at the challenges posed to the rural labor force when migrating to the city, *Ayautla* leaves the city to look for the dignity in labor and life in rural space. José Rovirosa was part of the first generation of students at the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (CUEC) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). In the years between graduation and his making of *Ayautla*—which coincided with his employment as an instructor at the CUEC—Rovirosa worked, making short educational films regarding hygiene: films with

² “Video: Disertaciones en torno al documental.”

³ De la Vega, 18.

subtle ideological ties to the Mexican national habitus and the project to shape the national body into one that was scientifically measurable, hygienic, racialized and whitened, and made consumerist. *Ayautla*, though, is the story of a territory: a space that is changing and in which the Mexican national habitus plays a latent role.

Though *Ayautla* did not garner international acclaim, or even national attention outside a specific cultural circle, Rovirosa's intellectual and political affiliations implied a certain level of prestige amongst Mexican artists and thinkers. Rovirosa's social circle included the likes of Carlos Navarrete (anthropologist and archeologist at the UNAM), authors José Revueltas and Juan de la Cabada.⁴ He participated in a few other film projects related to Indigenous communities across Mexico, including *El eclipse/Ratigobicha* (1970), *Semana santa entre los coras* (1971), *Oaxaca de Juárez* (1972) and *La CNDH en Jalisco con los huicholes* (1993), perhaps the last film he ever made. Moving amongst politically engaged authors and thinkers, it comes and no great surprise that *Ayautla* would reflect the keen awareness of Indigenous struggles in Mexico as well as broader class struggle and ongoing colonialism of Rovirosa's social milieu.

Ayautla was a small film project created and produced entirely within CUEC. The Sierra Mazateca offered tourists a place in which to purchase and consume hallucinogenic mushrooms, a topic that would gain even greater attention in Echeverría's documentary *María Sabina, mujer espíritu*, filmed in nearby Huautla de Jiménez. By contrast, however, this film approached the Sierra Mazateca and Mazatec community dynamics from a lens of collective struggle and daily life. The film was co-produced produced by the UNAM's

⁴ Illescas, np.

Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología y Departamento de Actividades Cinematográficas and allegedly also received government funds from Conacyt as well as the financial backing of a presumed NGO named Grupo de Solidaridad y Ayuda a los Pueblos Indígenas.⁵ After the film was produced, it may have been screened at a few cineclubes, and received minimal critical reception, though notably, film critic Jorge Ayala Blanco, closely tied to the CUEC, did write about it.

While it is harder to prove whether *Ayautla* was the target of censorship, we do have evidence that Rovirosa's work was a target at other moments: in a comically orchestrated "self-interview" published by the UNAM's cultural outreach foundation, Rovirosa describes how his short film, *El eclipse/Ratigobicha* (1970), the first film made by the UNAM filmed "fuera de la ciudad" (14) was censored by being denied permission from the Dirección General de Cinematografía to be exported to Italy for a science film festival. Rovirosa explains that he learned that his film was censored because the censors themselves gave him access to the review they had conducted. The documentary was shot in "una de las zonas más pobres de México. Motivo por el cual no podía salir del país pues esas imágenes denigraban la visión de México en el extranjero" (14). It must not go without mention that the film was shot in Oaxaca and given that Rovirosa chose to title the film in Didja'záa (Zapotec), it is very possible that the images that most concerned the censors were precisely those depicting people and daily life in an Indigenous community.

⁵ De la Vega, 18.

3.3 A Town with Three Names

The expression for “town” or “our land” in Mazatec is *naxinandána*, *naxi* meaning mountain or peak and *nandá* meaning water. As in other Mesoamerican cosmogonies, Mazatec traditional belief holds that mountains in the region have their *chikon*, their spirits, and are the places in which the thunder and rain deities reside.⁶ Mazatec territory is, in spiritual terms and literal ones, a place where mountains, ground and water need one another. As Magali Demanget points out, the abundance of derivatives of the word water in Mazatec, *ndá*, is a testament to the abundance of water in the Sierra Mazateca as well as the importance of water within Mazatec cosmologies.⁷ For example, *ndá ndé* is “water of the earth,” *ndá ndi’ya* is “water of the path,” and *ndá xitsií* is rainwater.

The hydraulic engineering projects conducted in Mazatec and Chinantec territories starting in the 1940s implied both an intense commodification of water as a resource in the Sierra Mazateca, through the construction of the Miguel Aleman dam, meant to harness the water of the Tonto River. The project has been accused of perpetrating the forced displacement of up to 20,000 Mazatecs between 1949 and 1955 from their former communities.⁸ The irrigation zone this engineering project was meant to not only stimulate the agricultural economy but also to generate electricity. Beneficiaries, according to one study, were: sugar refineries, like the Ingenio of San Cristobal; cattle ranches in the downriver region of Papaloapan, lumber and paper industries, to name only some.⁹

⁶ Demanget, np.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Barabas et al., 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

Spokespeople, politicians, and indigenistas working on Papaloapan commission believed that resettlement presented an opportunity for Mazatecos and Chinantecos to become modern citizens integrated into a more developed and homogenous Mexico. Antonio Pallés Brizuela, an engineer with the project, proudly declared the dam that promised “una vida mejor para los habitantes de la Cuenca de Papaloapan, un vigoroso impulse para la economía nacional and a new life, in general, in Mexica history.”¹⁰ Moreover, the Commission declared in a written statement in 1958 that,

the removal of the natives and their resettlement in a new environment does not represent a simple change of residence, but rather the beginnings of a change in their psychology...they have jumped in a period many stages of historical evolution...they are in the process of change from a tribal life to today’s civilized life and they are integrating themselves rapidly thanks to the help they have received from the Papaloapan commission and the Instituto Nacional Indigenista.¹¹

As Stephen Lewis points out, INI anthropologists relocated eighty six percent of the affected population in the Papaloapan Basin...the resettled Mazatecos, toyed with the promise of arable land, electricity, and other benefits in their new location, received neither electricity nor irrigation for their crops.¹² In fact, the INI produced the films *Nuevos horizontes* (1956) and *Todos somos Mexicanos* (1958) in order to demonstrate the success of the resettlement project.¹³ Lewis’ incriminating index of the Papaloapan River Commission and Dam’s impact on the Mazatec communities echoes the sentiments of anthropologists who declared this project an act of ethnocide.¹⁴ Indeed, Rosario Castellanos, writing to Usonian friends, predicted that in a few years the INI’s Coordinating Center in Papaloapan wouldn’t be

¹⁰ Nasre, 39.

¹¹ Barabas et al., 37.

¹² Lewis, 198-199.

¹³ For more on these films, see Arroyo Quiroz.

¹⁴ Barabas et al. call hydroelectric campaigns in the region “ethnocide.”

necessary anymore because “the indigenous will be a mestizo or will be so acculturated that it will not be necessary to treat him like a marginal man” (Lewis, 198). Stephen Lewis seems to have taken Castellanos’ harsh assessment as a complacent observation. Given her novels, and recent resignation from the INI’s San Cristobal coordinating center, it seems more likely that she was merely reflecting a brutal reality of Mexican state intervention: forcing Indigenous communities to de-territorialize and relocate to different areas was a method employed to take control of their lands, expand Mexican territory, and to promote assimilation—the re-racialization of Mexicans racialized as Indigenous.

Lewis writes of a lesser known case than Papaloapan in which Tzotzil communities were forced to relocate due to a hydroelectric dam project: though they requested that the CFE grant them permission to settle on arable land, but they were instead moved into the municipality of Venustiano Carranza, outside of San Cristobal de Las Casas because, according to the CFE, it would be easier to provide them with electricity in this settlement; the justification was made on the basis that electricity would help the displaced community better assimilate. Yet the arable land there was already in use: virtually the same happened for Mazatec communities, who were offered roads, potable water, and electricity as compensation for the fact that the land that would most benefit from the irrigation project had already been claimed by employees of the commission and by “influential people who expected to benefit from the dam’s irrigation district.”¹⁵

Quiet is notably absent from the film, and the soundtrack lends the sensation that, rather than a sleepy mountainous hamlet in which time passes more slowly than in a city, the

¹⁵ Lewis, 199-200 and Barabas, 76-77.

hamlet is brimming with movement and activity, which can be heard if not seen. There are no fewer responsibilities nor fewer tasks in Ayautla than in Puebla or Oaxaca City. One of the mother tongues of Ayautla inhabitants is Ayautla Mazatec, a variant of the Indigenous language spoken by over 200,000 people in almost five hundred regions within the political borders of Mexico.¹⁶



Figure 3-2. Drummer atop the Ayautla chapel. *Ayautla* (José Rovirosa, 1972).

While “Mazatec” is actually a name from Nahuatl, and in a colonial context, Mazatecs referred to themselves as *chjata yama*, or humble people. Today, however, some Mazatec scholars propose the use of *chjota én*, people of their word, or *chjota nima*, people of heart or soul. Nonetheless, the way Mazatec is named in San Bartolomé Ayautla and the way residents self-identity is slightly different, and both are related to the community’s ecosystem—especially to water. The name Ayautla, from Nahuatl, means “where there is

¹⁶ Secretaría de Cultura/Sistema de Información Cultural. “Mazateco.”

much mist.”¹⁷ As a 2008 summary produced by Ayautla’s ayuntamiento states, *ayautla* means “lugar bajo las nubes” or “donde hay mucha neblina” and comes from the words *ayahuitl*, fog, and *tlasubijo*, abundance. Meanwhile, the same summary states that “Ayautla se le llama ‘Nguifi’ en Mazateco, es un lugar donde la mayor parte del año está cubierto de nubes” (7). In Ayautla Mazatec, or *enre naxinanda nguifi*, Ayautla’s territory is called *Nguifi*, or beneath the clouds. Inhabitants of Nguifi are accordingly referred to in the neighboring Huautla de Jiménez as *chjota nguifi*: the people (who live) beneath the clouds.¹⁸

Ayautla, a municipality of the Mexican state of Oaxaca, is part of Mazatec linguistic and cultural territory and thus exists, at least conceptually, in a liminal in-between space: the geographic territory comprising the community is Nguifi, and it is also San Bartolomé Ayautla. Its catholic name, excluded from the film’s title, is the legacy of the conquest practice of renaming colonized villages after saints. Ayautla’s church was founded in 1588, and the free municipality of San Bartolomé Ayautla was officially founded in 1825.¹⁹ Likewise, it retains the Nahuatl name Ayautla, which gestures to pre-conquest Mexica imperialism, whose legacy is made manifest in the profusion of Nahuatl toponyms in regions where the lingua franca was never Nahuatl.²⁰

It is pertinent to think of *Ayautla* in territorial and spatial terms, given that the film’s very title is the Nahuatl toponym for a particular municipality, with geographic limits, bounded by political borders and overseen by governing institutions. The film is best

¹⁷ “Plan municipal,” 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

¹⁹ “Plan municipal,” 8.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 8. The report states that the Mazatecs were conquered in 1454 by the Mexica, specifically by Moctezuma and Ilhuicamina

described as a portrait of a territory, its landscapes; its people; the interrelations of people and land; the customs and rhythms and language of that territory. The spatial logic of *Ayautla* is subtle but offers insight into the shifting relations of Mazatec with Mexican national territory, comprised of economic relations, language, geographic terrain, and habitus, while also underscoring the sensorial and ideological components constituting the territory in terms of its material and immaterial nature.

Ayautla begins not by anchoring the viewer's sense of place through shots of the earth, but of the sky. The film opens with a traveling shot of mist, with the outlines of trees poking through it, at an angle that is nearly the reverse of a bird's eye shot. Like a wink at the etymology of the municipality's name, the film begins to portray the space by acknowledging that it is a territory: the very name is an acknowledgement that the people who live in this part of Mazatec territory are defined by the mist hanging above and around them. Having established this connection between community and environment, the camera finally tracks down amongst trees and misty hills to settle on townspeople, walking purposefully down wooded footpaths. The editing of *Ayautla* is fluid, made possible by the fact that, rather than emphasize a single past time, task, person, vista, or building. The montage includes not a single aerial shot, and with the exception of the opening sequence in which the camera is tilted upwards, the scenes are all filmed from an adult human's eye level. Giving the impression that it is very much located within Ayautla rather than an external eye, the camera removes critical distance and thus invites the spectator to enter the space—to experience territory from the inside—, rather than inspect it from afar.

Ayautla is made by a non-Mazatec director and film crew for a non-Mazatec, or at least a bilingual audience. Moreover, its lack of reference to the logic behind the creation of

the documentary or the ideology of its creators implies that the film intends to capture some sort of reality or truth about Ayautla. However, *Ayautla* is unlike innumerable ethnographic films funded by the INI or the SEP and filmed during the 1970s and 1980s like *La música y los mixes* (Oscar Meléndez, 1978), *Teshuinda: Semana Santa Tarahumara* (Nicolás Echeverría, 1979), *María Sabina, mujer espíritu*, *La montaña de Guerrero* (Alberto Cortés, 1980). Films from this list and others not mentioned attempt to discursively link Indigenous festivals, customs, and arts to national culture, evincing the idea that the communities at the center of these films are exemplary culture producers for Mexico, ripe for assimilation into the national economy and social body through tourism, the sale of their arts, and through the alteration of their consumption patterns. Another film of similar discursive ilk is *Misión de Chichimecas* (Nacho López, 1970), which emphasizes the idea that Indigenous peoples are the “esencia de la nación mexicana.” *Ayautla* in turn, sidesteps the national identity narrative and instead interrogates the notion of Mexican territory, and gesturing to the tensions between Mazatec and Mexican national territory, specifically the control over land and infrastructure, the conditions of commerce, and most subtly, the dominance of language and labor practice. That is, *Ayautla* is interested in the very essence of a territory and looks to transcend a national discourse ignoring the fact that Mazatec territory—and more broadly, Indigenous territory—is not solely a matter of who lives on what land and controls what resources: it is a question the relations, language, landscapes and sounds that make up this particular fragment of the Sierra Mazateca.



Figure 3-3. Still. Men Thatching a Roof. *Ayautla* (José Rovirosa, 1972). Filmoteca UNAM, México.

3.4 Tequio: Sustaining Space

The rhythm of the montage and soundtrack along with the movement of and within the film frame underscore a broader theme of tasks and activity, conducted for the sustenance and reaffirmation of the community. Animal husbandry, food preparation, home construction, agriculture, and bathing are some of these tasks (Figure 3-3). Weingartshofer's camera tracks women hurrying along with carrying clay pots of water perched on their heads, while fixed or slow-panning shots depict a flock of teenage girls and grandmothers at the creek, talking and laughing while rinsing buckets of corn, clothes, animal intestines and even themselves. In other sequences, a medium long-shot fixed shot, framed by dense shrubbery depicts three

men preparing a footbridge across a fast-rushing stream, and the camera pans over a long picnic table, at which seated men and boys eagerly sate their hunger, only occasionally moving their gaze from their lunch companions or plates to stare back into the camera.

Labor, as portrayed in *Ayautla*, is not only a fact of daily life but also as a practice and ethics with its method. What gives the labor-related sequence a sense of thematic unity is a narrative provided by sole film subject to address the camera. The unnamed interlocutor is filmed at an angled, close-up shot, lending him an authoritative aspect. Also one of the few people to appear on screen not moving or in the midst of a task, the interlocutor's stillness, emphasized by the fixed frame presenting him, distinguishes him from the rest of the film's human subjects. The break in the rhythmic unity of the montage is presented through the sequences portraying the interviewee give the impression that, even while the man is a part of *Ayautla* and lives within it, he has taken a pause to consider the nature of labor in *Ayautla*, and in doing so, invites the spectator to do the same.

The man's topics of discussion are mostly related to labor and, more specifically to *Ayautla*, he speaks of the role of *tequio*, which he translates for the camera as *mano de obra*. *Tequio*, mentioned for the first time about halfway through the documentary, is the referent for the tasks we have seen in earlier sequences, and its mention retroactively weaves the labor-related sequences depicted in the first minutes into a broader discourse that will remain recognizable throughout the film. Not all of the tasks and kinds of labor depicted in *Ayautla* are definable as *tequio*, yet as they are edited into the same montage as sequences depicting more explicit kinds of *tequio*, the film conveys the simultaneously romantic and radical notion that all of the tasks and kinds of work performed within the documentary are impulse by an ethos similar to that of *tequio*.

As it is used colloquially today in Mixe, Mazatec, Mixtec, Zapotec and other Indigenous societies, *tequio* refers to a particular kind of work done in the interest of the wellbeing and survivance of a community or territory. Notably, *tequio* is not a word endemic to Mixe, Mazatec, Mixtec or Zapotec, but in fact is a Hispanicized adaption of the Nahuatl noun *tequitl*, meaning work, job, or task. Amongst other definitions, it is defined as “el trabajo colectivo que deviene en un acto sagrado del que se beneficia toda la comunidad, por la participación de todo. Es el trabajo con obligación moral.”²¹ Despite the terms irrefutable post-conquest origins, historians and anthropologists find precedent for *tequio* in pre-conquest labor practice in Mexica society, though others argue that the practice, like the term, dates from the colonial period. Whether or not *tequio* is the direct inheritor of pre-conquest labor practice is immaterial to this chapter, but it must be acknowledged that collective or donated time and labor was commonplace before the conquest. Communal labor—historical and contemporary—is closely tied to the elaboration and sustainment of architectural, agricultural, and watered space. For example, the *altepetlalli* (which translates to “town land”) was the common land of the *calpuli*—the land associated with a particular building such as a ceremonial structure, a government house, or the like. Working this land was the shared responsibility and considered the way in which people would support the local organizing entities. This work included construction and infrastructure projects, such building ceremonial centers or government houses, digging ditches or building waterways.²² This work was in support of the local authorities and also ensured that local authorities had corresponding spaces in which to perform rituals and engage with the general populace. On

²¹ Flores Quintero, np.

²² Orellana, 35-6.

the other hand, there was work of a more intimate and directly interpersonal nature, which included canoe building, roof thatching, clearing, planting, and harvesting agricultural lands, and more. Such work was closely related to what we might now describe as mutual aid and insured a sense of mutual responsibility amongst community members.

The conquest imposed a new system of land-distribution practices related to the creation of the República de Indios, and within this new system of territorial divisions, Indigenous communities were either obliged to stay on their lands or to move to lands assigned to them by the Spanish Crown. When they did stay on their lands, the colonial government, and the post-independence governments used legal pathways to wrest the arable portions of ancestral lands from Indigenous communities.²³ These communities were then subject to tribute fees demanded by the Crown, and because the tribute was charged collectively, the communities would work collectively to raise the funds or to produce the goods demanded on them. This early practice is described as one of two ways in which tequio appeared on a community scale: while the former was oriented toward the payment of tribute, the latter was an adaptation to the conditions of the limited spatial confines into which Indigenous communities were placed by the Crown. Tequio, then, was a way of reinforcing the territoriality of a community both through its infrastructure and through its mutual social support.

In the twentieth century, anthropologists and historians have frequently linked tequio to the idea of communal lands—a concept concretized through Mexican Agrarian Reform during the 1930s, and the legal parceling of land into *ejidos colectivos*, that is, small tracts of

²³ Coy, 52.

land allocated to subsistence farmers across Mexico with the understanding that the land would be worked collectively and cooperatively.²⁴ In the twentieth century, collaboration has also consisted of sharing local governing roles, a process that operates through the systematic rotation of community members through a set of governing positions. One of the concerns with *tequio* during the mid-twentieth century was that as the Mexican federal and state governments interfered increasingly in community governance, the government would begin to coopt the collective labor practice of a community by requiring residents to donate their labor, thereby undermining the non-compulsory roots of *tequio*. In these cases, calling such labor contributions *tequio* becomes problematic insofar as it implies mutual aid when in fact such labor is considered involuntary and may likely not be of mutual benefit to both the Mexican municipal, state, or federal government and the Indigenous community called upon to contribute to public infrastructure projects or a similar endeavor.²⁵ While abuse or cooptation of the *tequio* system undeniably occurs, the implications and sheer creative power of *tequio* can also be perceived as a threat to the status quo, as I will explain further on.

²⁴ Ciafardini, 85.

²⁵ Orellana, 38-39.



Figure 3-4. Still. Men Walking Single File. *Ayautla* (José Roviroso, 1972). Filmoteca UNAM, México.

3.4.1.1 *Tequio and the (re)Construction of Community*

Within the visual economy of this documentary, the array of visual objects, faces, architectural styles, or manners of speech is given less attention than it is through physical activity itself. *Ayautla*, in other words, is a space of doings and of tasks, and especially of *tequio*.

This is made evident in the fact that, even when the camera is still, the people, farm animals or water within the frame is not. At around the minute mark, the first person appears on a fixed frame shot taken not on a tripod but with a handheld camera, so that the frame

moves slightly. The woman in the shot is walking, carrying a water jug under her arm. The camera then cuts to a woman walking outside and preparing to braid her hair so that she too may fetch water. The next few shots are similar: an angled travelling shot follows a woman striding along, water jug under her arm, another angled shot follows a man heading down the hillside. These scenes, full of movement and purpose, give the impression that *Ayautla* is bustling with the comings and goings of its residence.

Although, as I have already mentioned, *tequio* has often been associated with activities considered too difficult for women, *Ayautla*'s early emphasis on women working in the same space—if not together—invites spectators to think about the mutual benefit of meeting to perform tasks in the same place at the same time. A brief close-up of women's arms and baskets of corn shows one woman pour water into another woman's basket. The camera pans slightly to show another woman just nearby at a different phase in the corn-rinsing process. As the frame fixes on this second woman, she looks over at her companions and smiles. A jump cut shows a small waterfall, where six or seven women are gathered, performing tasks. Even when each woman is occupied with something, she may be actively helping her companion by pouring water into another's basket, as then may be done for her. The close ups that first introduce us to several women working together and then the long shot of the six or seven women reveals the degree to which women are sharing, if not the corn washing tasks themselves, then certainly the space in which the washing is done.

To reinforce the idea that watered space is a social space for women to complete domestic labor while helping one another physically and morally, the camera then cuts to another watered space, travelling with a young girl carrying a tin bucket, more of which come into view screen left as she arrives at her destination. The camera pans left to show five

more women, nestled together amongst boulders and rocks, bent over not corn this time but clothes. The camera pans back and forth across the group of women, some of whom are washing clothes and others animal intestines. Some stand in a semicircle, talking and pouring water for one another, while others are bent over their work, scrubbing the dirt out of white tunics, yet the montage gives the impression that these everyday tasks are pretext for an informal gathering of mothers, aunts, cousins, sisters, and friends for whom watered spaces constitute convenient places to perform tasks but also spaces in which an extra pair of hands may be solicited or even pointers exchanged.

These kinds of women-led collective tasks or labor practices are not well documented in Indigenous communities in Mesoamerica, but as Brenda Child has noted, thousands of miles north of Ayautla, Ojibwe culture has historically valued not only women's labor output, but the collective practices related with women's work in themselves.²⁶ In the Ojibwe case, women's collective labor has been related to *manoomin*, wild rice, and it has historically been women who tie rice into stalks in order to mark their territory and protect the rice. In fact, water was a gendered space where women had property rights, and their labor was not simply a matter of procuring sustenance, but also about empowerment and the community's spiritual well-being.²⁷ Arguably, something similar is at play at the creeks where Ayautla Mazatec women wash corn—the key ingredient for tortillas and so much more of the local diet: without the corn preparation (not to mention the other kinds of food

²⁶ “Water was a gendered space where women held property rights. Women labored not only for material and physical sustenance but for their own empowerment and the spiritual well-being of family and community” (Child, 242).

²⁷ *Ibid*, 242.

preparation) that women undertake at the river, the community could not thrive. Indeed, it is with fetching water that *Ayautla* begins, and that the daily cycles of life and work may begin.

In *Ayautla* as elsewhere, women have historically contributed limited physical labor as *tequio*. According to one study, women are not technically prohibited from performing manual labor as *tequio*, but often believe that the work is too physically demanding, and so either pay an amount or send someone in their place.²⁸ Nonetheless, I argue that *Ayautla*'s montage invites the spectator to consider labor performed by women, whether technically *tequio* or not, as edifying for the social element of *Ayautla*'s territory, particularly in immaterial ways.

The film's first seven minutes feature women at work. Immediately out of a shot of an elder sitting in her home working a loom, the film transitions to a medium close up of the film's only interviewee, who stands with a coffee cup in hand. This transition leads directly into the interviewee's discussion of *tequio*. These editing choices create what I argue is a discursive bridge between the socially-constitutive watery workspaces of Ja Nguifi women and the agricultural and architectural spaces in which *tequio* is performed—mostly by men. *Tequio* is collective work the man explains, and it principally serves the purpose of building or repairing “caminos, los municipios, las escuelas.” These projects, as the highway project he mentions as an example gesture to the complexity of *Ayautla* as both Mazatec territory and Mexican territory. San Bartolomé *Ayautla*, in fact, is a municipality of Oaxaca, meaning that it is subject to the enforcing of regional borders and politics. At the same time, however, *Ayautla* is a community defined locally as existing in relation to its misty climate, and as

²⁸ Espinosa Díaz, 42.

such its geography is affirmed not through legality but through local environmental and cultural relations. This truth applies to the very nature of labor and infrastructural projects within the municipality: while its schools, municipal buildings and roads are technically under the authority of the local government as well as the state and federal, as the documentary evinces, the infrastructure reinforcing the sense of community and territory is produced autonomously from the state.

Rather than attend to tequio-related construction projects on the Ayuntamiento or on the local church, *Ayautla* depicts collective labor being performed within agricultural and lived spaces, ensuring the fundamental needs of the community, such as food and shelter, will be met. Agricultural labor sequences entail medium long shots panning across a hill side, upon which dozens of men in hats with picks and hoes turn the soil of a single plot of land. A jump cut then offers an angled shot showing the same men marching down a steep slope with their tools over their shoulders. The camera cuts to a close up of the trail: a pair of rubber boots go by, and then a pair of bare feet, walking in towards the camera and then beyond the frame

This shot, or one very similar, repeats through *Ayautla's* montage. A fixed frame shot into which files of workers march repeats throughout the montage. In this visual theme, men keep pace with one another, and they all move in the same direction, approaching the camera and then out of the frame, but coming close enough to the camera that they become an endless stream of pants, boots, and satchels (Figure 3-4); or faces, hats, shovels, and arm. Labor applied to the agricultural space or home space may be tequio, but it is the community, the seemingly endless walking file of men, who perform and embody tequio. This, sequence,

perhaps as much as the ones of these same men tilling fields, is Rovirosa's attempt to create a cinematic portrait of tequio.

These and another fixed frame shot, which gazes across a hillside on which forty or so men are at work tilling soil, show bodies arranged within the frame in such a way that the spectator perceives the physical closeness between each of the men working to prepare the field for planting. The proximity between the men, working elbow to elbow and walking heel to toe, evinces that they are hardly strangers brought to work together. Rather, they are lifelong acquaintances and perhaps even relatives, accustomed to sharing physical space in the fields, at the dining table, or on the trails. Like shots in *Etnocidio* of factory workers walking in or out, or even the 1895 fixed frame shot of workers leaving the Lumiere Factory, the camera is angled in such a way as to allow the spectator to appreciate the sheer number of people within a single frame and within a perceived geographic space. The camera finds the interviewee within the milieu, dressed the same as the dozens of other men, while his voice, non-diegetic as it comes from his face-to-face interview, continues to play. For the interviewee, who talks about tequio, the concept is not abstract but rather a fact of life.

The camera dwells on the intimacy of the tequio men in *Ayautla* perform: extreme close ups catch one man whistle a tune, another dangling a homemade cigarette from his lips. A third medium close-up centers three men, shoulders pressed together, straining as they push a boulder downhill. A deep shot shows how the men have progressed in what is likely a single day, covering a huge amount of ground. This labor sequence is evidence of the impressive achievements of collective labor, but it is also a testament to the sense of community and the belief in communal land within *Ayautla*. When we consider the degree to which land exploitation and economic competition was encouraged within Mexican territory

during the 1970s, these scenes become all the more radical as far as they evince the possibility of belief in a collective wellbeing of a community, and the willingness to perform strenuous labor toward the collective wellbeing of that community.

Within the *tequio* thematic of *Ayautla*, the most important ongoing project according to the narrative is mentioned both by the interviewee and depicted within the montage: this is the highway project. It is thanks to the long-existing tradition of *tequio*, the interviewee claims proudly, that *Ayautla* residents, taking part *en masse*, have managed to construct sixteen kilometers of highway.



Figure 3-5. Photograph Demonstrating the Dangers of the Highway into Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca. *Sucesos para todos*, 1969. Hemeroteca Nacional, UNAM.

3.4.1.2 *Highway 182: Tequio and Contested Territory*

The interviewee, whose voiceover becomes the narrative thread linking sequences of agricultural labor and road building, describes how the highway construction began in 1967.

He explains that normally, everyone helps (with infrastructure projects pertaining to *Ayautla*)

but that in 1968 a number of caciques—locals with some amount of economic and political power and ties to the regional or federal government—conducted “una agresión armada” so that the people of Ayautla would not continue working on the highway. His narration, a voice-over for agricultural tequio shots, explains that since February of 1971, Ayautla has built twelve kilometers of highway along the gap created by the Papaloapan Commission.

Araiza and Weingartshofer do not miss the opportunity to film Ayautla residents building the highway, and presumably make the trek along with the men in order to record the work as it is being done. As the voice over continues to discuss the highway, a sequence of medium shots shows men hacking tree branches off a tree with their machetes. The men then carry the tree trunk together down a slope and rest it across a fast-rushing brook, tying it to another trunk with vines. A zoomed out shot then shows men cross on the footbridge, where more wait for them on the far side. The camera cuts to a medium fixed frame shot taken from behind dense shrubbery: the shot is angled down slightly, and one by one, men with machetes walk from right to left across the frame. As they walk, the voice-over explains that the community would like to finish building the highway within the year but that the highway’s end, sixteen kilometers—ten miles—away from Ayautla, is a four-hour walk. If the highway builders are to leave home in the morning and return home in the evening, they must walk ten miles to the highway’s end, work all day, and then walk the ten miles home, preferably before dark.

The gravity of the voice over’s revelation about the time commitment and implied physical demands of this tequio are coupled with the medium-long shots of the end of the highway, frames so densely filled with plant matter that the worker takes up less than one tenth of the image. The workers are not using backhoes or chainsaws but machetes and

manpower. The camera pans from the end of the highway towards where it leads into the dense forest. The camera, sometimes positioned inside the forest and looking out to the newly formed highway, captures the constant movement of the men and the plants they cut, swinging their machetes rhythmically and unceasingly. Dense tree cover and plant life, as well as rushing water at the start of the highway building sequence convey the power of Sierra Mazateca and the enormity of the physical effort needed to mold those spaces. No wonder then, that the already-existing stretches of highway leading into Huautla de Jiménez were described as a “Una carretera imposible,” even where highways already cut through the Sierra Mazateca, they were dangerous and difficult to maintain (See Figure 3-5). Perhaps this tequio is collective labor at its most extreme: a project demanding twenty miles of foot travel per day, not to mention the actual work that must be performed in clearing the way for the highway. Unlike the prior sequences in which forty or more men work elbow to elbow tilling a field, in the highway building shots, men are often alone within the frame, swinging a machete into a tangle of trees, vines and shrubs so dense that there is only darkness beyond: this is collective work, but it requires each into his own, individualized task. There is a solemnity to the brush cutting sequences that can only be explained by the fact that there is so much to be done, little time and few tools with which to do it. At the end of the highway clearing scene, a deep shot, perhaps of the highway’s end or perhaps a future agricultural field, men pile out of the glen they have finished cutting. The camera pans away from them to show how the land has been cleared, but again ends in forest so dense that light does not penetrate.

Tequio in the form of highway building is unlike the other forms of tequio depicted in *Ayautla*, not only because its physical demands are distinct, but also because it is historically

without precedent. This work, unlike preparing a field for sowing or thatching someone's roof, has consequences that are still not fully predictable. Yet the motivation to continue tequio, in spite of the considerable challenges, past and present, gestures to the community's belief that the consequences are worth the effort. Building the highway, the voiceover explains, will benefit Ayautla as far as it will connect the community to "la civilización y sacar el producto del pueblo" as well as to help Ayautla "salir del atraso y del abandon del pueblo." The road construction is not an end in itself but is a means to an end. This end, outlined by the interviewee, is important to the interviewee and seemingly to the men take part in its construction, and who, as the interviewee notes, walk sixteen or more kilometers to reach the end of the highway so that they may expand it: all this, of course, even upon the threat of future massacres.

The language the interviewee uses to describe the highway may come as a surprise to spectators who assume that Indigenous communities see development projects or any kind of direct infrastructural links (such as highways) with non-Indigenous communities as a sure path to assimilation. The assumption that Indigenous communities do not want contact with Mexican territory overlooks the important fact that Ayautla has already been politically assimilated into Oaxacan territory and that, moreover, Ayautla's agrarian output, like that of much of the Sierra Mazateca, is destined for non-Indigenous buyers. Still more, Huautla, and to a lesser extent, Ayautla, had become destinations over the 1960s for hippies interested in taking hallucinogenic mushrooms, and thus, the effects of tourism were already being felt.²⁹

²⁹ A.R.R. and A. Salgado, 21.

As such, the highway, is not such an obvious case of de-territorialization of Ayautla or the expansion of Mexican territory to the detriment of Ayautla and the Sierra Mazateca.

The nuance with which *Ayautla* renders the highway building narrative is commendable, precisely because of its unwillingness to bemoan the highway's linking effects as a vehicle for assimilation. This choice is of particular importance considering Mexican ethnographic films of the 1960s and 1970s, whether theatric or not, often portrays Indigenous communities one of two ways. On the one hand, films portrayed Indigenous communities existing in millenary bubbles, which anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán describes as a *región de refugio*, frozen in time and intentionally avoidant of Mexican social and economic space in a manner that presumably reproduces the same cultural practices in perpetuity. We see this in films like *María Candelaria* and *Janitzio* (Carlos Navarro, 1935). On the other hand, films made by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista frequently depicted Indigenous communities—or more frequently single families—flourishing thanks to the interventions of the INI, and myriad examples that emphasize Mazatec communities include *Nuevos horizontes* and *Todos somos mexicanos*. *Ayautla*, it should be noted, eschews either narrative.

Unlike the communities depicted in numerous independent films produced by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista or even commercial films, *Ayautla* acknowledges how contemporary Indigenous society, its organizational structures, and its means of collective representation decisively push back against the idea that their community must remain within geographic or territorial bounds imposed by the state's imposed municipal borders, on the one hand, and the community's own sense of itself and its territoriality. The montage that communicates a story about the highway construction, a task executed by and for the

community, is not about Mexican national territory infiltrating Mazatec territory, but rather is about Mazatec community deciding to expand its territory, its economy, and its relationship with non-Mazatec communities.

Ayautla's montage serializes the voice over and different tequio sequences in such a way that the highway building shots are followed by the voice-over's description of the average wages made by Mazatec workers in Ayautla. He explains, his voice the non-diegetic sound over men gathered at picnic tables, eating, talking, and laughing, “[la] jornada de una persona es de ocho a doce pesos... cuando no hay trabajo llega la jornada a ocho pesos, cuando hay trabajo en la cosecha de café, entonces cuando llega a doce pesos, pero es una temporada nada más.” The voice over fades and then picks up again: “el producto lo tenemos que sacar por comerciantes de Huautla... que nos vienen a comprar el café... en el medio donde estamos, siempre hemos sido engañados totalmente ¿Verdad? Siempre.” For eleven and a half kilos, the man says, buyers offer thirty or forty pesos—between one dollar fifty cents or two US dollars. Though coffee harvesting is not one of the kinds of labor depicted in *Ayautla*, several sequences depict the process of rinsing beans, breaking the shells, and the other kinds of tasks related to the post-harvest. These sequences are reminders to spectators that the effort required to produce eleven and a half kilos of coffee is not simply directly related to the amount of time taken to harvest the individual beans: it is a process that begins with soil preparation, followed by the three or four-year period of care during which the coffee plant grows into a mature plant capable of yielding the coffee cherry. The coffee cherries, then harvested from the plants, must be removed from their outer layers, toasted, and bagged. Only a few short steps in this process are shown by the camera, but the diegetic “thudding” sound of the heavy wooden pile being brought down repeatedly upon the coffee

to break the shells open, and the deep shot showing a man hand the heavy pile off to a woman, imply to us that even a short step such as this is arduous.

The decision to build a highway and the immense effort it demands are thematically central to *Ayautla*, but the reasons for the highway must be extrapolated through the brief mention of the coffee industry and the relation between labor exploitation and *Ayautla*'s geography.

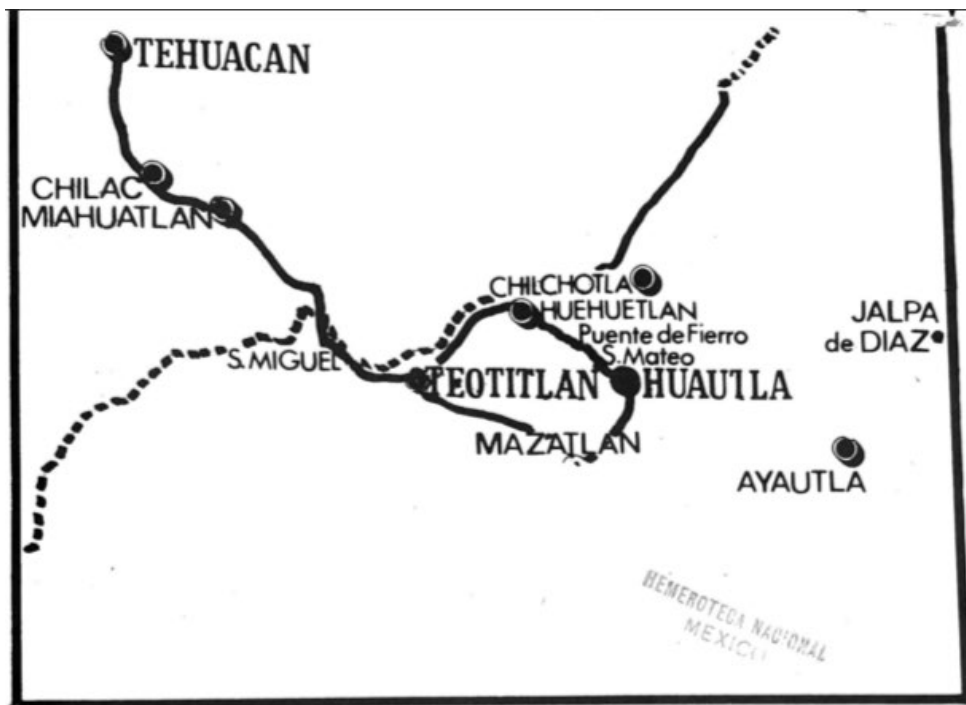


Figure 3-6. Regional Map. *Sucesos para todos*, 1969. Hemeroteca Nacional, UNAM.

3.4.2 Background: The Coffee Industry and the Benefits of a Highway

In 1969, anthropologist Margarita de Orellana called the regularization of coffee prices in the Sierra Mazateca an eloquent example of the completion of development programs in Indigenous communities, since this would apparently protect coffee growers from “los comerciantes locales, o de la ciudad o villa mestiza que domina el ‘hinterland’ indígena,

arreatándoles a vil precio sus artesanías y sus cosechas” (46). Recalling that the interviewee is concerned about the coffee buyers in Huautla underpaying Ja Nguifi farmers for their coffee beans, Orellana’s comment rings true. His comment on the need to “sacar el producto,” however, speaks to the limitations of paternal protective measures purportedly put in place for Indigenous communities like Ayautla, perceived as ‘hinterlands,’ isolated from the coffee economy.

Though Orellana describes the regularization of prices as a success story, the involvement of the INI, the organization Beneficios Mexicanos del Café, and the creation, at the INI’s encouragement, of a pan-Indigenous Producers Association based in Huautla during the 1970s failed to account for the ways agricultural communities like Ayautla, southeast of Huautla and as of 2022, an hourlong, forty-kilometer car ride. This was even as tourists were trickling in to consume hallucinogenic mushrooms and elements of Mazatec material culture. In 1971, Luis Marquez Romay, a fashion collector who had travelled Mexican territory buying traditional Indigenous apparel, explained in an interview that he had been to Ayautla. “Sí voy a Huautla, a Ayautla de Jiménez [sic.], y a Tenango. Hago el viaje en automóvil y después en caballo. De Huautla a Ayautla hago 15 horas en caballo.”³⁰ In other words, Ayautla was a day’s journey from Huautla and there was no highway nor thoroughfare to connect them (Figure 3-6). This scenario underscores the consequences of municipal organization under the Mexican government: the geographic borders of the municipality and their colonial origins did not plan—or perhaps did not want—a future in which Ayautla

³⁰ D’Acosta, 47.

residents would travel beyond the political boundaries of the community for economic and trade purposes.

Ayautla, geographically distanced from Huautla without a transportation route to connect them, did not enjoy the same benefits as Huautla, and as the documentary signals, continued to be exploited by both private purchasers and the government into the 1970s. Orellana optimistically claims that the regularization of coffee prices in the Sierra Mazateca “culminará un viejo capítulo; sus primeras páginas fueron escritas al principio de la conquista” (46), yet *Ayautla* demonstrates that the neo-colonial unequal access to land and the exclusion of Mazatec labor and agriculture from legal protection based on the excuse that these communities were located in the “hinterlands”—outside of Mexican territory—were order of the day as of 1973.

While the INI claimed to have the answer to Mazatec coffee farmer’s exploitation, so did the Secretaría del Comercio, which oversaw the creation of the Mexican Institute of Coffee (Instituto Mexicano del Café, INMECA), during 1953-1958 presidency of Adolfo Ruiz Cortines. This institute supposedly helped expand the commercial coffee market, amplifying purchasing centers across the country where coffee growers like the inhabitants in Ayautla could sell their goods.³¹ In theory this could help towns like Ayautla sell their wares at wages that reflected production labor. In 1973, a year after the filming of *Ayautla*, INMECAFE would multiply its coffee selling sites, organized into Unidades Económicas de Producción y Comercialización, or UEPC. Between 1973 and 1974, over one hundred selling sites would be added around the country, and by 1979, eleven of these were in Oaxaca. These

³¹ Chaires Rangel, 108.

centers were designed to serve small-scale farmers; only those whose lands measured under twenty hectares.³² In theory, these centers could be formed anywhere there was a group of farmers who met the requisites outlined by the government:

Su actividad principal sea el cultivo del café, ser diez o más socios activos, vivan en la misma comunidad, no tengan crédito con alguna otra institución pública o privada que no sean compradores de café, no posean tiendas o cantinas, no se dediquen al agio, no posean más de 20 Has., no tengan parcelas en áreas marginadas ecológicamente inadecuadas... Los directivos o representantes de las UEPC deberán ser preferentemente las autoridades locales (si están en la unidad) o las que designen la asamblea de socios, todos los socios son solidarios, un promotor del INMECAFE dará asesoría a los directivos y representantes de la UEPC en el desempeño de sus actividades, la asamblea de socios es un recurso complementario...³³

Huautla, one of the cities to which the highway being built in *Ayautla* ultimately reaches, becomes a UEPC site. As Manuel Chaires Rangel suggests in his 1984 study, the intervention of INMECAFE in providing credits, technical assistance, and selling opportunities did not, in fact, favor small-scale coffee farmers but rather favored bigger agricultural enterprises with lower per-bushel production costs. Moreover, certain communities like Ayautla were situated at a great distance from one of the INMECAFE centers, rural buyers or “coyotes” would give coffee growers advanced payment for their coffee, essentially paying below market value, and would request their money be returned if some of the coffee did not sell.³⁴

The Ayautla highway project, begun even before INMECAFE’s expansion, is framed within the documentary’s narrative as an attempt by the coffee-growing town to facilitate the sales of their coffee on more favorable terms by engaging directly with the regional coffee industry rather than relying on intermediaries. It is through *Ayautla*’s montage that spectators

³² *Ibid*, 44.

³³ *Ibid*, 44-45.

³⁴ Chaires Rangel, 109-110.

are invited to perceive the analogy between the tequio in the fields or on homes with no single identified benefactor and the tequio carried out on the as-yet unfinished highway, a project presented in the film as one designed to benefit the community in its entirety. In the medium-long shots depicting people dispersed across a hillside tilling soil or sitting elbow-to-elbow sharing a large picnic table and the food upon it, the camera never invites speculation about the way the land is legally divided, to whom it belongs, or who will benefit from the crops grown upon it, just as there is no indication that the picnic table belongs to one person or that mealtime is the responsibility of one person.

As far as is discernible on the screen, the labor practices within the montage are not designed to generate wealth for a select few members of the community, nor does the tequio or *mano de obra* stand to enhance the political or economic power of one individual alone. In this way, we may observe that a different kind of territorial production is at play than those described in previous chapters. Of course, we cannot generalize to state that labor practices in San Bartolomé Ayautla universally operate in contradiction to the power-concentrating practices described by geographers like Raffestin. In the kinds of power-producing labor relations within a territory, Raffestin explains, the power is often concentrated into nodes, which in turn helps those at the nodes—points within that territory—attain further control over the production of that territory. In this instance, however, it would seem that the spatialized labor of Ayautla’s hillsides, homes, or streams—all spatialized labor—translate to a cinematic space on the screen in which the town itself is a node, and labor—and by consequence, power—is distributed across homes and families in a manner that does not reflect the macro-grid of nodulized power points within Mexican national territory. Perhaps this is why Ayautla inhabitants would be forced to constructing the highway with their own

hands and tools and would even be killed for wanting to build the highway.³⁵ On the one hand, the highway would reinforce Ayautla's existence as a space in which power is distributed equally through labor, and on the other, the highway would make Ayautla a node of power in its own right, since the highway would make it a producer of coffee with the ability to move its product in ways that would ensure the highest sales per kilo possible. Considering the interviewee's comments at the center of Ayautla's thirty-two minutes, the highway was—and is—a bridge between mountainous Mazatec territory and the broader coffee market: one small segment of the Mexican national economy.

Thinking about *Ayautla* as a film concerned with space, or more specifically with territory, helps us understand the significance of the highway-related narrative that lends continuity to various sequences within the film: the highway *mano de obra* differs from other projects depicted on screen because the territorial consequences visibly extend beyond the agricultural fields and homes of community members. The highway, as the interviewee-voice over makes known, has been perceived by local caciques as a threat. Perhaps this threat is the very possibility that the highway constitutes the production of a different kind of territorial production: one in which labor is not organized for the benefit of a few people, but instead for an entire community—of Mazatec farmers, no less. *Ayautla*, then, is witness to the production and reproduction of territory by Ja Nguifi, inhabitants of San Bartolomé Ayautla, and the subtle yet extraordinary implications of that production when it comes to building the highway.

³⁵ Evidence of this massacre is scant, but I believe the Archivo General de la Nación or the Hemeroteca Nacional (UNAM) may hold some information on this event.

Finally, in spring of 1976, more than four years after *Ayautla* was filmed, the Luis Echeverría officially presented the Teotitlán-Tuxtepec highway to the Oaxacan state government. No mention was made of the nearly ten percent of the highway that Ja Nguifi laborers had constructed without a single peso of help from neither the state nor federal governments.³⁶

3.5 Sensorial Space

Two elements of the documentary provide coherence in an otherwise fragmented portrait: one the one hand, the soundtrack and the other, the labor motif encompassing highway construction, home-building, and more. The two are not mutually exclusive: labor is a sensorial experience within the film, rather than emphasizing the product, the camera centers movement created by the back and forth of hands scrubbing animal skin, or the vertical motion of a shovel creating furrows in the ground, or the birdlike flutter of hands throwing or catching bundles of straw for the creation of a thatched roof. By allowing the spectator to indulge in the sensorial experience of space, rendered into a soundscape, Rovirosa subtly but effectively decenters the visual realm as the privileged way of experiencing the town.

The first few minutes of the film overlay the sound of a man, perhaps elderly, chanting a steady stream of words, the tone of his voice rising and falling, and the cries of an infant. When this ceases, we hear pigs snorting, turkeys gobbling, and a person whistling. Even though these film components do not directly gesture to space or territory, they ultimately reinforce it. In fact, M. Murray Schafer coined the term “the rural soundscape” to talk about rural territory in terms of sound. He points out that sounds of the farm gesture to a

³⁶ See “Entregó el Presidente,” np.

particular rhythm, both because work such as raking has a certain rhythm to it—one that at times even extends into song—and because, he argues, the keynotes, or regular sounds underpinning other more fugitive or novel sound events, are numerous because of the routine inherent to farm life.³⁷ What Schafer does not address, but is also fundamental to the soundscape of Mazatec territory, is the presence of the Mazatec language, the language that names, claims and unites the townsfolk. The chanting is not translated into Spanish for the benefit of non-Mazatec speakers who watch the documentary, yet its cyclic tones, punctured by the chanter’s breaths of air, mirror the kind of tasks conducted on screen and contribute to the multi-sensorial portrait of territory that the film projects.

In this dissertation, I am carefully considering representations of Indigenous territories as well as Mexican territory. While I have heavily emphasized visuality as the sensorial medium through which territory is conveyed and constructed, taking sight for granted as the primary medium for representing and visually constructing space is problematic. As David Howes et al. has noted, Western culture does not value all senses equally, but rather values sight and hearing more highly than taste, touch, and smell; the so-called “lower” sensations.³⁸ Though hearing is still considered a more credited sense than touch, smell, or taste, it is arguably treated as secondary to sight. When thinking about films with Indigenous protagonists and the representational practices or sensorial methods used to represent those protagonists, it is impossible to ignore the primacy that has historically been given to the visual medium: sketch, photography, and of course, film. It is analytically productive, then, and indeed, necessary to think about the visual elements of landscape—of

³⁷ Schafer, 48.

³⁸ Howes, et al., 5.

representations of territory—not only in terms of what they look like but how they make spectators feel, that is, the affective power of a particular landscape over its spectators. While most landscape theory of the late twentieth century deals solely with media appealing to sight, landscape in cinema, particularly like *Ayautla*, demands a consideration of the multi-sensorial experience of landscape.

I argue that it is productive to think of *Ayautla*'s cinematography as landscape, but landscape that relies heavily on the idea that landscape and the spectator cannot be mutually distinct; a contradiction of colonial landscape epistemology, as Leslie Marmon Silko has noted. *Ayautla* boasts extensive use of non-diegetic sounds laid over diegetic ones, and the enhanced volume of these sounds. Soundscape, then, is in fact a part of the *Ayautla* landscape, and helps convey not only an image but indeed a multisensory experience of space, which affirms *Ayautla*'s territory as linguistic, interpersonal, environmental, a human-environment relationship, and more.

3.5.1 Soundscapes of *Ayautla*

Ayautla is the audiovisual portrait of a community, and as such the film does not only examine the appearance of the landscape or the way people move through it, engage with it: the film's complexity largely stems from the use of sounds to convey both human and non-human elements of this space and all it contains.

There is a romanticizing tendency in some sound theory to praise the silence or low levels of noise in rural, agricultural communities, a description often paired with the idea of indolent and carefree days. Indeed, R. Murray Schafer asserts that, "aside from the spectacular celebrations of warfare and religion, rural and even town life was tranquil. There

are many towns still, the world over, where life moves uneventfully, almost by stealth. Poor towns are quieter than prosperous towns” (52). Rovirosa, however, troubles the idea that life in Ayautla is uneventful or even tranquil, calling our ears’ attention to the turbulence and activity of animals, insects, water, and people struggling to survive as well as thriving. Indeed, it might be said that the perception of rural space as quiet stems from an inability to notice non-machine or non-human sounds. In *Ayautla*, spectators—listeners—are invited to consider these other noises, which are amplified.

The documentary’s emphasis on acoustic environment, diegetic and non-diegetic, makes the film rather experimental in comparison with even independent cinema of the 1970s and today. With the careful attention to sound and acoustics paid by Rovirosa and Rodolfo Sánchez Alvarado, sound director,³⁹ *Ayautla* is not simply an invitation to see the Sierra Mazateca but to hear it as well. The sound composition of this space is enhanced and modified by the director in a way that, with one exception, de-emphasizes human speech, privileging murmurs, laughter, cries, and sacred chants over quotidian conversation. Likewise, the soundtrack enhances non-human sounds, providing a decidedly non-anthropocentric soundscape even as the montage itself is anthropocentric.

3.5.1.1 *The Sounds of Ayautla at Work and at Play*

The first acoustic space presented in Ayautla is a watered space, fitting since the very name for the Mazatec language in Ayautla is *enre naxinanda nguifi*: quite literally, the “speech of

³⁹ Sánchez Alvarado was the director of Radio UNAM and had helped edited and produce the soundtrack for *El grito*. For more on his role and on the participation of UNAM and CUEC students in independent filmmaking in 1968, see Rodríguez Cruz.

the watered mountain beneath the clouds.” Water, in its various forms, is an intrinsic part of life in Ayautla, touching everything from speech to earth to cosmogony to work.

A jump cut and sound cut take us to a stream where women are washing corn, meat and clothes, the sound of the flowing water is a constant lull over the sound of peeping turkeys, one of which appears within the frame. We hear a male turkey gobble somewhere outside the frame, and the chorus of domesticated birds fades, only for a petulant “gobble” to suddenly punctuate the constant rushing water. A grunting pig joins the chorus. Even though the women doing their washing are part of the scenes, their conversations are either so hushed as to be inaudible or have been edited out of the sound. Instead, non-diegetic birds and humans whistle, turkeys gobble, and pigs grunt. The first diegetic human voice is that of the interviewee, yet faintly, almost as white noise, the same non-diegetic sounds of rushing water and peeping turkeys persists.

In this watered acoustic space, which is also a social and labor-oriented space, it is surprising that the non-human sounds are generally more audible than human ones. These sounds are what Schafer might call keynote sounds of a landscape, or those sounds not always heard consciously but created by a space’s geography and climate, such as water, wind, birds, insects, and animals. They affect the behavior or lifestyle of a society such that life without them would be sensed as an impoverishment.⁴⁰ The abundance of watered spaces within the visual economy, coupled with the keynote sounds of water, emphasize the importance of water as a unifier and sustainer of life in all forms, a point evinced in the fixed

⁴⁰ Schafer, 9.

frame microscope shot of organisms swimming to the sounds of the same acoustic environment as the macroscopic organisms who gather at the creek.

Water sounds also factor importantly into the acoustic environment of the extremes of Ayautla's labored space. When the camera cuts to a sequence in which men are preparing a footbridge and working to cut away thick brush in preparation for the highway or another project, once again their conversations are inaudible. The sounds of peoples' activities are perceived as murmurs and laughter, and are part of, not outside of, the acoustic environment, just as they are not outside of the landscape. We can also hear the clink of their machetes hitting wood and the non-diegetic sounds of a bandsaw at work, while we can also hear the constant the hum of insects, the whistle of birds, and the howl of monkeys engaged in their own life rhythms. Most constant, however, is the woosh of fastmoving water as it rushes past. In this sound sequence, like the earlier one recorded at the creek where women washed, the people in the particular soundscape are included in the acoustic environment as one more element of a complex acoustic ecosystem, just as they are one part of the material ecosystem itself (Figure 3-7).

Architectural space also has its soundscape within the *Ayautla* soundtrack: the soundtrack overlaying the sequence in which a roof is being thatched is the one with the most boisterous sounds of human noise. Shouts and laughter rise and subside, and individual voices are distinguishable at times while at others the laughter and joyful yells are more of a chorus simultaneous or staggered. The distinctly human sounds of joy perhaps most perceptible in this scene than any other throughout the film, are the soundtrack to a sequence in which men of all ages gather around a partially constructed home. It is impossible to distinguish the owner of the future home out of the many arms, faces and voices in the scene,

but the energetic and hopeful voices suggest it could belong to anyone of the people helping in the construction. As men on the ground gather straw into bundles, others tie them, still more trim them, and finally, men sitting on the roof catch the bundles and tie them down onto the roof's frame.

The men on the ground do not just toss bundles—the send moonshine up to the men on the roof, too, and the men drink and fearlessly smoke cigarettes as they work. In this sequence, each person has their task, each helps another and in this way the house is built for a brother, a cousin, a sister, or a friend. This instance of *tequio* is not simply the scene of workers laboring shoulder to shoulder to build a home: it is itself an acoustic space—the context for laughter, the mixing of cheerful voices, and, at risk of sounding trite, the sounds of hopefulness, perhaps that the future inhabitants of the home will live well, or than these same men will also help them thatch their rooves when the time comes.



Figure 3-7. Medium-Close Up of a Woman Preparing Tortillas. *Ayautla* (José Rovirosa, 1972).

3.5.1.2 *Rhythms and Sounds of Life and Death*

The film's title screen and opening shots are coupled with the non-diegetic sounds of a man's voice. Quiet at first, the chanting becomes more enunciated, and is suddenly punctuated by the cries of an infant. The chanting is constant and rhythmic and is in Mazatec, so for the non-Mazatec listener will be nearly incomprehensible. As the camera pans over women fetching water and Ayautla residents heading out to work, the chanting continues with the same volume and same rhythm, with the occasional, punctuating cries of the child. Though the chanting is obviously non-diegetic, it is instantly making the soundtrack of *Ayautla* and gestures to some sort of ritual or multigenerational practice of care between the elderly and the very young.

Several words in Spanish slip into the man's chant: "Padre Cristo padre padre solo solo santísimo..." but this anaphoric utterance does not recall rosary prayers or chants we might recognize as part of the soundscape of a Catholic Church. The whispery voice of the man's chant is intimate—we hear him as if we were sitting right beside him, and the pairing of this whispering sound with the visual assemblage of travelling shots following the movements of women heading to the river or to the fields makes the opening sequences feel intimate but also urgent: over two minutes into the film and the chanting persists. The child's feeble cries become more frequent just as a shot shows little boys running off to play: the cries are not cries of rage or frustration, but cries of pain. This non-diegetic sound offers a rupture with the visual economy of the shot: neither the chanting man chanting, nor the child appear within the frame during the film. Like the children at play and the women fetching water, the chanting and child's pain are a part of the scene-setting presented to us in the first four minutes of the film.

One of the more enigmatic symbolic sounds throughout the film is that of the drumbeat. A zoom in shot depicts a young man, standing precipitously on the cathedral roof just beside the steeple. Like a church bell, the drum's vertical altitude presumably allows the beat sound to travel farther than it would if it were beat from the ground. The drumbeat's single note and consistency does not reveal much about its purpose, but the volume of the beat and the rhythm of it invite attention and perhaps something more. Research on acoustic environments in European villages has suggested that community signals such as church bells or factory whistles punctuate village life and precipitate chains of other sounds.⁴¹ Indeed, the drumbeat precipitates the entrance of a voice: the voice begins to sing in time with the drumbeat, and then other voices join in. The camera cuts away from the deep shot of the drummer, up on the roof, to a woman in her home preparing tortillas, but the sound of the drumbeat and three or four voices singing and chanting in turn are still audible, intercut with laughter. Even this older woman, alone in her home, is seemingly accompanied by the lively chanting of young men (Figure 3-7). This same chanting, now without drums, becomes louder as the camera cuts to a shot of men walking single file, tools slung on shoulders, towards a field.

The drumbeat and voices chanting with it, accompanied by the visual references to a church and then to men heading to or from work, acoustically unite the sacred and profane: the drumbeat, played from a drum atop the church, is visually connected to the Church and thus already implies a relationship with sacred space. The drumbeat could be a call to worship or to attend the funeral mass held in the church during one of the last sequences in

⁴¹ Schafer, 231.

the documentary. On the other hand, the drumbeat as a cue for the voices of singing workers heading to work or returning, might be understood as a call to work—or more specifically, to participate in tequio. As a respected form of community participation, a context for song and music, and a means of satiating and securing the community's needs and future, tequio, like the Church space, is sacred.

The last sound bite to include chanting in *Ayautla* is the diegetic sound of chants, sung in Spanish and in unison, as a funeral procession gathers at a small cemetery with an infant-sized coffin. For the first time in the film, birds, pigs, and all the sounds that created a chorus or rhythm previously are silent. This temporary silence is perhaps coincidental, but it also adds to the impulse to attend closely to the acoustic environment. In the absence of insect sounds, water sounds, and even laughter sounds, the listener searches the acoustic environment for what remains. The sounds of the child's cries have ceased, and the child-sized coffin is carried toward the cemetery. With the child's silence, the silence or reduction of keynotes within the acoustic environment sounds, the few human sounds—a cough here, a murmur there, and the sound of nails being hammered into the tiny coffin, sealing it shut.

Silence in Occidental cultures has historically been associated with death as it is perceived as the absence of life, and as such, death is considered the ultimate silence or a symptom of catastrophe.⁴² Still, the silence in the funeral scene is temporary—a jump cut to a medium shot shows children at play and the non-diegetic sound is that of children in the classroom repeating phonemes back to their teacher. From the temporary silence of the

⁴² Schafer, 256. Note also that Rachel Carson considers the absence of bird sound and insect sounds to be cause for serious concern in her book *Silent Spring* (1962).

funeral comes a cacophony of children's voices: they are Ayautla's future, and their voices, joined in unison, are loud and clear.

3.6 Ayautla: The Epilogue

Today, Ayautla, is observable on Google Maps. It is blocks of color: fields of tan pixels slashed by white scars signifying roads, blue bubbles signifying commercial sites, and a larger yellow line passing through—the only road into or out of Ayautla. From Google maps, it looks much like so many other small towns in Mexican territory: color blocks signify clusters of houses, a single highway or road juts through, and perhaps a geotag mentions the presence of a church, a tortillería, or a mechanic. Ayautla, located in the northern region of the political territory of Oaxaca, includes geotags identifying tiendas de abarrotes, a tortillería, and even the ayuntamiento. From this two-dimensional, gods-eye view map, there is nothing remarkable about Ayautla that sets it apart from the rest of Mexican territory. A commerce and movement-oriented map like Google Maps does not let spectators appreciate the cultural, historical, or linguistic specificity of a space and it does not account for the ways that space has changed through time.

Rather than be identified by the shockingly green and lush hills beneath them captured via satellite, as a multinational company like Google certainly suggests, Ja Nguifi are defined locally by what is above them: a climate that also defines their livelihoods. As José Roviroso's *Ayautla* shows, such a humid climate is favorable to coffee growing. Indeed, the industry is referenced repeatedly throughout *Ayautla* as the major motivator for the construction of the highway: the idea is that once a highway exists, farmers can take their

coffee to larger markets and sell at higher prices. But the ayuntamiento's 2008 report reveals that whatever hopes coffee farmers might have had for bolstering their sales would fade.

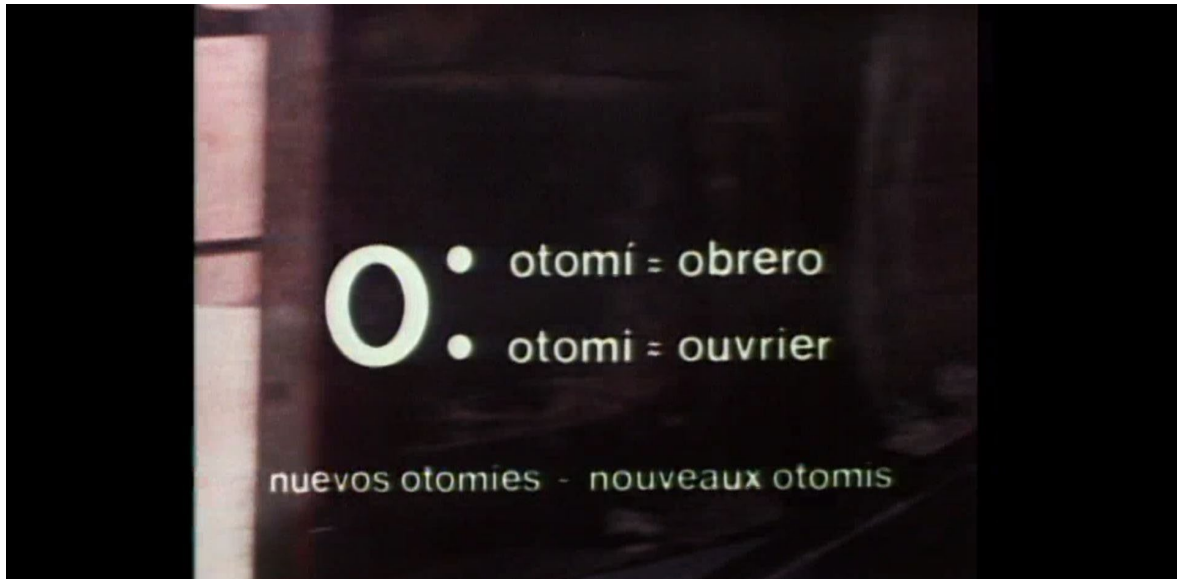
San Bartolomé Ayautla is comprised of different hamlets, such as La Soledad Piedra Ancha, Cafetal Carlota, Agua Espuma, and Loma de Cacao. As the 2010 report notes, “el 30% de los habitantes mayores de diecinueve años tienden a emigrar por falta de empleo y oportunidades dentro del municipio. Los lugares más frecuentes de emigración...son la ciudad de México, D.F., Oaxaca, Tehuacán, Puebla, Tuxtepec, Teotitlán de Flores Magón y Tijuana” (“Plan municipal,” 11). Migration statistics this high, while hardly unique to Ayautla, signal a generalized feeling of economic marginalization within Ayautla, and the sense that travel to elsewhere will result in better wages than agricultural activities do. Reading these statistics put forth by Ayautla's own leaders four decades after José Rovirosa Macías' documentary allows us to trace the changes in labor practices in Ayautla, as well as beliefs about how Ayautla exists—and can exist—socially and cohesively in the age of neoliberal globalization.

As young Ja Nguifi leave Ayautla in search of employment elsewhere, they take the federal highway 182, Huautla-Jalapa, which traverses roughly northwest to southeast, linking at its extremes the cities of Tuxtepec, Puebla and Flores Magón, Oaxaca. By car, it will take you no less than 6 hours to get from San Bartolomé Ayautla, to Oaxaca City, and nearly that same amount to arrive in Puebla de los Ángeles, Puebla. In 2008, according to the Ayuntamiento, sixty percent of houses have laminate roofing while thirty six percent use traditional zacate bundles or cardboard. While it is unclear how many homes in Ayautla would have used zacate roofing at the time *Ayautla* was filmed, Rovirosa's film depicted a process that forty years later was still used—but only by a minority: a shift happening in

towns across Mexican national space. Another shift immanent but unmentioned at the time of the filming of *Ayautla* is the fact that the 2008 report bemoaned the abuse and misuse of televisions and their negative influence on values, such as a loss of “honradez, solidaridad, unión familiar, respeto por la naturaleza, respeto a los mayores...el desconocimiento por el respeto a la naturaleza ha provocado deforestación, contaminación de nuestros ríos y arroyos” (19). Moreover, the report blames not just television and media culture but also the fact that migrating Ja Nguifi, especially young people have acquired new customs in different cities.⁴³ In sum, the report states, “la globalización y efectos migratorios han acelerado y acentuado la pérdida de la identidad indígena” (24). Rovirosa, who passed away in 1997, lived to see the confirmation of NAFTA and but he could hardly have anticipated the trajectory faced by the Ayautla community. Still, the documentary depicts labor practices and community ties as well as struggles facing Ja Nguifi and in doing so, reveals the immanent changes in labor, travel, and attitudes amongst community members.

⁴³ “Plan municipal,” 19.

4 CHAPTER 4: GRIDS AS COMMODIFIED SPACE IN ETNOCIDIO, NOTAS SOBRE EL MEZQUITAL (PAUL LEDUC,



1977)

Figure 4-1. Establishing Shot. "O: otomí = obrero." *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* (Paul Leduc, 1977).

4.1 Synopsis/description of *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital*

In comparison to *Ayautla*, the discursive control that Leduc, his editors and his cameraman take over *Etnocidio* is much more explicit. *Etnocidio* might best be defined as a chronicle documentary, which follows linearity or chronology—an alphabetically organized structure being a more unusual variant of this organizational style—containing “sucesos y personas con alta carga opinativa, basada en la observación y en la recreación de atmósferas. En el documental de crónica, la empatía con los protagonistas y el empeño formal dominan sobre la tarea informativa, y sus alcances interpretativos provienen de la *subjetividad* de la observación” (Mendoza, 41). Organized into alphabetically chronological chapters, which are

all identified with on-screen text. The film' opens with the echoing, tinny sounds of a violin being tuned, and the screen pans out from a desert ravine, cut through by what appears to be a dirt road or a dry riverbed. The violin is joined by a guitar, and the two begin to play a tune, as the camera cuts away to a deep shot of a violinist, flanked by a family, a man carrying a tiny coffin on his head, and imposing, dry mountains nearly filling the screen. The funeral procession moves up a steep hillside, and the camera faces the procession as they make their way between maguey, nopal, and chaparral against a backdrop of rolling, dry hills, and mountains. A jump cut shows the baby's coffin lowered into the ground, and the camera then fixes on the funeral-goers and their faces. Then a jump cut presents the title screen: the words *ethnocide/ethnocide* against a frame that is filled entirely by a piece of land so dry the topsoil has cracked. The next jump cuts depict more parched land, and then the next jump cut presents the first alphabetic chapter, against a backdrop of flames.

With sixteen chapters in total, the film plainly states its themes, and averts the need to create thematic or *mise-en-scène* continuity between segments. As the film's title suggests, all of these sequences depict the region of the Mezquital Valley and the spaces— industrialized, drought-blighted, and contested—within it. Zoom-ins and zoom outs, practically omnipresent in the film, lend the sensation that the film, like *La hora de los hornos*, is interested in how Hñáhñú land struggle, poverty, environmental concerns, and industry have individual effects, national effects, and mirrors in other parts of the country. Likewise, the instrumental music at the start of the film, performed by and for campesinos, lends credence to the idea that the film, at its core, is about rural space, its inhabitants, and the challenges they face. The ominous piano and horn music, by contrast, convey the denunciatory, pessimistic tone of segments of the documentary, which is often paired with

shots of pollution, city scapes, and factories, as if to posit these as antitheses to rural, Hñáhñú lives and livelihoods.¹ Despite the number of fragments comprising the film, a handful of chapters take up the bulk of the celluloid and comprise the most discursively complex portions of the film. In particular “C: Clases,” “E: Etnocidio,” “F: Fábrica,” “I: Indígena” and “O: Otomí=Obrero” (Figure 4-1) most explicitly treat the questions of space, racialization, and development.

Paul Leduc (Mexico City, 1942-2020) studied Architecture and Theater at the UNAM during the 1960s, and when outside the classroom he joined the “Grupo Nuevo Cine” along with Emilio García Riera, Salvador Elizondo, and others: a group also linked to the CUEC, where Elizondo occasionally taught. Leduc, for his part, was concerned with the direction of Mexico’s film industry even as he finished his architecture degree, and before initiating his film studies in Paris, he signed the *Manifiesto del Grupo Nuevo Cine* in 1961 along with nearly twenty others.² Film, the manifesto declares, is “not only a form of entertainment, but...one of the most formidable medium[s] of expression in our century” (210). The manifesto also called for the proliferation of cinema spanning different genres “with the diversity in aesthetics, morals and political points of view that this implies” (de la Colina et al., 210). This manifesto gestures to the fact that young filmmakers in Mexico were keenly aware that the horizon of political filmmaking was quickly expanding. This manifesto, published in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, anticipated the proliferation of New Latin

¹ I am using a term which is not recognized by all speakers of this language, but which is used in some communities in the Mezquital Valley. Indeed, in 1996 organizers at the *Segundo encuentro de regiones indígenas* chose the terms Hñáhñu, Ñuhu, Ñhato y Ñuhmu (Otomí) to refer to themselves (Wright Carr, 51).

² MacKenzie, 210.

American Cinema and its immanent hemispheric struggle for intellectual and artistic freedom from authoritarian politics.

Perhaps more so than some of his peers who had remained in Mexico, Leduc was a part of a cohort of politically committed, filmmakers who came from economic and social privileged and were further indoctrinated in political filmmaking while in Europe. After studying at the UNAM, Leduc left for France—in 1965 he enrolled in an ethnographic film course at the Institute d’Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques, which connected him with other emerging auteur and New Latin American film movement filmmakers like Rafael Castanedo, Alfonso Gumucio Dagrón, Sergio Olhovich, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, and Felipe Cazals. Upon returning to Mexico in 1967, created the “Cine 70” group who would all be involved in Reed, *México insurgente* (1973), including producer Bertha Navarro (Cronos [Guillermo del Toro, 1993], *Ayotzinapa, el paso de la tortuga* [Enrique García Meza, 2017]), photographer Alexis Grivas (*La hora de los niños* [Arturo Ripstein, 1976], and *Beirut Encounter* [Berhane Alaouié, 1981]) editor Rafael Castanedo (*El santo oficio* [Arturo Ripstein, 1974], *Cabeza de Vaca* [Nicolás Echeverría, 1991]).³ It was perhaps not a coincidence that Reed, a U.S. born journalist whose political and international engagement led him to document the Mexican revolution and then to travel to Spain to fighting for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War—a commitment to the cause that cost him his life.

Even the origins of *Etnocidio* must be attributed to international travel: in the mid-1970s, Leduc connected with Roger Bartra in Paris, and Bartra was a screenwriter for Leduc’s film adaptation of José Revueltas’ novels—a project that never materialized. Leduc

³ Pualleduc.mx

then approached Bartra to write another screenplay, this time about the Mezquital Valley, with which Bartra was intimately acquainted as he was directing a collaborative research project between the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and the Patrimonio Indígena del Mezquital Valley.⁴

4.2 The Origins of *Etnocidio*

Etnocidio, notas sobre el mezquital, released on March 17, 1977 in Canada, is a coproduction by Cine-Difusión Secretaría de Educación Pública and the Office National du Film du Canada.⁵ The condition for the Canadian financing was that the Canadian producer could choose the cinematographer, and thus Georges Dufaux joined the crew.⁶ As Bartra mentions in an interview, it was the Patrimonio Indígena del Mezquital Valley, a local development organization with ample funds, which helped finance the film.⁷ Though the Mexican government did participate in the distribution of the documentary, it did not contribute to the film's creative budget. As Alfonso Gumucio Dagrón, like Leduc an alum of the IDHEC in Paris, pointed out in 1984,

se produce la censura de la producción. Puede manifestarse como la imposibilidad de obtener capital de financiamiento o por las presiones que ejerce el productor para que el guion sea alterado, ejerciendo así un chantaje sobre el realizador: se financia el film, si se elimina esto, y esto otro. Paul Leduc, por ejemplo, y Jorge Bodansky, han tenido que acudir al financiamiento del Canadá, el primero, y de Alemania, el segundo, para poder realizar películas tan importantes como *Etnocidio* o *Iracema*, evitando el chantaje de los productores de México y Brasil respectivamente. (8)

⁴ Vázquez Almanza, 12.

⁵ *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital*, IMDb.

⁶ Vázquez Almanza, 13

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

In writing about *Etnocidio* as one example of a film that avoided censorship, it would seem that Gumucio Dagrón perceived Leduc's search for support with the Canadian Government to be an attempt to escape the censoring mechanism of the production services offered under Rodolfo Echeverría, Luis Echeverría's brother and founder of the Cineteca Nacional de México as well as the state-owned film studios, Estudios Churubusco, in 1974. What Gumucio Dagrón does not consider, however, is the fact that Leduc sought the production support of the SEP and its film circulating organism. It is not certain whether the decision to collaborate with Canada was indeed rooted in concerns about censorship or if, conversely, it was a decision made for bureaucratic or financial reasons.⁸ Regardless of whether or not censorship had been a concern during filming and post-production phases, circulation appeared to go relatively smoothly. Indeed, critical reception domestically and abroad was good enough that *Etnocidio* received various awards, including Arieles for Director and Screenplay, the Diosa de Plata award and the Premio Especial del Jurado at the Havana festival.⁹ Years later, the film would continue to screen at events internationally.¹⁰

Etnocidio's narrative, its carefully edited chapter-style montage, some of the filming techniques employed, and the scriptwriting and filming processes differentiate *Etnocidio* from the audiovisual productions of some of the Third Cinema or independent cinema filmmaking collectives active at the time. For example, one of these more revolutionary groups, Grupo Ukamau, prioritized collaboration with the film subjects over virtually all

⁸ In an expansion of this project, information on the financing of the documentary and the value of support offered by CONACINE and Conacite I and II will be added.

⁹ For more on the importance of *Etnocidio* within Leduc's career and within the historical context of Mexican Cinema, see García Riera, 311.

¹⁰ Screenings were held in Mexico in 1986, 1990, 1997, and 2001, and in Cuba in 1994.

else.¹¹ By contrast, *Etnocidio* is a film that implies a strong Marxist-socialist ideological grounding and is framed by academic and intellectual perspectives on the socio-political concerns the film addresses. Moreover, the film is carefully scripted and structured by the director, a fact made evident by the documentary's organization into titled chapters, such as "o: otomí = obrero," "f: fábrica," and "c: clases." It is curious that the final edits wound up as discursively structured as they did, considering that Paul Leduc and his co-screenwriter, anthropologist, and historian Roger Bartra, did not attempt to write a film script and then execute it. Rather, according to Bartra, they adapted the film structure to what was happening in interviews, to the people, to the question of who was willing to give an interview and who was not.¹² In other words, the film's genesis was not determined before shooting began, but rather responded to the unfolding narrative and aesthetics to build upon itself. In reality, the film was not exactly imperfect cinema nor was it cine junto al pueblo: the Indigenous proletarian and peasant film subjects of *Etnocidio* did not choose the plot or montage but did perhaps drive the film's discourse through their comments and their willingness (or not) to participate in the filming.

Leduc became inspired to create a film about Indigenous peasants after reading Bartra's article, "El problema indígena y el pensamiento indigenista" (1974). For all intents and purposes, this article was a recrimination of State Indigenism, well-intentioned cosmopolitan liberalism, and the rural middle class, and its self-declared intention was to observe how capitalist society has absorbed the knot of socio-ethnic conflicts inherited from

¹¹ For more on the collaborate filmmaking practices of the Grupo Ukamau, see Sanjinés, *Teoría*, 12.

¹² Vázquez Almanza, 13.

the colonial past. The article painted a bleak picture of social, economic, and political dynamics in Indigenous regions of Mexico, stating

[El] propio desarrollo capitalista en las zonas indígenas provoca la aparición en ellas de nuevos actores sociales: florece una burguesía agroindustrial y agro-comercial local que, como hemos visto, reasume actitudes racistas; al mismo tiempo, los grupos políticos gobernantes locales requieren de métodos más represivos para el control político. Todo esto ocasiona un segundo momento en el proceso ideológico: el tecnocratismo se torna demagógico y el liberalismo se trueca en racismo...el racismo ha dado a luz a la demagogia, y éste al racismo. (477)

Bartra's article is anthropological and attempts to trace a general pattern or tendency in terms of agro-industrial middle-class relations to Indigenous communities. Though he does not explain precisely which mechanisms or relations result in the recursion to racism amongst the rural bourgeoisie, we might extrapolate that this middle class, having simply re-entered the economic and political role of their rural oligarchical predecessors, utilize racial discourse as a means of justifying their hegemonic position. As the above quote demonstrates, Bartra also has harsh words of the Mexican government, and it is not illogical to assume that he is thinking of Luis Echeverría Álvarez' administration's policy of participatory indigenismo.

Between the establishment of cooperatives meant to shield Indigenous farmers from low-balling middlemen buyers and the establishment of infrastructure initiatives ranging from (monolingual, Spanish-only) schooling to hydroelectric dam construction to the construction of the Tula Thermal Electric Plant in the Mezquital Valley, the Mexican government's interventionist policy—at least to Bartra's eye—resulted in political cynicism and racism on the part of government functionaries involved in these projects. Written in the early 1970s and published in 1974, Bartra's article argues that official indigenista policy in Mexico deals in a kind of reformulated racism that operates at the service of contemporary capitalist development. Writes Bartra,

Las instituciones gubernamentales encargadas de aplicar la política indigenista se han convertido en unas administradoras de una cultura despojada de su base social y material; de una cultura ‘limpia’ de la miseria que acompañaba a sus portadores, de una cultura que puede entrar a los salones de la burguesía y aparecer en la televisión. La política indigenista del estado ha contribuido al asesinato del indígena. (480-481)

Bartra’s somber conclusion, which doubles as a warning to his readers, might retroactively be identified as an accusation of necropolitics on the part of the Mexican government.¹³ It is something of a marvel that the UNAM published the article, given its directness in implicating Mexican politics in systemic violence of Indigenous peoples. It was perhaps thanks to the publication four years prior of *De eso que llaman la antropología*, a scathing repudiation of Mexican indigenismo, which kept Bartra out of trouble.¹⁴ The article is not entirely unproblematic in its own right, but it invariably takes a posture of radical social and political critique hardly thinkable for most highly visible intellectuals, especially during the years in which it was not unheard of for dissenters to be arrested, tortured, or even disappeared.

Leduc read the article, then reaching out to the author—a personal acquaintance—to propose the writing and creation of a film. Having born witness to the 1968 student movement and the violent state response to it, there is no doubt that such an article—so openly critical of an exploitative middle class and a government that further divides its populace and permits their exploitation—would have resonated with veterans of the movement.

¹³ Mbembe, 66-70.

¹⁴ The book does not mince words, declaring that anthropology-including in the Mexican context-is “un auxiliar ‘científico’ de la expansión blanca” (Warman et al., 11). By white expansion they quite literally mean racialized imperialism in which the classification and study of indigeneity was a fundamental component.

While Bartra's analyses might have been critiqued by Third Cinema filmmakers as excessively focused on the bourgeoisie and the state and insufficiently focused on the masses, Bartra's writing responded to the unique political circumstances within Mexico: namely, the existence of official government policy towards Indigenous peoples. Indeed, Leduc was not part of the Third Cinema movement and his film fell more in line with the New Latin American Cinema movement; neo-realist, auteur, and aesthetically experimental, than it did with the more militant Third Cinema tendency.

Bartra's 2010 interview suggests that *Etnocidio* might accurately be described as auteur cinema as far as Leduc insisted on executing his vision for the film. One anecdote shared by Bartra exemplifies this role: Georges Dufaux, whom the Canadian producers had appointed as the cinematographer, filmed at one particular site without Leduc present, and this made Leduc extremely upset. Bartra alleges that Leduc "se indignó porque sentía que había sido usurpado su papel de director; además el camarógrafo tomaba muchas iniciativas y se veía que había tensiones" (13). Bartra concluded this reflection by adding, rather bluntly, "hay en el cine de que los directores son unos déspotas, es difícil trabajar con ellos" (13). Bartra's impression of Leduc's attitude towards the film crew taking liberties reflects that Leduc wanted the narrative and technique in *Etnocidio* to be created in a alignment with his vision. However, that vision was not by any means romantic or indifferent. Bartra, in fact, claimed that much of the tension among the filmmaking crew for *Etnocidio* was caused by Leduc, not so much because he was fussy about aesthetics, but rather because of "ese tono como antimperialista un poco ya caducado que tiene la película...yo no estaba de acuerdo, era demasiado militante y yo lo compartía muy poco, aunque yo era militante" (13). Where Leduc's desire to control the narrative and cinematography of the film gestured to his affinity

for auteur cinema rather than a kind of participatory filmmaking, Bartra's comments suggest that Leduc's political allegiances had much to do with the staunchly anti-imperialist Third Cinema filmmakers active at the same time.

Indeed, Leduc describes in an interview that he marched with the student movement in 1968, and that he was part of a generation of filmmakers that was closely tied to the Brazilian cinema novo filmmakers such as Glauber Rocha. He shared in the same interview that “fui el que más relación tuvo [con los cineastas latinoamericanos] y no sólo porque me los encontré ahí, sino porque en realidad estábamos de acuerdo en muchas cosas. Yo seguí más una línea que tenía que ver con la de ellos, que es esa cosa—que hoy ya me parece ridícula—[a la que] le llaman Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano” (269). While Bartra and Leduc ultimately both had criticisms for the New Latin American Cinema movement, evidently at the time of filming *Etnocidio*, the latter ascribed to this movement, while the former did not.

The making of *Etnocidio* did not subscribe to Third Cinema tenets: for one thing, Leduc gained access to particular spaces within the Mezquital Valley and to particular subjects for interview thanks to Bartra. For another thing, the documentary was made with the support of a fleet of academics and intellectuals, including not only Bartra but also Bartra's colleagues who worked at the UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, a cavalcade of individuals including economists, anthropologists such as Guillermo Bonfil and research assistants.¹⁵ With such an institutional cohort supporting the project, it would seem that the zeitgeist of the film was, indeed, one rooted in middle and upper middle class—that is, bourgeoisie—intellectual thought, albeit radical thought. It is undeniable that the group of

¹⁵ Vázquez Almanza, 13.

intellectuals, plus the French-Canadian cinematographer, who initially made up the brains and skills of the operation, were not working elbow to elbow with Hñáhñú colleagues or peers, nor were they targeting a Hñáhñú spectatorship. Moreover, the fact that Leduc gained contacts in the Mezquital through his intellectual acquaintances rather than through his own connections with the Hñáhñú people featured on camera evinces that *Etnocidio* was not created, like the films of the Ukamau Group for example, on the principle of making film “junto al pueblo.” *Etnocidio* in most senses falls outside the realm of Third Cinema film, but this does not mean the film failed to problematize the status quo: as will be discussed further on in this chapter, *Etnocidio* makes a move that is relatively unorthodox by Mexican film standards—it visualizes Hñáhñú territories while depicting the mechanisms and consequences of Mexican territorial expansion made possible, as Bartra vehemently argued, by official policy towards Indigenous communities.

In comparison to *Ayautla*, the discursive control that Leduc, his editors and his cameraman take over *Etnocidio* is much more explicit. The latter might best be categorized as a chronicle documentary, which follows linearity or chronology—an alphabetically organized structure being a more unusual variant of this organizational style—containing “sucesos y personas con alta carga opinativa, basada en la observación y en la recreación de atmósferas. En el documental de crónica, la empatía con los protagonistas y el empeño formal dominan sobre la tarea informativa, y sus alcances interpretativos provienen de la *subjetividad* de la observación” (Mendoza, 41). In essence, the film’s thesis is that an ethnocide is happening in the Mezquital Valley. Organized into alphabetically chronological chapters, which are all identified with on-screen text. The film’ opens with the echoing, tinny sounds of a violin being tuned, and the screen pans out from a desert ravine, cut through by

what appears to be a dirt road or a dry riverbed. The violin is joined by a guitar, and the two begin to play a tune, as the camera cuts away to a deep shot of a violinist, flanked by a family, a man carrying a tiny coffin on his head, and imposing, dry mountains nearly filling the screen. The funeral procession moves up a steep hillside, and the camera faces the procession as they make their way between maguey, nopal, and chaparral against a backdrop of rolling, dry hills, and mountains. A jump cut shows the baby's coffin lowered into the ground, and the camera then fixes on the funeral-goers and their faces. Then a jump cut presents the title screen: the words *ethnocide/ethnocide* against a frame that is filled entirely by a piece of land so dry the topsoil has cracked. The next jump cuts depict more parched land, and then the next jump cut presents the first alphabetic chapter, against a backdrop of flames.

With sixteen chapters in total, the film plainly states its themes, and averts the need to create thematic or *mise-en-scène* continuity between segments. As the film's title suggests, all of these sequences depict the region of the Mezquital Valley and the spaces— industrialized, drought-blighted, and contested—within it. Zoom-ins and zoom outs, practically omnipresent in the film, lend the sensation that the film, like *La hora de los hornos*, is interested in how Hñáhñú land struggle, poverty, environmental concerns, and industry have individual effects, national effects, and mirrors in other parts of the country. Likewise, the instrumental music at the start of the film, performed by and for campesinos, lends credence to the idea that the film, at its core, is about rural space, its inhabitants, and the challenges they face. The ominous piano and horn music, by contrast, convey the denunciatory, pessimistic tone of segments of the documentary, which is often paired with shots of pollution, city scapes, and factories, as if to posit these as antitheses to rural, Hñáhñú

lives and livelihoods. Despite the number of fragments that comprise the film, a handful of chapters account for the bulk of the film's length and comprise the most discursively complex portions of the film. In particular "C: Clases," "E: Etnocidio," "F: Fábrica," "I: Indígena" and "O: Otomí=Obrero" most explicitly treat the questions of space, racialization, and development.

Like *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio* explicitly references a toponym in its title. Taken together, the sixteen chapters comprising the film are the "notas sobre el Mezquital," are sixteen short documentaries, some of them linked by scenery, by interview material, or non-diegetic sounds, and all represent or discuss the Mezquital Valley. In order of appearance, the chapters are:

- A: antecedentes
- C: clases
- D: democracia
- E: etnocidio
- F: Fábricas
- H: historia
- I: indígena
- K: kultura
- L: lectura
- M: migración
- O: Otomí=obrero, 'nuevos otomíes'
- P: polución
- R: resumen
- T: tesis
- W: Washington
- Z: Zimapán

The film, as this chapter will argue, is an exegesis of Bartra's article, but in engaging the article becomes its own narrative, built through an aesthetically rendered investigation of gridded space and the applications of grids as tools for Mexico's economic, social, and geographic territorialization. Through thematically related and labelled sequences, panoramic

and angled shots, as well as deep shots and match cuts, *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* interrogates the gridding of topsoil and subsoil, as well as the gridding and subsequent resourcification of land for mineral mining, oil drilling, and for cattle grazing. The relationship of gridded celluloid and gridded land will also be discussed, and attention will be drawn to the role of grids in producing the isolation of film subjects from land and from their dignity as workers. Also of interest in this chapter is the way the cinematography in this film articulates—and troubles—the logic of gridded film frames in representing racialized Hñáhñú protagonists, and the implications of gridded versus non-gridded sequences when depicting people in the Mezquital Valley.

Reception

Etnocidio does not address the cultural significance of the Mezquital Valley to its Hñáhñú inhabitants, and it does not ever represent relations between humans and the spaces in which they live beyond the material (for example, perhaps an opportunity was missed to acknowledge the spiritual significance of the lands, or the immateriality of the lands in Hñáhñú cosmogony). What concerns the film, from the outset, are the exploitative and impoverished labor and living conditions of Hñáhñú people live in the Mezquital Valley, versus settlers living in the same region. Writes Rafael Aviña, “[u]nas notables y duras imágenes de Ángel Goded –su fotógrafo de cabecera– y Georges Dufaux, ofrecen un testimonio indignante de las condiciones sociales de campesinos que viven a duras penas en ejidos donde la tierra ya no da más, y su difícil adaptación a las zonas semiurbanas con lo que ello implica (transculturización, pobreza, alcoholismo, prostitución, racismo,

etcétera).”¹⁶ At times, the difficult and shocking images Goded offers up seem to flirt with misery porn, given the emphasis, literally zooming in— on the tin shacks, dirty faces and mussed hair, or the gaunt faces of the nameless, voiceless subjects—magnified for the inspection of the viewer, more likely than not someone who is non-Indigenous and bourgeoisie.

Indeed, Jorge Ayala Blanco accuses the film of simply doubling down on standard urban poverty tropes, already familiar to bourgeoisie spectators, and suggests that this technique is not only ordinary, but harmful to the film’s subjects. Writes Ayala Blanco, "las vivencias de seres concretos de la cultura de la pobreza se empobrecen también ellas al manipularse como incisos particulares de un temario formulado por paranoico orden alfabético; vivencias reducidas al nivel de meras ilustraciones, a menudo con pretensiones cultistas. Se tocan los aberrantes límites de una Estética de la Pobreza" (*La condición*, 556). What it seems most troubles Ayala Blanco is the film’s intent to posture itself as an intelligent—and intelligently crafted—discourse on inequality and the failure of the state to intervene on behalf of the factory and agricultural workers in the region and elsewhere. For Ayala Blanco, the film is not saying anything original, but fancies itself original because of the way it says what it does. The manipulation of images of poverty, the elaborate montage, are more about the filmmaking team accruing cultural capital than they are about the real issue at hand.

Ultimately, however, the redeeming elements of the film lie in its ability to pose a critical question that may well be asked of any contemporary in which Indigenous

¹⁶ Avíña, “1942-2020,” 33.

communities are driven from their ancestral lands: how does native land get completely taken over by the state? Moreover, how does ethnocide happen in the context of industrialization, late capitalism, and nation states? *Etnocidio* finds an aesthetic, documentary discourse through which to offer hypotheses in response to these questions.

4.3 The Mezquital Valley—A Gridded Space

The Mezquital Valley is situated near the western portion of the Sierra Madre and is an extension of the Chihuahua Desert. In the variant of Otomí spoken in the Valley, the name for the region is Mbonthi, which is a reference to the abundance of Mezquite trees.¹⁷ According to geographers, the Valley constitutes some 40% of the state of Hidalgo's surface area, or nearly 4500 square miles¹⁸ Since the early 1900s, foreign and domestic anthropologists have characterized the Valley as "arid and infertile, "dispossessed" and "inhospitable."¹⁹ The Valley receives limited rainfall, has alkaline soil, and farming has historically only been possible during the rainy season or by tapping into running water sources, as is done in Izmiquilpan and Zimapan.²⁰ Yet the land is only non-viable insofar as the gridding processes of agriculture, mining and more recently of energy production have demanded of the region to provide resources that further undermine its ecosystem's functioning, while pushing Indigenous communities out of the valleys and watered areas chosen hundreds of years before for their life and lifestyle-sustaining qualities. The territorial

¹⁷ Lastra, 406.

¹⁸ Fournier-García et al., 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 49.

²⁰ See Lastra, 19; Tranfo et al, 65, and Aguirre Quezada et al., 41.

displacement of Indigenous peoples was largely a consequence of land gridding and privatization processes that allowed latifundios to expand with the blessing of the Spanish-controlled municipalities.²¹ Although the region is often characterized as unforgiving and difficult to cultivate, pre-conquest civilizations flourished in the region for many hundreds of years, and speculation is that as many as half a million people inhabited the region.²² Moreover, the region is hardly barren: it is bountiful in maguey, matorral, lechuguilla and biznagas as well as other cacti.

Since the colonial period, some of the most politically powerful locations in the Mezquital have been built with Indigenous labor: the monasteries of Tula, Huichapan, Chapantongo, Alfajayucan, Itzmiquilpan and Actopan were all built in this manner, exploiting the labor of Hñáhñú and other Indigenous communities forced to live on the land assigned by the Spanish crown to the República de Indios using the encomienda and repartimiento systems—both essentially seasonal slave labor drafts.²³ Moreover, the resourcification of the land, a major theme in *Etnocidio*, did not begin in the twentieth century, though the film makes plain the extent to which this process is being carried out in the present. It is not that the land has little to offer, but that the logic of private property, ownable land, and capitalism has demanded much.

Research on the Valley during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries indicates that Indigenous territories were victim to settler-colonizers who “frequently invaded the natives’ lands, grazed their animals, destroyed houses, stole from maguey fields, and hoarded limited

²¹ Fournier García et al., 49.

²² Fournier García, 413.

²³ *Ibid*, 51.

water resources for themselves, their animals, and their crops” (Fournier García, 54). Though I have only but glossed the direct relationship between private property, divided land, dispossession of Indigenous territory and environmental concerns, these antecedents make plain the circumstances permitting the creation of the status of Indigenous territories in the Valley during the 1970s, as well as the larger concerns of environmental precarity and degradation. Since achieving statehood, Hidalgo has been a site for environmental crisis brought on by the unilateral decision-making of local and regional authorities, big agrobusiness, clientelism, and indubitably the dominance of a single-party political system.²⁴

In the twentieth century, the Valley has been the site of intensive extractivism. As Yolanda Lastra has noted,

En Tula hay fábricas de cemento, refinería y planta termoeléctrica; en Itzmiquilpan marmolería, empacadora de carnes, fábrica de mosaicos y terrazos; en Tecozautla canastos que se exportan...en Jonacapa extraen mármoles que se benefician en Itzmiquilpan para pisos y fachadas. En Huichapan, Chapantongo y Nopala hay cantera de buena calidad. En Alfajayucan, cantera rosa para adoquines y en San Pedro piedra negra para pisos y fachadas. (400)

The crowning feature of the contemporary extractive industries situated in the Valley is inarguably the federally owned and operated Central Termoeléctrica de “Francisco Pérez Ríos,” located in the southern part of the Mezquital. Inaugurated in 1975, the plant, located eight kilometers south of Tula is the highest producer of electricity in Mexico as well as its single greatest polluting energy plant. The plant generates electricity through the creation of vapor, but the creation of vapor is in turn the result of the burning of natural gas and combustibles (petroleum derivatives). As such, as of 2013, the city of Tula has the highest

²⁴ Aguirre Quezada et al., 264. See also Vargas González, 13.

rates of respiratory illness per capita in all of Mexico—including Mexico City.²⁵ To illustrate the gravity of the matter, inhalable particulate in Mexico City on a day with moderate to poor air quality measures at around $28\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$; in residential areas within the vicinity of the Tula Thermoelectric plant, those levels have been measured at over $60\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.²⁶ Amongst the air pollutants generated by the plant, scientists have located sulfur dioxide (a known respiratory irritant released in the burning of fossil fuels). As if this were not problematic enough, the Tula River, which cuts through the Mezquital, and has historically provided irrigation to its agricultural lands, is a dumping site for sewage from Mexico City. Meanwhile, the mines in the small city of Zimapan, called *Maboza* in Hñáhñú, about sixty miles north of Tula, have been accused of releasing carcinogenic particulate matter into the air.²⁷ The mines in Zimapan, active and multiplying since the seventeenth century, have been a source of lead, zinc, copper, silver and gold for Mexico and the globe.²⁸

In one way or another, *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* makes a gesture to most if not all of these environmental concerns as well as the de-territorialization of Indigenous communities in the Mezquital. What links them, an epistemology to which the film gestures in its title and addresses, I argue, through a series of aesthetic treatments related to gridding and grids, is land and the measures taken within a power-centered system to control it as a means of consolidating and obtaining additional power.

²⁵ “Iniciativa Climática de México,” 7, citing two research papers.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20. Note: the data for this study were taken from Mexico’s Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI).

²⁷ Aguirre Quezada et al., 267.

²⁸ Sánchez Crispin et al., 6-7.

4.4 Gridding the Mezquital

Grids were one of the most potent tools of colonization—across New Spain and indubitably in what is now Hidalgo—during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in New Spain.

Theorizing the application of grids within the context of colonization, Fernando Luiz Lara et al. observes,

the rationalization of space through the use of the grid is inherently linked to the colonial enterprise, as well as to the construction of a stratified society in which people were allocated a place according to their position in a system of extraction and exploitation: an emergent global capitalist system. Indeed, grids permit not only the physical organization of space, but also its commodification. Through the use of grids, land becomes property that can become quantified, purchased, bequeathed, and also expropriated. The ordered distribution of land also facilitates administration, taxation, and more importantly, the distribution of bodies on the land. (13)

Because *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* is so ambitious in the themes and chronologies it attempts to encapsulate, its analysis is best approached aesthetically or theoretically to give us something of a punctum. The application of grids brings our spectatorship of *Etnocidio* into focus on multiple fronts: first, as Luiz Lara et al. discuss, grids were a tool and a technique of colonialism and literally determined the way land colonized by the Spanish Empire was divided legally and on maps. An a-historical understanding of the Mezquital Valley in 1976 or 2022 forecloses the ability to understand the ways the Spanish Colonial empire's privatization and division of land led to water scarcity, the migration of Otomí men, women, and children away from the Mezquital, de-territorialization and displacement of still other Otomí communities, massacre, and pollution.

In contrast to the logic of Foucault, whose history of sex or even of architecture are most deeply interested in power relations but are not perceived as rooted in physical space, this chapter and in reality, this dissertation on the whole—holds the conviction that power

arrangements and ideologies, as well as human categorizations are inextricable from physical space itself. As such, physical space, with its organization and modification in relation to power arrangements, and the human behaviors that shape and are shaped by it, is a main concern in this dissertation. In addition to allowing spectators to comprehend the film and its geographic region from a historical perspective, the application of spatial theory of grids responds directly to colonialization, colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, Indigenous struggle, and even the film medium itself. This chapter applies the concept of grids as means of approaching all of these aforementioned topics, acknowledging that *Etnocidio* is a film concerned both with its subject matter and aesthetics.

Grids, as we will determine throughout this chapter, are on the one hand a tool for the organization of land and bodies, which in turn influences the organization and distribution of political and economic power, and on the other hand are quite literally the means by which power—of the electrical variety—is distributed. Both sorts of grids are relevant to *Etnocidio*, and by examining this film through its use of—and representations of—grids, we may best understand the relationship between historical and contemporary racial discourse, land struggle, industrialization, and energy politics.



4.4.1 Grid Theory in Application

As discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation, the application of grids to land and landscapes began before the colonization of the Americas but took on a different purpose when put to the service of the colonial project of obtaining capital. What is of interest in this chapter pertaining to grids is what they do—and how they do it. In the film, grids are cataloguing and categorizing devices used upon people, as well as land itself, which may be divided, fragmented, commodified and made inaccessible through its conversion into bird's eye view maps displaying political borders that are then marked on the land itself by surveyors. Moreover, as we learned earlier in this chapter, the division of land into tracts allowed the hacienda system to flourish in New Spain and also allowed Indigenous peoples to be contained within parcels of land of the colonial government's choosing. The gridding of land allowed Hñáhñú people to be de-territorialized in the seventeenth century and, as the documentary reveals, continues to provoke the de-territorialization of Indigenous communities not only in the Mezquital Valley but across expanding Mexican territory.

4.4.2 Gridded Portraits

The recurring device of the talking head interview, conducted with Hñáhñú interviewees, is used to anchor the film's testimonial sequences meant to capture the actuality of the ethnocide taking place against Otomí communities in the Mezquital Valley. The replication of the same framing, scale, and background—including the reappearance of the same shrub and the same leafless tree in various of the film frames (Figure 4-2) for each of the talking head shots eliminates novelty from the *mise-en-scène*. With the absence of new visual

elements, spectators are encouraged to make the object of interest the interviewee and their testimony, rather than the landscape.²⁹

That the same *mise-en-scène* —the same hilly backdrop—is used for each of the six or more interviews gives the impression that this space is a familiar or preferred one, whether it be to the cinematographer or the interviewees. Regardless of the way in which Leduc and Goded arrived at the decision to film the testimonials at that particular location, which contains not a single human dwelling nor car nor other sign of the ubiquitous oil pumping sites, the environmental constant gives the impression that the Otomí comuneros are inseparable from this location. As I discussed in Chapter One, European ethnographers, eugenics researchers, and anthropologists at the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century turned to photography in attempts to classify the perceived Other—that is the racialized colonial subject.

What *Etnocidio*'s interview sequences do have in common with the photography grids used by the likes of Jenks, is that a series of mediatized portraits of Indigenous peoples have been created, removing as many visual variables as possible, and, by way of the celluloid itself, serialized within the celluloid into a gridded band of negatives. What distinguishes this gridded band from the anthropometrist's grids is the spectator's perception of time: while Jenks' photographic images inhabit the same time-space for the spectator, the various interviewees who appear on the screen in *Etnocidio* occupy the same space but in sequence. As a result, the people interviewed not only are made unavailable for comparison in the ways that the photographic subjects might be, but they are also all tied to

²⁹ See Lefebvre on being distracted by landscape, *Landscape*, 29.

the same space, a visual rhythm encouraging the spectator to consider them as overlapping, multifaced representatives of a community and territorial whole.

4.4.2.1 *Gridded Space and Linguistic Territory*

According to one 1980 study on government education policy and its consequences for Hñáhñú communities, the Spanish language constitutes one of the main vehicles for dominant national culture.³⁰ The study also notes that the subordination of the Hñáhñú language in favor of Spanish is related to the “crecientes relaciones con el mercado capitalista (intercambio de mercancías, venta de la fuerza de trabajo) y el sistema de dominación política [que] constituyen un complejo estructural que favorece la penetración del español y el desplazamiento del otomí” (Muñoz et al., 135). Ultimately, discussions of Hñáhñú communities that focus on poverty, displacement, and food supply without acknowledging the power relations between Mexican territory and racialized spaces are irresponsible and incomplete.

The talking-head interviews in this sequence of the film are almost conducted in Spanish, a second language for most of the interviewees. The lexical terms rich and poor, and the obvious thematic continuity of the interviews lends the impression that interviewees have been fed prompts that question the relationship between social class and land access. The first interviewee states “aquí somos puro pobre” and then follows up with the declaration that, “por eso nosotros queremos saber cuándo nos da nuestra tierra que nosotros estamos peleado.” The second interviewee picks up the same thread, even more explicitly discussing the connection between poverty and a lack of access to land: “a los pobres, no tienen nada de

³⁰ Muñoz et al., 135.

terreno para que pastoreen sus pobres animales, van a arrear sus animales a su terrenos de los ricos. Entonces nos corren hay veces cuando uno si no ve uno cuando le alcanza uno pues claro le pega uno le pateo uno.” A third interviewee states that “ha venido estas gente creyendo que ellos son dueño de la tierra, todos los que son acaparador de hoy. Entonces, ellos son ricos. Y los pobres los que nomas tienen sobrenombre que son comuneros,³¹ son pobres—no tienen nada. Por eso es que hay codicia en este pueblo con los con la gente rica que han catarreado.”

These quotes, taken together, convey a certain scripted and controlled nature of the sequences filmed but they also gesture to the inability of the class-struggle discursive framework to successfully capture the struggle for Hñáhñú territory, not to mention capturing the struggle in Hñáhñú linguistic terms. By entering Hñáhñú linguistic and cultural territory, asking multiple individuals to speak on the record in their non-native language, and to discuss a matter that is framed in occidental ideological terms, Leduc, Roger Bartra, and his production team foreclose the possibility of engaging with history, space, and development outside the bounds of capitalist thinking. Still, these choices, as much as they minimize non-Western epistemologies, help frame an issue of racialized space in terms that an international, Spanish- or French-speaking audience with a certain education level might grasp.

One of the interviewees in the “C: clases” montage refuses to discuss the fact of land distribution and exclusion in terms of class only. In fact, it is he whose comments underscore

³¹ What distinguishes the comunero system is that the land cannot be sold, and plots are possessed by the comunero who cultivates them, but the land actually belongs to the community. Comunero organization, he also notes, was created early in the conquest when the Imperial authority granted legal recognition to Indigenous communities, which were often later forced to become *ejidos*. See Morett-Sánchez, et al., 125–52.

that class is entirely the consequence of Mexican national territory and its influence on Hñáhñú territory. The man states, “La gente pobre la realidad que nosotros semos tontitos en una razón, no sabemos leer ni escribir, todo somos tonteros. No sabemos hablar en una palabra en español... Todos nosotros hablamos en puro en otomí.”

Even though the interviewer seems to be most concerned about the economic components of the displacement and deterritorialization of Otomí communities, various interviewees frame the land issue in cultural—and racial—terms. In one of the most discursively powerful scenes in the film, two men stand in a field. Goded’s deep shots situate the men in the center of the screen, but not as talking heads. They are two, and they never address the camera, but rather the empty field, as if standing at the lectern of a concert hall. One of the men reads and speaks aloud, but both appear in each frame, rupturing the individualism enforced by the single talking heads in each interview sequence.

What the man in blue reads is an essay recounting the history of colonization and land loss, read, ironically, on farmland, likely prepared using colonizer farming methods. It was in light of Hñáhñú rebellions against the government, he reads, that “el gobernador de Hidalgo

dijo que había que acabar con esos indios comunistas que amenazaba la raza blanca según él."

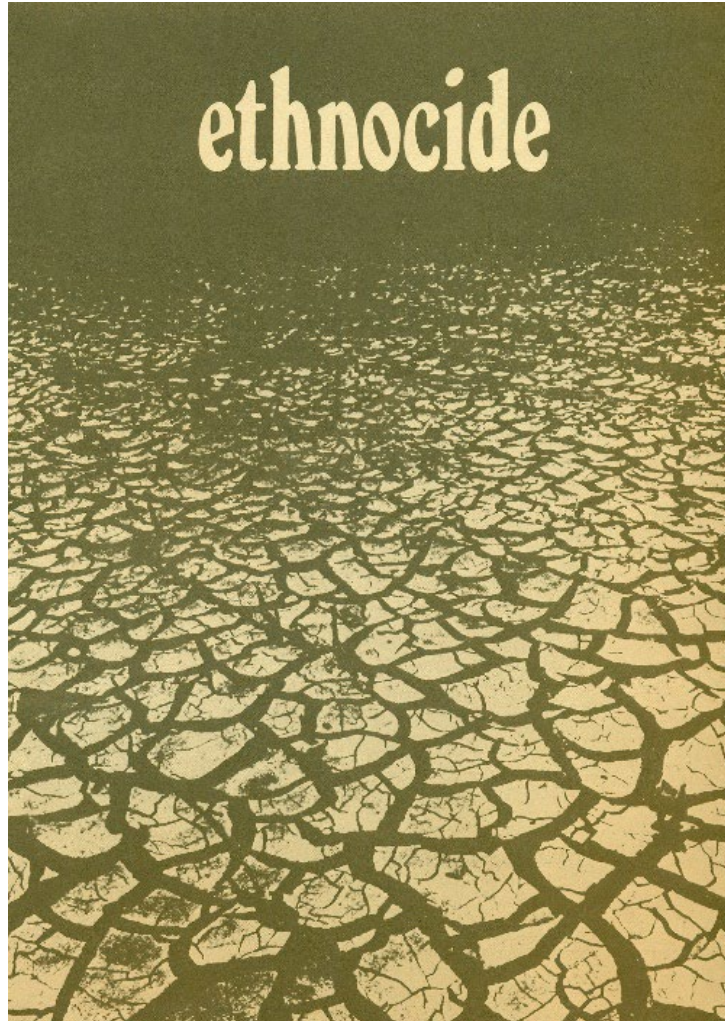


Figure 4-3. Poster. *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* (Paul Leduc, 1977).

Though this comment is not further explored in the film, its echo reverberates throughout the film: land privatization has always been about securing the future of whiteness in the Mezquital Valley by mexicanizing—and thereby ethnically cleansing—space of its Indigenous communities. The control of space—of land, labor, and cultural hegemony—is what is at the core of the genocide taking place in the Valle. Putting down his paper, the man summarizes “ha causado muchas violencia, y muchos pisoteo de derecho a

los compañeros y más que todo a la raza otomí." The land grab then, the establishment of mines in the sixteenth century, haciendas in the seventeenth, and factories in the twentieth, are simply continuations of a legacy of colonialism and the erasure of Hñáhñú culture, communal lands, and language. The issue of land struggle, gridding, and colonialism in the twentieth century cannot be ascribed solely to class, then: it is also inextricable from the issue of linguistic territory, as it is with racializing categories. Regardless of intentions of organizing these interviews into a chapter titled "C: clases," the sequence's visual and narrative discourse transcends the limitations of its own epistemological label, in large part thanks to the voices of the film subjects themselves. In the simplest of terms poverty is the consequence of the gridding, commodification, extraction, and racialization of Hñáhñú territory.



ETHNOCIDE un film de Paul Leduc

Figure 4-4. Canadian Poster. *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* (Paul Leduc, 1977).

4.5 Gridded Landscape, Privatized Land

The Canadian propaganda poster for *Etnocidio* bears the abbreviated version of the title in French—*Ethnocide*—and eschews any additional information about the producers (the Cine Difusión branch of the Secretaría de Educación Pública and the Office National du Filme of Canada) and likewise makes no mention of the cinematographers nor of Leduc (Figure 4-3).

The two-toned poster is reminiscent of a graphic print, with the realist colors swapped for

pale yellow and olive green. The contrast between the light and dark shades has the effect of emphasizing the cracked topsoil's fragmented texture, which is the main feature of the movie poster. Naturally, if we accept that the poster is indeed a colorized image of cracked earth, the message of the poster is quite clear: the ethnocide of the Otomí communities that protagonize the documentary is inextricably tied to drought, or rather, to a lack of water.

The division of the topsoil into small, parched chunks is the consequence of a lack of water. Yet the very fact of this fragmentation of the earth evokes something more: the distorting colors have the effect of removing the assurance that the image is what we think it is. While I have just identified the image as cracked soil, the image might also be interpreted as an aerial shot of an endless horizon of agricultural parcels divided by an endless zigzagging of thick green borders. On the other hand, it is also possible to imagine that the poster is representation of the map of Hidalgo—of the Mezquital Valley itself. When the government-sanctioned municipal boundaries are drawn onto a map of the state of Hidalgo, the lines creating the borders make shapes reminiscent of the movie poster. Recalling again, as I did in Chapter One, the words of Yásnaya Aguilar Gil, these municipalities, the smallest units of state politics, are elements of Mexican territory and do not ever coincide with the territories and linguistic areas of Otomí peoples, nor other Indigenous communities that call the Mezquital Valley their home.³² Whether the poster has some symbolic meaning legible beyond the verisimilitude of the image is debatable, yet the relationship between water scarcity and the territorialization of the Mezquital Valley into arable tracts of land by the Spanish colonies and later the Mexican government is not.

³² Aguilar Gil, *Áa*, 94.

Also gesturing to the parceling of land, another film poster, likewise bearing its title in French and no other information besides the mention of the director (Figure 4-4). This one, like the other poster, trusts the visual composition to convey to the spectator all the information they might need from the film: the first poster tells us a story about the land and the causes of the ethnocide. The second poster mostly shows—and only briefly tells—who is filming, where, and under what conditions. Importantly, this still, taken on the set of *Etnocidio*, shows Leduc standing just over Goded (cinematographer's shoulder), actively participating in the shot. But what is most striking here is the space in which they are filming and how they are doing it: the camera lens is pressed closely to a chain linked fence, and all three men within the image could reach out and touch the fence if they chose. The shot is deep enough that we can make out a road and buildings in the distance, yet the object of interest for Leduc and his crew is outside the image frame. Whatever they are filming, it must be shot from a distance because of the chain linked fence, topped sinisterly with two types of barbed wire, draped in fragments of plastic or cloth. The fence sends a clear message: what is on the other side is private property, the consequence of the gridding of land into parcels for purchase or sale. Stretching into the horizon of the frame, the fence gives visual reference to the size of this private tract of land. Likely the Tula Thermoelectric Plant, the fence gives the impression that the owners of the land are deeply concerned with cordoning off the land.



Figure 4-5. Deep Shot of the Tula Electrical Plant. *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* (Paul Leduc, 1977).

4.6 The Electrical Grid and Other Grid Consequences

The Tula electrical plant (Figure 4-5), known also as the “Francisco Pérez Ríos” Thermoelectrical Plant, was inaugurated in Tula, Hidalgo in 1975, under the supervision of the Echeverría administration. Built on expropriated Hñáhñú lands, the electrical plant created jobs required for its construction and several other jobs for its subsequent maintenance and plant operation. As of 2022, the electrical plant is still operational, burns petroleum, and as such requires oil from a nearby source: drilling and pumping sites have also been established on Hñáhñú land. The thermoelectric plant supplies electricity to much of Mexico City through a network of electrical cables referred to in English as a “grid.” This kind of grid is distinct from the cartographic sort we saw in Chapter Two but recalls the kind of communication and power grids described by Raffestin in his description of territorial organization under capitalism. Indeed, the grid, an urban design principle for organizing

power concentrically or within local epicenters (Raffestin’s “nodes”) is in practice (if not teleology) not terribly different from the electrical grid. A cartographic grid organizes power, but an electrical grid quite literally distributes it.

Grids of the electrical variety, like cartographic grids, are a determinant of access to certain privileges and serve as a means of dictating the opportunities afforded to people living within a particular region. In a sobering 2016 study, it was demonstrated that nearly four in ten Mexicans live in energy poverty.³³ Energy poverty, simply defined, is the circumstance in which a household must spend more than ten per cent of its income to have access to lighting, entertainment, water heating, food preparation, food refrigeration, and temperature regulation.³⁴ The study, which looked at energy poverty statistics across Mexican states, found that the Mexican states with the largest Indigenous populations were also the states with highest incidences of energy poverty. In the states of Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca, in fact, the rates of energy poverty ranged from sixty six percent to seventy-seven percent. While these data do not help us understand the ways energy poverty is linked to factors like linguistic territory, racialization, or the way energy poverty plays out in a place like Mexico City, we can be sure that income and the ability to purchase electrical appliances as well as the quality of the electrical infrastructure in a given town, city, or home, has bearing on the ability of a household to use energy and to be able to afford it (old or faulty appliances, not to mention electricity infrastructure, may make energy use more expensive).

We might think of the Mexican electrical grid as a metonym for Mexican territory itself: designed to distribute power, it connects centers of power—like the thermoelectric

³³ García-Ochoa, et al., 293.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 293.

plant in Tula—to other parts of itself through a system of cables traversing territory, ensuring that power may reach, and be enjoyed, by those who are situated in parts of Mexican territory that are designed to receive it. There are neighborhoods, towns, and entire regions, however, which have been excluded from the Mexican grid-territory or only partially and problematically included: these regions have been forced to make do with alternatives, with limited access to power, and with the constant reminder through power failures that they are only marginally part of Mexican grid-territory.



Figure 4-6. Dutch Angle Shot of a Marble Quarry. *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* (Paul Leduc, 1977).

4.6.1 Gridded Commodity

The marble factories of Izmiquilpan are the subjects of various sequences throughout the film. Impressively, Leduc managed to film an interview with a priest who was a primary shareholder in this industry. This interview is visually organized within the frame evoking an earlier interview—found footage—which is edited into the film during its first chapter, “a:

antecedents.” The found footage, shot in black and white, feels slightly aged compared to the colors and movement of Dufaux and Goded’s shots, but the priest’s narrative is stunning in its racism—and stunningly pertinent to the present. In the found footage, a white man in a button-down shirt discusses the malleability—or exploitability—of humans on the basis of their genes, indicating that he feels his privilege is the result of having been born with favorable genes. This interview is edited into a montage of shots of a commercial dairy farm and a hunting expedition. The interviewee, whose voice serves as the voice-over for these sequences, casually declares, “Un otomí que ha sido regularmente alimentado está capacitado para pues para ser tractorista, para hacer un buen trabajo, puede hacer.” As also occurs in the interviews conducted within *Cascabel*, it seems that the white, elite interviewees filmed during the mid-1970s in Mexico felt quite at ease espousing eugenicist (and utterly dehumanizing) rhetoric in the same breath as they discuss labor and land development in Mexican territory.

By now, it is abundantly clear that racializing discourse, development and labor practices, and habitus have served the economic interests of hacendados, oligarchs, and, most recently, corporate executives eager to expropriate Indigenous land and labor for their personal economic gain. The interview with the priest reinforces this observation, but also acknowledges the participation of the Catholic Church alongside a landed elite and the government in territorializing Mexico and commodifying it for personal gain.

Like the earlier interview, the sequence in which a priest discusses the marble factories in Izmiquilpan sits comfortably at a table, reclining. The man describes himself as an émigré, appointed by the Vatican to work in the Mezquital, and his immaculate frock and careful haircut suggest that his time in Mexico has suited him. Goded’s camera angle is slightly tilted

down, giving the priest an appearance of being reclined or relaxed. The priest explains that the "Valle del mezquital es una región riquísima en minerales...hay materias mármoles, por ejemplos...tenemos catorce canteras de diferente mármol, por la brillantez puede competir con cualquier mármol del mundo." Speaking of the material wealth of the Valley's subsoil with the same aplomb one might expect from a seasoned businessperson, the priest does not hint at any sense that his role in the marble business creates a conflict of interest with his role as parish priest: a position of considerable authority already.

Part of the montage titled "F: fábrica," is surprisingly open about the connections between the Catholic Church and land exploitation in the valley. Just as the Church was involved in the re-organization of Indigenous territories into parishes and just as the Church also owned lands distributed to it through the grid-map system deployed by the Viceroy during the colonization of Mesoamerica, so too the Church, for which the priest in question is a metonym, has continued to profit off the gridding of the Valley at the expense of Otomí communities. Indeed, by filing this interview under the factory sequence, Leduc implies there is more in common between a factory and the Church that is generally recognized. In a subsequent sequence, a deep shot shows the priest leaving the church and sliding into the driver's seat of an improbably shiny car while parishioners stand under the hot sun in their straw hats and worn clothes. A montage of interviews juxtaposes the priest's testimony with that of the Hñáhñú residents of his parish. The priest declares that "los primeros beneficiados son los indígenas porque son los propietarios de la materia prima," yet the material reality of the priest, on the one hand, and of the Otomí communities he claims to serve, on the other, is keenly different. One interviewee, seemingly having been prompted off camera to respond to the priest's claims, declares that such discourses about Indigenous authority over primary

goods, “son mentiras, porque los acaparadores son los que ellos están trabajando, están poseyendo.”

The case of the businessman-priest offers only more material and social evidence of the segregating effects of the gridding and allotment of land to the Church—and later, the Church’s ability to profit of that land’s excavation, using racialized Indigenous and mestizo labor. Marking another contrast, the shots of marble miners reveal a reality much harsher and precarious than that of the priest: we are transported to the dusty marble excavation site, with its jackhammers, which Goded and Dufaux frame at dutch angles (Figure 4-6). The dutch angles interrupt an otherwise gridlike mining system, in which marble is cut into blocks that will then be transported to a factory for finishing, before being shipped elsewhere to be installed by mestizo workers as adornment for luxury homes, hotels and churches. The marble mining sequence is compelling in part because of the dutch angle: such an angle interrupts the sense of order and control over a parcel of land being heavily extracted, and it also breaks up the horizontality of the landscape, which becomes fragmented, rather than contiguous, with its sudden tilt down towards the right lower corner of the frame. A later shot, zooming out of a marble sanding machine, which visually isolates this machine, not to mention the marble, from the land from which the marble was mined, or even from the Valley. It is as if there are two, parallel spaces within the Mezquital Valley. This, then, is what happens when space is gridded and commodified on a map and in law: it is then literally cut into squares, extracted, and then sent elsewhere to create luxurious architectural spaces that will not even slightly reference the land from whence they came, nor the people from whose ancestral lands the mineral was cut.

Yet another material mined and prepared for distribution in the Valley, limestone and its respective processes also make an appearance in *Etnocidio*. A film chapter titled “o: otomí = obrero (nuevos otomíes),” which includes seemingly unrelated sequences of zoom out crane shots, interviews, and traveling shots cycling between interviews and with a former employee whose leg amputated after he was chemically burned at the limestone preparation facility. The man, unemployed and disabled at less than forty years old, is flanked by a young boy—the next generation of Otomí people likely to either migrate or be conscripted into risky industrial labor, as his father was. The man’s interview is conducted in Spanish which, while his second language, he speaks with only the slightest accent, implying years of working in Spanish linguistic territory. Perhaps even more so than the sequences addressing the marble companies and marble drilling, *Etnocidio* emphasizes the precarity of work in the limestone manufacturing industry. Not only does the film convey the bodily harm the work has caused to the young amputee: a non-diegetic voice over, paired with shots of men working preparing calcium, details how the limestone, when cut, releases silica particles into the air that then lodge themselves in the workers’ lungs, causing silicosis, an incurable lung disease characterized by the accumulation of scar tissue in the lungs—and a significant risk factor for tuberculosis.³⁵

The sequence paired with this voiceover, shot from inside the factory, is a somber testament to the de-territorializing nature of a factory like this: in one particularly striking shot, a worker goes about their business, covered head to toe in clothing as to prevent the dust from entering their orifices. The makeshift safety suit the worker has fashioned suggests

³⁵ “Silica, Crystalline,” United States Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

that the employers have not provided formal protective wear, and that employees must procure their own. With the layers of cloth, the worker is entirely anonymous both to the spectators, their colleagues, and their employers. The dust hangs so heavily in the air that the shot has no depth or background whatsoever, ridding the shot—and its subject—of its land-bound setting (Figure 4-7).

This sequence, perhaps more than any other in the film, conveys the extreme consequences of gridded space, including the commodification of topsoil and subsoil, the conversion of land to resources, the isolation of labor from community and collectivity, and the extreme risk at which human beings are put.



Figure 4-7. Close Up Shot inside a Limestone Factory. *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* (Paul Leduc, 1977).

4.7 Against the Grid?

A reoccurring montage in the film depicts about two dozen men, women, and children standing at the foot of a series of scrubby mountains. The crane shot reveals the odd spacing of the camera subjects (Figure 4-8). The shadows cast by the subjects and the splotches of

chaparral give the illusion that there are more people posing than are present, and that they have spread out to fill the space, as if to declare “this is our territory, and here we belong.” The other unsettling element of the shot is that the movement is provided by the camera alone, which pans slowly. Indeed, the staggered spacing of the Hñáhñú subjects is reminiscent of the arrangement of a squadron or a battalion, challenging their foes, or rather, anyone who would dispossess them of the little land that has not yet been stolen and developed by the Church, the State, or other corporate interests. Taken face front or as crane shots, the sequences depicting groups of Hñáhñú comuneros appear staged, as if the Hñáhñú community has been staged for the camera on their ancestral lands.



Figure 4-8. Zoomed-out Crane Shot of Hñáhñú Men, Women and Children. *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital* (Paul Leduc, 1977)

4.8 Conclusions

Whereas Rovirosa comes to the matter of Mazatec territory and its relationship with Mexican national territory in a subtle, coded fashion, Leduc makes arguments about Hñáhñú territory

that make a slightly more overt pass at Mexican territory—particularly politics and economics. In contrast to Rovirosa’s choice to refer to San Bartolomé Ayautla simply as Ayautla, Leduc’s decision to title his project based on the colonial name of that territory in which ethnocide is taking place is an inadvertent affirmation that, whatever part of the Valley is ancestral Hñáhñú territory, it is also already Mexican territory. The act of naming is also an act of asserting Mexican territory: by calling the territory in question the Mezquital Valley, the assumption is made that this place has always been a cartographic one, with a Spanish name as if Hñáhñú territory did not exist elsewhere and as if Hñáhñú language lacked names for places or communal territories in question.

Beyond the trouble of naming territory, the greater arch of Leduc’s project is to paint a portrait of the ethnocide—or genocide—as it may equally be called made possible by the destruction of part of Hñáhñú territory. Effectively, *Etnocidio* attempts to trace the architecture of an ongoing neo-colonial project in which the commodification of space results in spatial displacement of Hñáhñú communities through a system encouraging farmers to pay debts with pieces of land and the annihilation of racialized Hñáhñú bodies at the hands of the municipal president’s police forces.³⁶ Leduc also demonstrates how the expansion of Mexican territory entails the resignification and utilization of space for factories, and the erasure of Hñáhñú culture, language, and lifeways as a means of ensuring future control over land as well as cheap labor for both factories in the region and in other parts of Mexico. The chapter in the film titled “O: Otomí=obrero ‘nuevos otomíes’” never manages to elaborate on

³⁶ The film includes a brief montage of interviews discussing the 1968 Massacre at Pueblo Nuevo in Izmiquilpan, in which ten Otomí men were murdered, and both the film and multiple written accounts of the event name one Doctor Romero and Rosalío Ávila as the architects of the massacre. For more on this, see Biñuelo Batista, 22-32. Fernando Benítez has also allegedly written on the *Massacre in Los indios de México, Tomo IV*, but I was unable to access the book for research purposes.

this claim that Hñáhñú farmers are being pressured to leave their ancestral lands or to change their relationship to them, but the earlier chapter, “F: fábricas,” does attempt—if disjointedly—to gesture to some similar process of forced migration, forced changes in employment, and language loss. There are jumps in logic that make this connection hard to trace, but the clues are there.

A second round of medium, deep shot interviews are artfully staged by Goded against a backdrop of the Tula thermoelectrical plant. Some workers wear hard hats, as if to underscore their status as factory laborers. Two workers, whose voices and images are alternated in an interview montage, describe how in anticipation of the construction of the Tula power plant, engineers arrived, “quienes comenzaron a inspeccionar el terreno para ver quiénes eran los dueños de los terrenos.” Cut to another worker, who adds, “Y empezaron a levantar las vardas para las construcciones que hay en la zona, para la termoeléctrica y la refinería, entonces los campesinos al ver que estaban invadiendo sus tierras inmediatamente llegaron a lo que estas gentes respondieron que tenían que ver a un señor, se les iba a pagar un buen precio, cosa que a la fecha no ha ocurrido.” At the center of this discussion is the impact of industrialization on campesinos, rather than Hñáhñú communities, which lends the belief that Hñáhñú farmers and peons are simply future campesinos and circumvents discussion about the cultural and linguistic erasure through which this shift might transpire. In yet another discursive move gesturing to language used by Mexican social scientists and politicians alike, Hñáhñú cultural specificity and, Indigeneity in general, is retired in favor of terms like campesino, which in turn allow a part of the story of land rights to be instantly erased.

Ultimately, there is only a gesture to the idea that the entire process of Hñáhñú land usurpation, genocide, and resourcification have pushed some members of the Hñáhñú community to leave behind agriculture, since the grazing lands to which they have access are ever smaller, for factory jobs and for other regions. On-screen statistics such as “60% de la población otomí migra” and “Hidalgo 1960: 23% de la población activa es campesina...1970 baja a 17%” seem as though they ought to have some connection, but only one segment in the film attempts to draw the link between these statistics: another man, interviewed as a talking head against a backdrop of mountains, distinguishes himself from the other interviewees in that he begins by introducing himself, and explains that his parents “nacieron otomíes,” as if to suggest that they are no longer so, or that he is no longer Hñáhñú. He explains that crippling poverty and a lack of help from the government led him to migrate out of the Valle to the Port of Veracruz and into the US with the bracero program. The man’s voice continues to be heard as the non-diegetic sound matched with another panning shot over the staged Hñáhñú men, women, and children. It is unclear if the point being made is that the people in the panning shot are those who stayed behind when young men left to find jobs elsewhere, or if they are a collective metaphor for the Hñáhñú will to remain on their ancestral lands. Many Hñáhñú people aspire to migrate into United States territory to find work. Indeed, in one study conducted in the last decade, every Hñáhñú family interviewed had at least one family member who was currently living and working in the United States or had previously done so.³⁷ A study organized by UNAM anthropologist Verónica Kugel and

³⁷ Ruschel Robinson, 168.

funded by the archdiocese of Tula, the location of the electrical plant, found that in Izmiquilpan, Hñáhñú territory, almost 40% of the families were “afectadas” by migration.

Moreover, land struggle is still very much a part of the reality of portions of Hñáhñú communities in the region: *La Jornada* reported on October 22, 2010, that eighteen Hñáhñú comuneros were arrested for squatting (“despojo”) on land they were demanding be returned to them. This was land also claimed by the nephew of former Hidalgo governor Jesús Murillo Karam, by the Mármoles del Valle de Mezquital company, as well as by the fishing and hunting club Campo de Tiro.³⁸ This news story gives an elliptical framing to the history of the land struggle at the core of *Etnocidio*'s montage, recalling the marble plant and man with hunting dog presented during the “a: antecedentes” and “f: fábricas” segments of the documentary, which allude to labor exploitation, land expropriation, and physical violence at the detriment of Hñáhñú communities in the Mezquital. In his 2014 monograph, Pueblo Nuevo resident and local historian Homero Biñuelo Batista declared that his community, the site of various massacres of Hñáhñú comuneros and land defenders, “reclama un espacio digno en nuestro México.”³⁹ As with Ayautla, Pueblo Nuevo—and the Hñáhñú communities of the Mezquital more broadly—attempt to negotiate their existence within, or perhaps in spite of, the oppressive consequences of Mexican national territory, and the pressures of Mexican national space upon Hñáhñú lands.

By examining both aesthetic techniques and discursive elements documentaries address labor, development and national institutions cinema linked to realism and the

³⁸ This information was provided by a secondary source and could not be verified due to technological flaws in *La Jornada*'s digital platform.

³⁹ Biñuelo Batista, 8.

journalistic exposure of daily life, as well as the impulse to assess, categorize, and diagnose humans and the human condition—without ever proposing solutions to those conditions. That films are descriptive rather than prescriptive. This is not to say that description is not useful nor important; on the contrary, both *Ayautla* and *Etnocidio* bear witness to processes of land transformation through labor transformation, and the degree to which Indigenous peoples in Mexico are pressured into putting their land and labor at the service of national and international economic interests. Even if they stop short of prescribing a course of action for spectators or film subjects, it might be said that the very act of bearing witness and recording testimony is a kind of activism.

5 CHAPTER 5: ARCHEOLOGY, JUNGLE LANDSCAPES, AND ETHNOGRAPHIC IMAGE SPACES IN CASCABEL (RAÚL ARAIZA, 1977)



Figure 5-1. Still. Alfredo (Sergio Jiménez) and Manuel (Aarón Hernán). *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976).

Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico.

5.1 Synopsis

“Mexico no sabemos qué cosa” the young Hach Winik (Lacandon) man declares, speaking into the camera. And yet, the film crew holding the film camera and other equipment consider themselves to be standing on Mexican territory. The year is roughly 1976 and Raúl

Araiza is filming in Chiapas with Rosalío Solano (also of *Tarahumara, cada vez más lejos* and Sergio Olhovich's 1978 film, *Llovizna*) on a budget provided by CONACINE, the Mexican film production fund by the Department of Culture. The young man standing with his father and brother, is never depicted in a headshot, but rather the shot depth allows spectators to take in the speaker's white tunic and black hair.

The movie revisits Mexico in 1972 after the official ratification of the Lacandon Forest in the state of Chiapas Mexico, a decision that converted a swatch of land apparently measuring exactly 614,321 hectares into land with an official name and several clauses attached. Echeverría, celebrating the forest's ratification, declared that the Lacandon Forest was, "tierra comunal que desde tiempos inmemoriales perteneció y sigue perteneciendo a la tribu lacandona."¹ Protagonist Alfredo Castro (Sergio Jiménez), a young playwright and filmmaker whose experimental film has won a competition, is tapped by the Mexican government to direct a documentary that, in words of film producer and government collaborator Gómez Rul (Raúl Ramírez) "Se pretende reflejar la realidad en la que viven los lacandones". Castro, immediately skeptical of the script the government has provided him, wants to create a montage of highways, lakes, and Lacandon homes—that is, of landscapes and architectural features—to demonstrate why Lacandon peoples and other Indigenous peoples in Mexico have always been so "jodidos."²

Enticed by the offer of steady work, even if it comes from a government that has censored his plays for being sympathetic to worker unions and public protest, Alfredo

¹ Published originally in the *Diario Oficial*, 6 de marzo de 1972, 10-13, cited in Viqueira Albán, et al., 351.

² For Jorge Ayala Blanco's analysis of the film and his unrestrained critique of its political discourse as beating spectators over the head with exaggerated tropes, see Ayala Blanco, *La condición*, 568-574.

prepares himself to travel to Chiapas from Mexico City. In anticipation of his travels to the state of Chiapas, Alfredo is invited to the offices of Licenciado Gómez Rul, who introduces Alfredo to other functionaries and then sits him and the other functionaries down for coffee and a slideshow. The lights are flicked off, the curtains drawn, and then the frame cuts to a subjective medium shot taken from behind Miguel (Aarón Hernán), who begins to explain to Alfredo the names and roles of the various Lacandon subjects of the projected images, which Miguel explains were taken the previous month. The camera's medium-long shot re-frames the projected photographs, mostly headshots or medium-close ups, of the Hach Winik photographic subjects. A reverse shot captures Alfredo, Miguel and the documentary's screenwriter, Lugo (Héctor Gómez), foregrounded by the secretary's arm leaving a cup of coffee. The slightly uptilted camera angle, reclining body postures and attentive gazes of the three men are such that they could just as easily be studying a work of art in a gallery, viewing a whale skeleton hanging from a ceiling, or even admiring a vintage car: the Lacandon elders whose images are projected on screen are novelties. The origins of the image are not discussed, but they are clear enough.

While some scenes are entirely scripted, some blur the boundaries dividing fiction film and documentary. Sergio Jimenez is effectively under cover playing Alfredo Castro, though no doubt various interviewees know him to be Jiménez in character. Upon arriving first in San Cristóbal de las Casas and later in Lacanjá, Alfredo bears witness to systematic labor exploitation of Tzotzil and Tzeltal coffee farmers, filming the same scenes that Araiza films, and as importantly is privy to the racist and classist opinions of local oligarchs, intermediaries, and civilians, who are mostly mestizo. At this point, it becomes difficult to ascertain which scenes are Araiza's and Jimenez' and which are Alfredo's and indeed,

fictional characters and unscripted, non-actors utilize similar rhetoric. Alfredo, in the fictional world of the film, and we, the spectators, are confronted with a montage that lies somewhere between documentary and fiction, a fact that makes the paternalistic, racializing, and colonializing rhetoric used to describe Tzotzil, Tojolabal, Chol, Tzeltal and Lacandon people all the more chilling because the script suddenly does not appear to exaggerate truths about the Mexican habitus. Indeed, the Hach Winik are blamed for their agricultural methods just as Maya coffee growers are blamed for their inability to haggle over the value of their sacks of beans. Alfredo and spectators, having witnessed these systemic inequalities, are aware that the reality in which Lacandon people live—the reality about which Alfredo has been asked to make a documentary—is one that is in fact epistemic rather than ontological. The reality that the Mexican government officials want captured is teleological, and lends credence to the idea that, no matter its nomenclature, the Selva Lacandona is in fact Mexican territory. The reality Alfredo is supposed to convey through shots of the Selva and Hach Winik community members is one in which the creation of the Selva has saved the Hach Winik from exploitative oligarchs and has also preserved so-called “pristine forests” and equally “pristine” and millenary lifeways.

Alfredo’s initial interest in the salary attached to the job gives way to a sense of purpose as a documentary filmmaker creating not a propagandistic government documentary but rather a testimony to the imminent threat posed to Hach Winik, Tzeltal and Tzotzil agricultural laborers, community leaders, and even newborn infants by the Mexican government, local oligarchs, and even would-be filmmakers like Alfredo. What Alfredo ultimately creates is a series of interviews, which are edited into this fiction film in a way that indicates they have not been scripted and that they are, in fact, the work of Araiza, Solano,

and Jiménez rather than of the fictional Alfredo. Indeed, a message before the opening credits states that “[t]odos los testimonios y las entrevistas de esta película fueron filmados con personajes reales, en forma directa y sin ensayo previo.” Alfredo’s unwillingness to visually reproduce the requested discourse about Lacandon reality causes him to get into arguments with his colleagues, like cinematographer Miguel, over the social impact of film as incompatible with the aim of making a living from filmmaking. Ultimately, Alfredo’s unwillingness to give up his belief that film can rectify the wrongs of national politics and change politicians’ minds costs him his job, and he dies both a literal and a symbolic death—having left behind the middle-class city life of a struggling playwright and become a film maker whose work evokes that of Third Cinema filmmakers such as Santiago Álvarez and even Jorge Sanjinés.

5.2 Context

Raúl Araiza, born in Minatitlan in Veracruz in 1935, in contrast with José Roviroso and Paul Leduc, was an autodidact. Alfredo Castro has been referred to as Araiza’s alter ego.³ Considering its critique of art censorship by the Mexican government it is remarkable that *Cascabel* circulated at all. While *Etnocidio* seemingly managed to avoid government oversight by receiving its funding from the SEP and the Office National du Film du Canada, *Cascabel* was funded in part by CONACINE (as well as DASA films) and thus was directly beholden to the Ley de la Industria Cinematográfica. Araiza was transparent about the critical tone of his film, sharing in an interview that “en *Cascabel* me inquietaba el problema de la demagogia en este país y su libertad de expresión, así como también la manipulación de los

³ Aviña, 1999. Np.

medios de información, la confusión que se vive, las mentiras de los políticos...”⁴ Araiza’s career films were something of a paradox: on the one hand, he virtually conceded that his film *En la trampa* was misogynist and that the film reflected something of his own character, adding that his female characters are largely afterthoughts: “no pienso en mis protagonistas como mujeres, sino pienso en hombres.”⁵ On the other hand, Araiza, described making *Cascabel* as throwing salt into his own wounds, alluding perhaps to the political and epistemological reckoning with human rights limitations, Official Indigenism, and the teleological limits of film—and art more generally.⁶ Araiza, a longtime director with Televisa, also stated that while the network gave him everything he wanted, in Televisa “no me puedo expresar como lo hago en el cine, porque la televisión es una compañía privada que tiene su política y ahí me ajusto a sus normas” (“Entrevista,” 28). While Araiza bemoaned the lack of freedom of speech for directors both working with Televisa and within a framework of Mexica law, he knowingly benefitted from the same system, accepting employment and funds, and benefitting from having his son receive his acting courses through his employer at the Centro de Educación Artística of Televisa. If Alfredo Castro is indeed Raúl Araiza’s alter ego, Castro is brave in ways Araiza is not: when Castro’s directing choices are questioned by the government functionaries who patronize him, he doubles down rather than acquiescing to their demands for adjustments to the plot. Yet Castro dies in his thirties, and Araiza lived to the age of seventy-eight.

⁴ Navar, 6.

⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

⁶ Araiza, “Hay desinterés,” np.

Filed in May of 1976 on 35-millimeter celluloid, the feature-length film made its debut on September 1st, 1977.⁷ Unlike *Ayautla* and *Etnocidio*, *Cascabel* was marketed as a fiction film and was distributed across Mexico City, even receiving international attention. The film took the Ópera Prima and editing awards at the Ariels, Mexico's most prestigious film festival, as well as three Diosa de Plata prizes for best film, best direction, and best script in 1978. There is scant information about its initial distribution, and viewings across Mexico City and elsewhere, but in the wake of 1992—the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the first colonizers, helmed by Columbus—interest in film representations of Indigenous communities in the Americas suddenly became de jour. Re-emerging in the 1990s, the film was, like *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) offered a one out of four star rating in the *Uno Más Uno* “Guía cinematográfica” even though the review did not offer specific critiques besides noting that the film demonstrated Araiza's “propensión a un liberalismo pretendidamente polémico.”⁸ In 1999, *Cascabel* remastered as part of a joint project undertaken by Estudios Churubusco and the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, the Cineteca Nacional, Imcine, Fonca, and Kodak Mexicana. Together, this supergroup of producers remastered a total of twenty films, including *Canoa* (Cazals) and *Mexico insurgente* (Leduc). The project was done, purportedly, in acknowledgement of the public's interest in seeing the kinds of films made in the 1970s.⁹ And indeed, *Cascabel*, made appearances at film events in Mexico City every couple of years.¹⁰ The 1990s screenings—

⁷ Morales Martínez, np. See also Ramírez Hernández, np.

⁸ “Guía cinematográfica,” np.

⁹ Morales Martínez, np.

¹⁰ Shown in 1992, 1993, 1994, 1997, and 2000 at the Cineteca Nacional, and in 2002 at the Guadalajara film festival, the film made something of a comeback around the 500th anniversary of Columbus' first colonial excursion, which may or may not be coincidental. In 1999, following its remastering, the film was re-released, which explains the relative spike in news press *Cascabel* and Araiza both received in 1999.

showing the remastered version—took place in several locations dispersed rather evenly across Mexico City, including Cinemark Centro Cultural, Cinemark Tlahuac in (Itztapalapa), Cinépolis Azcapotzalco (in Azcapotzalco) and Lumiere Inguarán (in Colonia Bondonjito).

5.3 The Zona Lacandona

As Jan de Vos and Deborah Dorotinsky have pointed out, the Lacandon Jungle was not always referred to with this name, just as the Lacandon peoples—the Hach Winik, were not always referred to as the Lacandones. Both de Vos and Dorotinsky suggest that this moniker arose in the context of a publication created by the participant of a 1926 archeological expedition to the region.¹¹ The publication, illustrated with photos and titled *En los confines de la selva Lacandona. Exploraciones en el estado de Chiapas, mayo-agosto 1926*. Even though the expedition had as its objective the observation and study of pre-conquest architectural spaces, the publication itself dedicated many pages to describing their interactions with Lacandon people, displaying photographs of Lacandon subjects, and also depicting the clearings in the forest where their homes stood.

The idea that the jungle belonged to or was intrinsically tied to the Lacandon peoples was related to an abundance of scientific, anthropological, and architectural research conducted during the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century in the region. Likely because of the geographic proximity between the archeological sites and the perceived extreme and exotic Otherness of the Lacandon peoples, the Hak Winich repeatedly became the unanticipated subjects historical accounts of the jungle, of photographs, and eventually of studies conducted with the express purpose of learning more about them.

¹¹ Dorotinsky, *Viaje*, 90.

Until the Porfiriato, private property did not technically exist in the Lacandon Jungle. Though logging had been underway since the early 1800s,¹² the forest has always been inhabited by various Indigenous peoples, as architecture from pre-conquest times indicate. It is understood that the peoples inhabiting the jungle practiced agriculture, but that they managed to do so in a manner that would regenerate the nutrient makeup of the topsoil. As the twentieth century proceeded, U.S. based logging companies, following the lead of British and German ones, developed a presence in the Lacandon Jungle, one seeking to rapidly increase its landholdings and thus ability to log, well into the 1960s.¹³

In April of 2021, two hundred Lacandon families co-signed a letter addressed to current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in which they declared that the Procuradería Agraria working within Lacandon territory was attempting to wrest their lands away from them in order to divide the lands up for settlement by Tzeltal and Chol communities. The letter accuses agrarian *procurador* Luis Hernández Palacios of normalizing invasions happening in Lacandon territories.¹⁴ The missive adds “Somos el pueblo originario, las tierras nos pertenecen y la protección de estas selvas está establecida por ley.” This letter does not mark the beginning of an ongoing territory feud but rather one with its origins largely within the Echeverría presidency. Bernardo Chankin, vice commissioner of Lacanjá, declared in a phone interview with *El País* that furthermore,

La responsabilidad de la protección de la Selva Lacandona fue dada a nuestras familias hace varias décadas. Las otras de choles y Tzeltales llegaron después, pero nosotros somos los habitantes y dueños legítimos y no estamos a favor de repartir la

¹² Fuentes Aguilar, et al., 67.

¹³ *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁴ García, np.

tierra, sino de cuidarla como un todo. Si llegara a distribuirse la tierra, comenzarían la destrucción y estamos preocupados por el daño que sufrirá.¹⁵

The irony of this conflict is that during the 1970s, the federal government promoted the migration of Indigenous communities from the Altos de Chiapas—the location of San Cristóbal de las Casas, San Juan Chamula, and a massive number of haciendas with power and money-wielding oligarchs—into the Zona Lacandona.¹⁶ These communities were ones with no means of having their ancestral territories recognized and protected under Mexican law.¹⁷ At the same time, the federal and state governments created the Compañía Forestal de Lacandonia, S.A., and Triplay de Palenque, S.A., which according to one study reduced tree cover of the Lacandon Jungle by as much as thirty five percent between 1970 and 1982. Meanwhile, in 1972, Luis Echeverría Álvarez signed a provisional decree creating the Zona Lacandona. The first of its kind, this provisional decree granted the Lacandon people with authority over more than 600,000 hectares—2300 square miles—of the jungle’s surface. This decree proposed to ration and enable “aprovechamiento forestal” of the region, as well as the authority to “regular y controlar” the processes of immigration and colonization in the region, practices that would, in theory, help in avoiding the destruction of old growth in the jungle, particularly when that old growth was considered highly valuable as wood.¹⁸ The decree benefitted the formally named “Comunidad Lacandona” composed of sixty-six families. The Indigenous communities whose communities were the targets of this territorial regulation and control were, as we might have guessed from the 2021 incident, Tzeltal and Chol.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Fuentes Aguilar, et al., 71.

¹⁷ Vásquez et al., 246.

¹⁸ Fuentes Aguilar, et al., 71.

Meanwhile, petroleum deposits were discovered in the Marques de Comillas, located within this newly delineated territory, and in accordance with Mexican law treating as Mexican territory all mineral and petroleum deposits below the topsoil, PEMEX was able to begin searching for petroleum at Pico de Oro.¹⁹

The cartographic delineation of Indigenous territories briefly factors into *Cascabel*'s narrative, when a sequence of interviews offers a fixed frame shot of a map of linguistic territories of Indigenous languages within the bounds of Mexican territory. With the voice-over from one of the interviewees, a series of cuts allows the frame to focus on distinct sections of the map at a time. Notably, in contrast to Aguilar Gil's observations about the disregard of Mexican national and regional territories for Indigenous cultural, ethnic, and linguistic territories, the map largely indicates that linguistic territories fit within state borders, rather than transcending them.

The subsequent frame after the map shots is a close-up shot of people, their faces slightly angled towards each other and their gazes tracking to the left and right of the frame. A non-diegetic voice, recognizable as that of Sergio Jiménez, asks "¿Qué cosa es Mexico para ti?" to which the man, smiling, responds "O sea, no hay." The woman to his left smiles slightly. "No lo sabemos qué cosa." A jump cut presents another close-up of a young man, again angled slightly so that his gaze looks to the right of the frame, and the same non-diegetic voice asks, "¿Sabes tú que es México?" The young man responds "México, cosa no hay."

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 77.

Later in the film, the recurring interviewee whose voice is the voice-over for the fixed frame shots of maps declares that Agrarian Reform is in part a response to, and acknowledgement of, the concept of collective ownership of land as well as an antidote to latifundismo. The concept of collective land ownership, he explains, existed in the whole American continent before the conquest. A subsequent medium shot of a group of UNAM students from the Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Derecho and Economía standing outside their academic building, shares with Sergio Jiménez their understanding that the government functionaries who operate as go-betweens between landowners and heads of state, employing red tape tactics such as “tortuguismo” in order to keep Agrarian Reform laws from being observed and followed.

What is important to note in the contrasting perspectives between the interviews is the massive difference in the ways Lacandon communities and the UNAM students and professor perceive Mexico’s role in determining land rights and territorial designations. Indeed, for Lacandon people, the very concept of Mexico—as a nation-state, a set of laws, and a territory, is a myth. The message is clear: politicians, mestizo civilians with strong opinions, and even anthropologists working with the Instituto Nacional Indigenista intending to, as Alfonso Caso proposed, help Indigenous peoples feel Mexican, have assumed that a Mexican habitus extends to all parts of Mexican territory. This assumption, the interview sequence implies, is false. Indeed, even after the conditional ratification of the Zona Lacandona, the idea of a national Mexican territory and, with it, national space, is simply a teleology for which some like the Lacandon interviewees have no use.

5.4 Architecture and Landscape

A medium-long shot depicts Alfredo with his back to the camera, inspecting the fixed frame shot that is being prepared. To his right, the film frame is reduced by the presence of a wall that, as the camera pans out, reveals an archaeological site. The wall in question, now depicted within a long shot, is dissected by a doorway, which creates its own kind of cinematic framing for gray pyramids—the stones of which cut a contrast with the bright green grass below. Alfredo invites his cameraman, Miguel (Aarón Hernán) to look through the camera to see the shot, quipping sarcastically, “a este ‘grama, le ponemos música de mariachis, y se ganó Usted su Ariel.”²⁰ The sarcasm reveals Alfredo’s apparent understanding of what it is that his benefactors want, and what the powerful film board in charge of Ariel awards want. As was discussed in chapter one, since the early twentieth century, great political and intellectual interest was taken in archeological sites across Mexico by the likes of Manuel Gamio.

The archeological sites were not built by the Mexican government, nor were they even built by the Spanish crown, yet pre-conquest architecture—no matter in Bonampak, Chichén Itzá, Monte Alban, Uxmal, or in Teotihuacan, —had been re-presented to the Mexican public through photography and film as part of a Mexican landscape, and as a referent simultaneously for mestizaje and for the “indígena universal.”²¹ Where pyramids—alternated with deserts sprinkled with maguey plants—had been reproduced ad nauseum until they became the quintessential Mexican landscape—metonyms for Mexican territory—

²⁰ And of course, Araiza did indeed win his Ariel, though he notably did not choose mariachi music anywhere in the soundtrack.

²¹ Kummels, 400.

mariachi had been marketed as the quintessential Mexican soundscape. Taken together, pyramids and mariachi, architecture, and sound, had been made to signify Mexico in the most a-historical, homogenizing, and cunning manner possible.

The archeological site filming continues with a cut to a shot of Alfredo with the diegetic sound of film celluloid moving through the camera, suggesting that Miguel and Alfredo have begun to shoot their scene. A cut to a close-up shot reveals the face of a Lacandón man, framed by the screen but also by the doorway. His face is partially cast in shadow by the building, and his facial profile, reminiscent of anthropometric photographs taken by Désiré Charnay at the turn of the nineteenth century and even of photos taken of Lacandón communities in the Selva Lacandona during the 1940's.

The profile of the man's face aligns almost perfectly with the ridge of the pyramid acting as the backdrop for this deep shot. The shot is executed such that it is both a deep shot and an extreme close up with impressive levels of focus at both shallow and extreme depth. The extreme close up of the man's face naturally invites close observation, as the shading of his face de-emphasizes his face with respect to the well-lit buildings and hills in the deep background of the shot. Even as the shot is a portrait of the man, the framing of the shot, the man's face composes only part of the right half of the frame, and as such, the punctum is not the man's face. Instead, the punctum is the background, and taken as a whole, the film frame becomes a landscape shot, and the man's face having become the architecture itself.



Figure 5-2. Top: *Que Viva México!* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1931). Bottom: *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976).

The diegetic sound of the next scene precedes the cut, with the utterance, “Esto sí, sesto sí es cine, mira qué belleza, qué composición, ¿eh? ¡Qué ruinas, qué paisajes!” A match cut takes us to an entirely different space in which various licenciados, with their backs to the camera, face a movie screen on which the previous sequence is being projected. Just as the licenciados have been presented with this well-received sequence, which so neatly satisfies

their habitus as light-skinned government functionaries living seemingly a world away from Palenque, so too are the spectators of *Cascabel*. Unlike the functionaries, spectators are, in theory, armed with the cynicism of knowing that this shot is not meant for us, but rather for a spectatorship that craves affirmation of its ideas about what Mexico looks like, what Indigenous peoples—specifically Hach Winik—look like, and the places and ways in which they live.

As fix framed shot, spectators might easily consider similarities between this cinematography and the decades of ethnographic photography taken of Lacandon subjects, with its frequent headshots and emphasis on subjects' faces, hair, and clothes, with the subject's gaze directed not at the camera but out of the field. Moreover, the punctum of the shot, given the chiaroscuro filming technique and the focus of this deep shot, is the architecture rather than the man himself since his face is heavily shadowed. This shot's composition and scale is also notably quite similar to shots from Eisenstein's *Que Viva México*, in which unnamed non actors posed for fixed frame shots, staged near the camera for a deep shot in which their faces would appear in profile, scaled up, while pre-conquest architecture—the real punctum of the deep-focus shot—loomed in the background. In particular, the shot of a woman's face foregrounding a geometrically, diagonal shot of Chichén Itzá is echoed in Alfredo/Rosalío Solano's shot, in which the Palenque steps descend diagonally across the frame, with the man's face appearing as a close-up in the right portion of the frame.

What role, if any, might precedent and the legacy of architecture—especially archeological sites—have in preventing spectators from seeing the absurdity of filming Lacandon men at the Palenque archeological site? In fact, there is great precedent for

incorporating pre-conquest architecture into cinema in Mexico, and as we learned in chapter one, Manuel Gamio inspired early 20th century filmmakers in Mexico with his short films depicting the cleaning and restoration of pre-conquest architecture, particularly in Teotihuacan and Chichén Itzá. This is the shooting location for an imaginative sequence in *Zítari* (1931, Miguel Contreras Torres), in which a medium long shot depicts Zítari conducting a ceremony atop the pyramid of the Plumed Serpent as the carved head of Tlaloc gazes back into the camera. Sergei Eisenstein also famously employed pre-conquest architecture in *Que Viva Mexico* (1931), staging elaborate fixed and panning shots upon the steps of Teotihuacan and Chichén Itzá.²² Chichén Itzá would be the site for sequences in films like *La noche de los mayas* (1939), *Chilam Balam* (1955), and Teotihuacán the site for

²² For a far more exhaustive list of films that have incorporated pre-conquest architecture into their mise-en-scène, see Vela, 86-90.



Figure 5-3. Still. Xanath is chased on the steps of El Tajín. *Raíces* (Benito Alazraki, 1954). Image 13. Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico.

romps like *Santo y el tesoro de Moctezuma* (1966), *Tarzan y las sirenas* (1948), and *Las luchadoras contra la momia* (1964).

On the other hand, since pre-conquest architecture was often treated as an interchangeable referent for a universal idea of pre-conquest ritual sites, films like *La otra conquista* (1995) were set in Tenochtitlan but were filmed at the archeological site of Xochicalco, Morelos—a clear example of the filmmakers’ suppositions about spectator inabilities or disinterest in distinctions between different periods of pre-conquest architecture. Pre-conquest archeology, and archeology as a profession, factored into films like *No hay cruces en el mar* (1967), a fiction about archeologists at Tajín and filmed there. Likewise, the camera in “La Potranca” in *Raíces* darts back and forth and through Tajín in a montage in which young Xanath (Alicia del Lago) is pursued by a sexual predator—a much older

archeologist. Over the years, innumerable films were made in Mexico either filming at archeological sites or creating a set meant to evoke for audiences the idea of pre-conquest architecture. Perhaps one of the most compelling examples of architecture for a set is that used for the film *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (Alfredo Salazar, 1976). The mise-en-scène for the scenes was none other than the Museo de Anahuacalli, the museum on the outskirts of Mexico City which was designed by Diego Rivera himself and houses much of his work. Fewer films have been shot at Palenque and Yaxchilán. In fact, among the interviews which are part of the film's montage, there is a segment featuring archeologist Roberto García Moll as himself: at the time of the film's making, he was the lead researcher on a research project in Yaxchilán.²³

Palenque, for its part, is considered by archeologists to be a classical Maya ritual site. It rose to prominence in the seventh century and has various references to Lord Shield Pacal, whose tomb is actually located inside the Temple of Inscriptions. The architecture is considered innovative, given its employment of a sloped roof and lattice roof comb to reduce the overall weight of the roof. Also notable, one particular structure called the Palace includes what archeologists recognize as an astronomical observatory.²⁴ These features of architectural excellence are incorporated, neither visually nor narratively, into Alfredo's documentary. To do so would mean applying specific historical significance to the Palenque architecture, rather than utilizing them as landscapes for the Mexican political imaginary.

²³ Vela, 43.

²⁴ Gasco, 16.



Figure 5-4. Aerial Shot of the Zona Lacandona. *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976).

5.5 Aerial Photography and the God’s Eye Landscape

This imaginary is further polemicized in the forty-five seconds of aerial cinematography of the Lacandon forest which comes towards the halfway point in the film. The montage is evocative of an ethnographic documentary insofar as we are presented with a sequence of aerial shots of the Lacandon forest, while a voice over (Jorge Zúñiga), states that politicians bring their words, anthropologists their sound recorders and filmmakers their cameras, and as the narrator speaks of the arrival of chicleros, of the effect of measles on the Lacandon community, a sequence of jump cuts offer aerial shot after aerial shot of the forest, with special emphasis paid to the turquoise-blue rivers which cut their way through green foliage. A sudden jump cut transports us back to Mexico City—to a screening room in which Gomez Rul sits with his back to the camera, a projector screen nearly filling the frame. “Esto si esta bonito,” Gómez Rul declares. “Esto si le va a gustar a Gorostiza”. The aerial shots, colorful

and full of movement provided by the fast-moving airplane and rivers, are indeed breathtaking. The hypnotic landscape, as seen from almost one thousand feet above and with the hypnotic sounds of the propeller motor audible, underscore the absurdity of cartographic boundaries or borders created by the Mexican government, local and federal in such a place as this. As established over the previous chapters, the use of maps to mark, organize and reign over space in New Spain and later in Mexico was an ideological one. Cosgrove's observation reminds us that aerial shots, too, have the symbolic capacity to create what a spectator may interpret as the ecological and topographical identity of a region or territory. Even as aerial shots may document actual space, that space, especially in the case of the Zona Lacandona, has already been given a legal, economic, and social treatment to convert it into a territory. Speaking to aerial photography's capacity to afford a gods-eye view, Denis Cosgrove suggests that,

What aerial photography does best perhaps, and what it shares with the map, is to establish a context for individual features on the ground, to place them in relationship to one another and to a broader topography, revealing patterns to the eye, or, we might say, to create geographies. Like maps, such patterns can be produced and viewed with an eye to scientific objectivity, accurately representing and documenting actual space, or they can be made and read artistically as creating and revealing formal compositions and patterns of light, colour and morphology. (*Photography and Fight*, 9)

Like maps of Chiapas and of the jungle, the gods-eye views afforded by Solano/Miguel offer spectators a totalizing perspective of the jungle, inviting it to be perceived as a vast, remote, and "virgin" terrain ripe for industrialization, tourism, and the application of Mexican policy.

For government functionary Gorostiza (Mario Cid), the importance of the aerial sequence lies not only in representation of actual space but also in what that space signifies: the beauty and exoticism of Mexican territory, the reach of Mexican legal authority, and the

promise of commerce, be it through eco-tourism, logging, or oil drilling. This gaze, a particular way of seeing space, is encapsulated in visual production of the state, but also in that of tourists, or those adjacent to the state's educational and policymaking apparatuses, like Alfredo and Miguel. We might call the propagandistic film and its aerial photography an extension of the neocolonial gaze. Commenting on the way a colonial gaze influences what is seen and what is of interest to a European spectator surveying a colonized territory, Mary Louise Pratt writes.

The European improving eye produces subsistence habitats as “empty” landscapes, meaningful only in terms of a capitalist future and of their potential for producing a marketable surplus. From the point of view of their inhabitants, of course, these same spaces are lived as intensely humanized, saturated with local history and meaning, where plants, creatures, and geographical formations have names, uses symbolic functions, histories, places in indigenous knowledge formations. (61)

It is no wonder that Gomez Rul anticipates Gorostiza's pleasure in the bucolic traveling shots of aerial photography Alfredo has sent back to Mexico City, precisely because the aerial shots are devoid of human subjects, and give the impression that the land is, indeed empty. This erasure, as Pratt well explains, of both the Lacandon peoples and the other Maya peoples living in the jungle, ensures that the jungle may be treated as a land outside (contemporary) human territory. Even the shots of Palenque and Yaxchilán, part of Araiza's montage as much as Alfredo's, are mostly devoid of humans and are represented ornamentally—the two-thousand-year-old spiritual houses, like the dense canopy and turquoise rivers, are almost entirely divorced within the film frame from their history, their ecosystems, their names in contemporary Maya languages, and event their identification as part of a cultural legacy which transcends national territories and borders.

The aerial shots of dense, yet seemingly empty jungle give way to another sequence which is received less than enthusiastically by Gomez Rul: these are aerial shots of controlled burns. In stark contrast to the bright blues and greens of the previous aerial shots, the following sequence of travelling aerial shots offer a bird's eye which clearly indicates both slashing and burning activity and thus human presence. The use of aerial shots to depict the burning jungle do not only offer a direct foil to the previous shots of seemingly pristine tree cover and rivers—they also nod to a tradition emergent in the 1970s of using aerial shots and aerial perspectives for films with an environmentalist theme. Indeed, since the 1970s, aerial perspectives have become a favored means for conveying environmental concerns and have in fact been used as a means of data collection for ecologists and environmental monitoring.²⁵ Rosalío Solano's early adoption of the aerial conveys a sensibility to emerging visual codes tied to environmentalist cinematography, and also helps aesthetically locate *Cascabel* as a work of art and the Zona Lacandona as an ecological territory within an imminent discussion unfolding within cinema and eventually politics about environmental custodianship. Invariably, the sequence of aerial shots, contrasting luscious green and smoldering canopy conveys the destruction of old forest growth on a scale different from that captured from a subjective shot, taken from the eye level of a cinematographer standing in a forest, inviting spectators to sense the scale of that forest and the scale of its destruction. However, compelling as the shots are, they also incriminate the Maya societies engaging in these practices and acquit by omission any international corporations or government policies which have impulse the displacement of Indigenous communities, encouraged large-scale

²⁵ Cosgrove, *Photography and Flight*, 87.

mechanized logging, and replaced regrowth-oriented agriculture with topsoil-destroying agricultural practice.

While the shots might be understood as a critique of the Maya jungle-dwellers who conduct slash-and-burn, they might also be described as a disruption of the bucolic aerial shots so friendly to the Mexican politician's eye. Indeed, the aerial shots of burning forest undermine the colonial, God's eye gaze over pristine jungle, since the smoke literally obfuscates their view, limits the spectator's ability to gaze upon the jungle in its totality, while muting the lush jewel tones of the landscape. As the aerial shot descends and then cuts to another shot, this time a crane shot, of burning or burned swaths of jungle, a voice-over cuts in. The voice over for this sequence is actually not one but multiple voices, which are eventually paired with faces revealed in various interviews which are intermittently edited into the montage. Each interviewee explains how heads of households burn up to twenty hectares for agricultural purposes because the jungle's soil is not arable. This ethnographic film technique—the voice over—offers some impression of truth value: the frame tells us what to see and the voice-over tells us how to see it. Indeed, the interviewees mostly overlook the fact of corporate logging in the forest, mentioning instead the issue of slash and burn agriculture. Though the two are not conducted for the same reasons nor do they have equal impact on the jungle, the montage does not pause to make this distinction.

Cutting away from the aerial shots of burning trees, the camera focuses on a prim-looking interviewee dressed in a suit and tie, who laments the slash and burn agricultural practice because, he laments, the wood is highly valuable, economically, and ecologically. Another interviewee points out that a Caoba tree, one of the species common to the Selva Lacandona, takes roughly four hundred years to reach maturity. Although interviewees do not specify

who is responsible for the slashing and burning, the protagonists of these activities are implied as in need of “orientation” from the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, suggesting that Indigenous communities are the source of this so-called problem. Like the aerial shots which offer a bigger picture of the space without offering a bigger picture of the territory which has shaped it, there is no mention of the foreign logging companies or PEMEX activities ongoing and far more devastating to the forest. The root causes of slash and burn agriculture and the knowledge that it may or may not be conducted sustainably is not discussed, nor are the reasons why farmers might not sell wood and burn it instead. Reasons are multiple and are reminiscent of the reasons why Ja Nguifi in Ayautla during the 1970s went to extremes to build a highway connecting them to Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca. Firstly, harvesting wood demands a certain level of infrastructure: roads, access to machinery like chainsaws, to goods like gasoline, and to vehicles. Moreover, as with the residents of Ayautla, a lack of familiarity with the Spanish language and the need to travel far distances to sell goods can easily result in the sale of coffee or wood at less-than-market prices.

The aerial landscapes of the Zona Lacandona, at once Araiza’s own artistry and the fictional work of Alfredo, offer spectators two ways of perceiving the jungle which are curated through the film frame and the soundtrack: on the one hand, the aerial shots offer a deceptively neat view of the jungle, one which erases human presence, history, and environmental diversity, to render the jungle a blank space available for consumption either as a source of primary goods or as a source of adventure and tourism for outsiders. On the other hand, the aerial shots of burning trees aim to inspire environmental concern for the forest, but these shots also minimize humans, and their accompanying voice-overs emphasize the antagonistic role of humans—specifically Maya Indigenous communities—in destroying

the forest, while sidestepping the matter of displacement and colonial consumption and agricultural practices which arguably shaped the reality of slash and burn practice.

5.5.1 Ethnographic Film in Chiapas and the Selva Lacandona

Ethnographic film postdates ethnographic photography, but as I have attempted to demonstrate, the former—particularly within Mexican territory and with respect to the representation of Maya peoples in Chiapas—has emerged in dialogue with the latter. The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia of Mexico published a survey of a collection of films—including *Cascabel*—under the title *Cine antropológico mexicano*. While partially theatrical, the film does include a considerable amount of ethnographic photography, as discussed previously, which approaches its Lacandon subjects—whether intentionally or not—with similar composition and framing, as well as attention to its subjects' bodies and their lived spaces or material objects in a way which underscores their exotic Otherness.

One essential element of ethnographic image but particularly of the moving image was its relationship to the Mexican state throughout the twentieth century. Of course, *Cascabel* was a sponsor of the state's CONACINE and in accordance with the Ley Industrial de Cinematografía, the xx would have had to review the film before it could be released. Other films and filmmaking projects, however, had an even more direct relationship with both the Mexican state and with ethnographic image production. In particular, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista used ethnographic film to promote its agenda and to present Indigenous communities in a way which coalesced with cultural indigenismo.²⁶ Some of the early films created in this context were the shorts *Nuevos horizontes* (José Arenas, 1956) and *Todos*

²⁶ Arroyo Quiroz, 211.

somos Mexicanos (José Arenas, 1958), filmed and produced by the Centro Coordinador Indigenista in Chiapas and in Papaloapan, respectively. In each film, visual themes include the poverty and marginality of Mazatec, Chinantec, Tzotzil and Tzeltal Indigenous communities with which the CCI work, and the positive material social change for these communities facilitated by the CCI. The INI would even produce a film on the Hach Winik, titled *Hach Winik, Los dueños de la selva* (Juan Carlos Colín, 1984), a film which paired voice overs from Hach Winik participants whose voice overs tell their people's creation myth with medium close ups of young children in an outdoor classroom. The film described itself as unfiltered window into a community preserving "la magia de los pueblos mayas, a pesar del cambio cultural provocado por la modernidad."

While *Cascabel's* fictional plot never explicitly references the Instituto Nacional Indigenista nor its films, the INI and its ethnographic filmmaking have a subtle but meaningful appearance in the plot. This particular sequence in which INI film is referenced is easily overlooked, but with careful consideration the scene is revelatory. The sequence follows the one which takes place in Gómez Rul's building, in which Alfredo, Lugo and Manuel view the slideshow, they all meet Chankin, and Alfredo expresses frustration about the censorship of the original screenplay. It is out of this space, in which ethnographic images, "artifacts," stereotypes and Official Indigenista policy are circulated from which Alfredo emerges, moving then into the next sequence, introduced with an establishing shot which finds Alfredo in a room, with an unidentified man standing close by, examining several documents. To Alfredo's left, in the background of the frame, are shelves filled with rolls of film and folders, giving the impression that he is standing in an archive. Sergio stares intently at a contraption which appears to be a video camera, but a reverse shot reveals that

the device is in fact a video player. This footage is incorporated into *Cascabel's* montage by containing the small celluloid-film screen within the film frame, which begins and ends with a crane shot over the Mexican congress. The diegetic sound, part of *Cascabel's* soundtrack, is not reproduced as a recording being re-recorded within the archival space in which Alfredo watches the documentary but as the original sound recording, as if we were in the chamber listening to the speech. The speaker, unidentifiable on the tiny screen within the frame, declares the Instituto Nacional Indigenista's commitment to the "preservación de culturas y formas de organización social...para que se engranen en la sociedad nacional." This sequence is long enough that we, the spectators, may view the documentary along with Alfredo, who takes notes as the diegetic sound continues and the montage circulates through a montage of headshots, deep shots of airplanes landing in lush green fields, and deep shots of homes and people standing in front of them wearing long, white tunics.

This sequence, particularly the screened documentary within the film which depicts the plane landing to a greeting committee of several people, either evokes or in fact depicts the interior of the former archives of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista. Whatever the space, however, it is a location in which Alfredo may conduct research on how prior filmmakers—working under the supervision of the Mexican government, have made films both ethnographic and favorable to Official Indigenista politics. The film itself, apparent found footage inserted into *Cascabel's* montage so that spectators may watch clips as if watching the documentary themselves, is self-evident in its integrationist discourse and its exoticizing tropes of Indigenous subjects. The repetition of establishing shots or wide-angle shots which depict Lacandon subjects amongst jungle foliage or receiving a biplane underscore the ethnographic visual economy which equates the Lacandon with the jungle and underscores

the idea that they are geographically, socially, and even chronologically isolated from Mexican territory and its industrial modernity. Including clips of archived, ethnographic film within *Cascabel* invites *Cascabel*'s spectators to consider how INI footage influences the



Figure 5-5. Medium Close-Up. *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976).

fictional documentary and likewise how it influences the perception—and expectations—of *Cascabel*'s spectators. That is, just as Alfredo primes himself to employ particular kinds of shots, framing, mise-en-scène and narrative which correspond to indigenista filmmaking, so too, *Cascabel*'s spectators are primed by both the edited footage and the wide body of ethnographic cinema and photography which are the intertexts for *Cascabel*'s visual economy and discourse.

5.6 Ethnographic Photography in the Lacandon Jungle

Ethnographic photography and film are incorporated into *Cascabel* through meta-media. A combination of slideshows, celluloid watched on a small television, a video camera viewfinder, and projected films incorporate representations of Lacandon community members—presented as themselves—into the montage. The abundance of headshots,

documentary clips from Instituto Nacional Indigenista archives, and other multimedia archives using similar representational techniques is reminiscent of media's checkered and complicated history—with Indigenous peoples and particularly with Lacandon Indigenous peoples.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the organization of ethnographic and anthropometric headshots and profile shots of Indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica, the Andes, and across the Global South into gridlike arrangements on a page permitted the images of Indigenous photographic subjects to be scrutinized and compared with greater ease. This, in turn, was used by observers to look for what they believed were the markers of bodily and facial difference in racialized Indigenous peoples. The photograph, then was a rectangular or square space in which the racialized Indigenous person could be codified. This practice and the broader practice of taking ethnographic photography, as Alfredo observes while watching the slideshow, was conducted at high frequency on Hach Winik subjects during the late 19th and early to mid-twentieth century.

When speaking of ethnographic photography and film, I wish to briefly underscore the aims, practices, and consumption practices of these visual media. I argue that, when put to the service of European and Mexican anthropologists or even employees of the Mexican state, ethnographic photography and film create a finite, perceptible and manipulable visual space within either the image or the screen, which may be circulated, decontextualized, and re-contextualized. Ethnographic photography and film, frequently, claim to fundamental truth which may be weaponized in the interest of a social order particularly when it pertains to racialized, colonized subjects. Ethnography, Fatimah Rony explains, refers to the actual process of field research or the final product of cultural anthropology, and that ethnographic

cinema—direct inheritor of anthropological photography—has historically served as an educational device which instructs the spectator how to “read bodies.” Ethnography is a process conducted upon the colonized body, but it is also a process of equating the body with a particular setting, environment or set of activities. Rony’s principal grievances with ethnographic visual media is that they invite the spectator’s “taxonomic imagination,” while also denying the voice, individuality, and the history of their subjects.²⁷

Ethnographic photography, film, and landscape are intimately bound up with each other and this relationship is particularly evident in the ethnographic lithographs, writing, photography, and film created in the context of the Selva Lacandona. Deborah Dorotinsky has conducted the most thorough study to date of the genealogy of the photographic image of the Lacandon peoples—the obsession of anthropologists and tourists for over a century. The European and later Mexican fascination with the Hak Winich—as opposed to other Maya peoples in the Jungle—is invariably related to the perceived aesthetic exoticism of their bodies, social spaces, and territories: their white tunics, hairstyles, the location of their homes in the dense jungle. The perceived continuum between their territory—the density of the jungle and proximity to the archeological sites--as well as the way sequential generations of explorers and ethnologists read the Hak Winich’s bodies within an environmental and

²⁷ Rony, 71.

architectural context let them to erroneously conclude that the Hak Winich were the last “true” Maya.²⁸



Figure 5-6. Photograph of Hak Winich Man Flanked by Two Wives. Désiré Charnay, 1882. Mediateca INAH.

²⁸ As Deborah Dorotinsky points out, they were referred to as “estos últimos descendientes de la gloria maya” in the journal article, “Una periodista en exótico romance con un lacandón” in *Mañana*, 44, July 1, 1944.

The particular interest in Hach Winich and the aesthetics of their lives and the spaces they inhabit dates back to the nineteenth century, and it was toward the end of this century that it occurred to explorers to bring cameras with them to visually document what they saw. The consequence of this is a chronology of photographic images of Lacandon communities which begins in 1882 with the 1882 images taken by Désiré Charnay during his search for the archeological site Yaxchilán (Figure 5-6). The next person to bring a camera to the jungle and photograph Lacandon subjects was Teobert Maler, who visited between 1898 and 1900.²⁹ The first ethnographic study conducted of the Lacandon community followed by the between 1902 and 1905 and was conducted by Alfred Tozzer, a graduate student from the United States.³⁰ Then, in 1926, a Mexican archeological expedition, led by Enrique Juan Palacios, travelled into the jungle with a camera, and the result was a publication by the Secretaría de Educación Pública and the Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, *En los confines de la selva lacandona. Exploraciones en el estado de Chiapas, 1926*. In the 1930s, French ethnographer Jacques Soustelle would document what he perceived as daily activities of Lacandon peoples and their domestic spaces.³¹ In 1943, Swiss anthropologists Frans Blom and Gertrude Duby, who makes an appearance in *Cascabel*, undertook what Blom described as the first official expedition to the Lacandon region—a trip funded by the governor of Chiapas at the time and meant to introduce improvements to Lacandon homes and to teach hygiene habits. The publication which emerged from this trip, however, was *Los lacandones, su pasado y su presente*, released in 1944 by the SEP. In 1944, the journal *Mañana* published

²⁹ See Dorotinsky, *Viaje*, 76-77.

³⁰ See Tozzer, 1907.

³¹ The volume containing Soustelle's photographs and observations would first be published in France in 1936, and then republished in Spanish in 1971 in Mexico. See Soustelle, 1971.

a serialized report written and photographed by Ricardo López Toraya y Antonio Rodríguez, who led an exploration expedition in the jungle without a particular objective other than having adventures in the jungle and documenting them for readers back in Mexico City



Figure 5-7. Photograph. “Llegada a El Cedro, expedición.” 1949. Bonampak, Chiapas. Manuel Álvarez Bravo. Mediateca INAH.

In her study of the relationship between photography, visual cultures, Mexican national politics, and the Selva Lacandona, Deborah Dorotinsky Alperstein explains how in the 1940s, the Mexican government, aligned with the press, crafted a master narrative about

the Lacandon Forest which it presented to the public (Figure 5-7).³² Explains Dorotinsky Alperstein, “los imaginarios indigenistas fotográficos y a veces gráficos recibieron una difusión muy importante por parte de los medios impresos de divulgación e informaron a la población—a la de la clase media sobre todo—, con lo que se consolidaron diferentes formas de mirar, entender y concebir a los mundos indígenas” (*Viaje*, 13). I argue that the meta-filmic visual economies of the photographs and documentary within *Cascabel*—the photographs in the slideshow, the film frames, the photographs in the banquet sequence, the sequences in which Alfredo and Manuel are greeted upon deplaning, and even the aerial cinematography—are legacies of this project and that these materials are the extra-diegetic intertexts of the film’s visual economy.

The academic and journalistic obsession with the Hach Winik and with photographing them helped construct a relatively broad visual economy—accessible to people in Mexico City and abroad—of the Hach Winik and the jungle in which they make their homes. Earlier photos by Tozzer, Maler and Charnay—medium long shots which depict families in such a way that corn and trees would foreground the image and homes, dense trees, vines, or rivers would constitute the background, conveying the perceived material life and lived-in spaces of the Hach Winik. Decades later, Enrique Juan Palacios would take more photography, Manuel Álvarez Bravo—whose suggestive landscapes I discussed in Chapter One—and Gertrude Duby. In their photography, travelers and Hach Winik pose shoulder to shoulder as if the travelers and photographers are attempting to convey the

³² Dorotinsky Alperstein highlights the *Mañana* news reports of 1944, which offered original photographs, texts, and maps, were taken happened in 1944 with funding from President Manuel Ávila Camacho, the Chancellor of the UNAM, and the governor of Chiapas. Dorotinsky Alperstein, *Viaje*, 24.

fraternal relationship between mestizo and European travelers and their Hach Winik hosts. Yet the side-by-side poses are orchestrated by the travelers—“explorers” as many dub themselves—in a manner that visually reinforces the verticality of the relations between these travelers and the Lacandon peoples whose photographs they will circulate amongst Mexico City middle classes as novelties. The way the tall, safari-ready man in Manuel Álvarez Bravo’s photo pulls the Hach Winik man towards him at an angle while facing the camera directly suggests the traveler’s physical, economic, and politically domineering relations with the Lacandon people with whom they interact.

Also striking are the ways side-by-side poses offer visual index of perceived differences, inviting the spectator to compare the clothing of the white and mestizo subjects with the tunics of the Hach Winik, not to mention a comparison of hairstyle and even body posture. Collectively, these photos both invited the spectator to develop an understanding of the Hach Winik as part of the jungle and as an extension of it: exotic, remote, inscrutable, and wild. Moreover, the photographic medium served a vital role as a space, bounded on four sides, in which a visual economy of the forest and of the Hach Winik people could be consolidated. In this way, the photographic image became a space in which a global discourse on the perceived racial otherness of the Hach Winik could be articulated to evince the idea that they were long-lost inheritors—and living artifacts—of the ancient Maya peoples of Palenque and Yaxchilán. Similarly, these photographs often carefully referenced the jungle setting when depicting the Hach Winik, so that the perceived relationship between the forest and the Hach Winik could be articulated to evince the idea that the Hach Winik were somehow uniquely linked to the forest in the ways the Chol, Tojolabal, or Ch’orti’ Maya peoples were not.

The legacy of photography in what became known as the Selva Lacandona, and in relation to the Hach Winik in particular, is called up in the stills that appear in different sequences throughout *Cascabel*. First, early twentieth century photography is evoked in the projector slides through which cinematographer Miguel presents to Alfredo and screenwriter Lugo in the offices of producer Gómez Rul. The diegetic narrative for the sequence is as follows: Alfredo is brought into the office and is shown a slideshow of photographs of various Lacandon elders and leaders. It is within the comfortable, upscale, and darkened space of this media functionary's office that the photos are shared as a sort of educational tool, meant to teach Alfredo about the Lacandon people with whom he will interact, but also to instruct him on depth of field, scale, and the visual emphasis on the exotic Otherness of Hach Winik hair and faces.

The camera alternates between a reverse shot of the three men viewing the slideshow of photographs taken of Lacandon community members and a subjective shot taken from above the projector so that the camera is perfectly in line with the projection screen. The same mise-en-scène and framing is recycled, each time displaying a different photograph. As such, the highlighted feature—the punctum—within the frame is not the protagonists (Manuel in the foreground and Alfredo in the background) but the photographs themselves. *Cascabel's* spectators, offered a subjective shot of the slideshow, are themselves interpolated as spectators. One of the first images we see is reminiscent of several images, publicized decades earlier, in *Mañana*. The photograph in *Cascabel* depicts Chankin in a medium close-up shot, so that his sitting figure fills the frame vertically and takes up almost half the horizontal space. Flanking him are three young girls. The image evokes a much older one, taken by Désiré Charnay in the 1880s. In this older photograph, a man sits, hands also on

knees. He, like Chankin, is angled slightly toward the left edge of the frame. Flanking him on his left and right sides are his two wives.

This photograph projected in Gómez Rul's office offers a strikingly similar composition to that of Charnay, but it also evokes another photo: a 1941 publication in *American Weekly*, "Last of the Mysterious Mayans" features a spread combining sketches of preconquest Maya frescoes and glyphs with photographs of Chichén Itzá and the photograph of a man with a facial deformity and a small child standing beside him. The description reads "Mateo—and his 5-year-Old Wife...A Lacandone, When He Needs a Wife, Can Only Take Certain Females, and It So Happened That at the Time These Tabus Permitted Mateo Only to Take This Child, Which He Did." The article continues by describing how Hach Winik have "mysterious and complicated tabus...These tabus explain the strange marital combinations of the Lacandones" (in Dorotinsky, 107). The article, and the photo of Mateo with his purported five-year-old wife, circulated in the United States, but also in the United Kingdom where it was printed, and in Mexico. The image of a man whose face had apparently been burned in a fire as a child and who had apparently taken a five-year old wife was placed at the center of this newsprint report and was intended to be at once titillating and instructive. Considering the obvious shock-value of this publication and its circulation, it is not difficult to imagine that the image would have reached a global audience who would not have likely forgotten Mateo's noseless face or the avoidant gaze of the small girl, much less the story of their purported marriage. The image of Chankin with three little girls, projected into Gomez Rul's office, evokes the older image. It is not improbable that such an image could evoke the 1941 publication for spectators who had seen it three decades before. There is no text nor description offered by Manuel when he projects the photo, other than pointing out that the

man is called Chankin, so Alfredo is left to read Chankin's body for himself. Manuel is not a trained anthropologist, but his photography cannot be parsed out from the corpus of ethnographic photography generated by travelers in the Selva Lacandona. The projection decontextualizes Chankin from his home, history and from Hach Winik territory, inviting his spectators to read him as simply an example of Lacandon otherness, whether through his dress, his hair, or the sexualizing fantasy that the three little girls might not be daughters or granddaughters, but wives.

While *Cascabel* does not directly reference the photographic projects of Charnay, Palacios, or Gertrude Duby, the projected photographic images presented in *Cascabel* could easily have been taken by anthropologists Duby or Frans Blom or could have been taken by an anthropologist working with *Cascabel's* film crew, as they retain the ethnographic visual organization and instructive function of preceding photography collections. As if to confront the role of ethnographic photography in consolidating the image of the Hach Winik in the national and global imaginary, it is in the very same sequences in which the slideshow is being screened that Chankin is ushered into the office and introduced to the group. Gómez Rul, speaking off to one side with the professor who has brought Chankin into the office, asks if Chankin really is Lacandon, suggesting that Hach Winik identity in the producer's imaginary is equivalent to long hair and tunics. Chankin's aviator sunglasses, trendy haircut in lieu of long hair, watch, and blazer in place of a tunic do not fit within the Lacandon archetype, consolidated through photographic imagery. Of course, the irony is that Chankin is, in fact, played by a non-Indigenous actor and is imitating what is supposed to be a Lacandon-speaker's accent in Spanish, troubling or poking fun at another one of the

components of the national or international imaginary in which native Indigenous language speakers all speak a broken, comical Spanish.

Another series of photographs appears at the end of the film: during the closing sequence of the film, a crane shot depicts a reception after the release of the propagandistic documentary, finished not by Alfredo but by the original screenwriter who takes over the project after Alfredo quits. Light skinned attendees in business-casual elegance stand around a neatly set dining table with flower arrangements, and on the walls, hanging over the attendees, are four black and white photos, blown up to be over a meter in width and height. Three are headshots of Lacandon subjects, two girls and one man, and the fourth, at the bottom of the reception hall, is a wide angled group photo of about twenty Lacandon community members: children, men, and women (Figure 5-8).

Unlike the photographs from the slideshow at the start of the film, these images are rendered in black and white. The three shots in the center and left portions of the frame are close-ups and the scale of the image is such that background or setting is indiscernible. Setting is sacrificed for the ability to offer a headshot, which captures the facial features and expressions of the photographer subjects quite clearly. The photographs, located in the top half of the frame and foregrounded by lights, groups of guest, and colorful flower arrangements, are visually organized so that they are not part of the scene and the social gathering in progress, but above it. Recalling the earlier sequence in the film in which Alfredo, the film crew and a few other men sit around a table in San Cristóbal de las Casas while Chankin stands apart, the photographs in this final sequence reinforce the epistemology of Hach Winik as remote, exotic, and external to Mexican politics and social space, as well as physical space. In the same ways Fatimah Rony describes ethnographic film, it might be

said that ethnographic photography depicting Lacandon peoples in the popular Mexican imagination is bound up with the idea that the image conveys some measurable sense of racial essence. That is, ethnographic photography is a space in which the idea of race is iterated over and over again to non-Lacandon spectators.



Figure 5-8. Deep Shot. Reception Scene. *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976).

Like film, this photography conveys the exotic, racial otherness within a frame, or as Rony suggests, “as people who only too recently were categorized by science as Savage and Primitive, of an earlier evolutionary stage in the overall history of humankind” (7). Though it is unclear whether Rosalío Solano shot the images or whether they were externally sourced for inclusion in the *mise-en-scène*, these photographs, too, offer *Cascabel’s* spectators the same decontextualized images of mostly nameless, interchangeable images of a racialized Other. The photographs displayed within the film frame make for interesting points of comparison for another set of photographs: the film stills for *Cascabel*, which are never included in the film’s montage but create a sort of intertext for them. The stills, like the

Archeology, Landscapes, and Ethnographic Image in *Cascabel*



Figure 5-9. Top: Establishing Shot. Bottom: Still. *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976). Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico.

diegetic photographs projected within the offices of Gomez Rul and like the photograph

hanging in the reception hall at the end of the film, blur the perceptible distinction between film set and fiction, non-theatrical images, and ethnography.

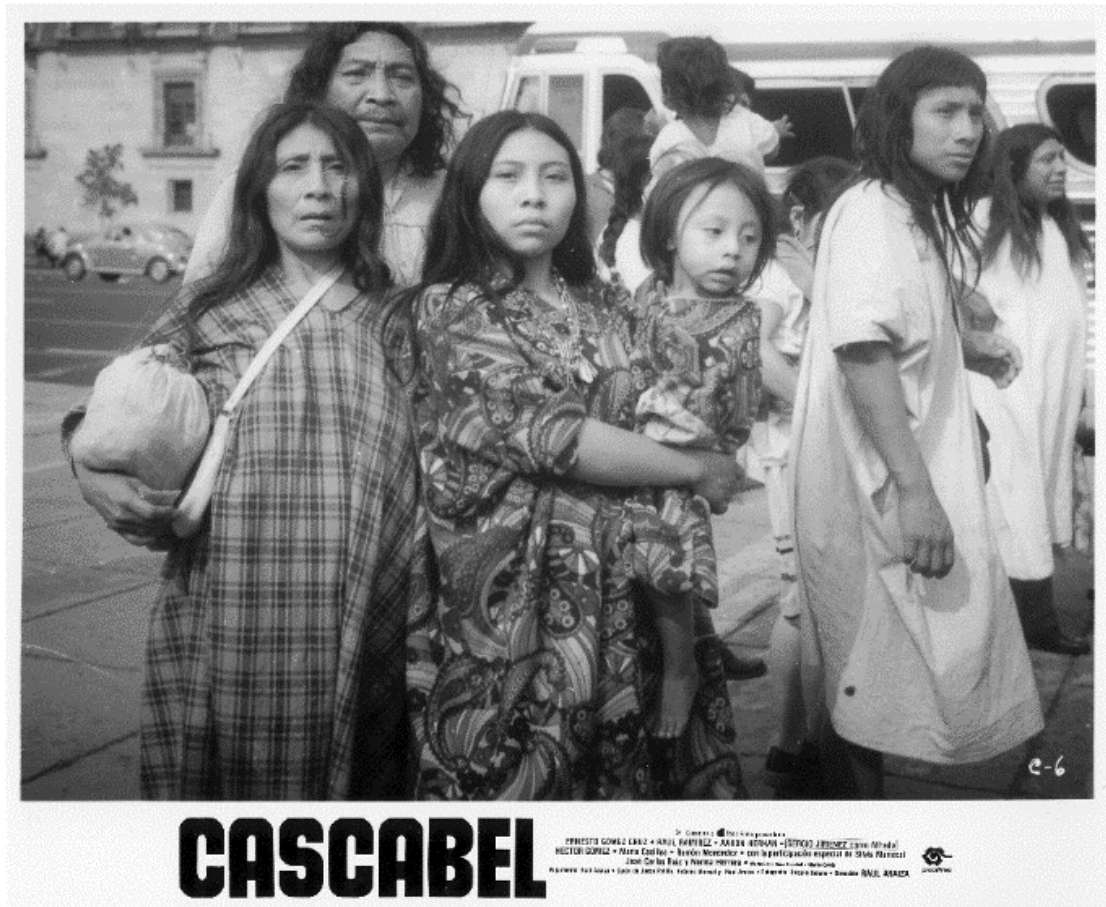


Figure 5-10. Still. *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976). Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico.

The stills, in black and white, each have a white border and in bottom portion of the still, the movie title is printed in large, bold lettering, while film credits are printed to the right in smaller letters. It is impossible to say how these images were used but given the inclusion of the title and film credits, it is plausible that the stills were actually used as publicity posters for the film. For a national and international audience with a kind of anthropological curiosity about the Zona Lacandona, about the Lacandon people, the movie posters would indubitably have piqued their interest since they offered the promise of ethnographic images

and an opportunity to examine the Hach Winik from a voyeuristic but comfortably distant angle.

In one still, Hach Winik men, women and children seemingly leaving the Palacio Nacional and heading into the Zócalo is part of the same *mise-en-scène* and has some of the same diegetic characters as in the still, but there are more women and children in the side angle still than in the frontal shot. The women, in patterned tunics, barefoot and carrying children, are absent from the film frame in which Chankin, Gorostiza (Mario Cid), and the unnamed anthropologist walk, flanked by Lacandon companions. Unlike the shot of the group leaving a building, the still is not a frontal shot, and it also captures the photographic moment in which the man carrying the camera actually begins to photograph the group—as if to underscore the spectacle of a Lacandon tribespeople walking through the Zocalo with famous Mexican actors. The framing is such that the van, bright white and looming, and the elegant crown molding of the facade in the background help direct the spectator's gaze first toward van, then the façade and then toward the group of people crossing the street. The effect is that the *mise-en-scène* is highly visible and the spectator is encouraged to consider the spectacle of a so many Lacandon in a setting which neatly signals to modern transportation and to Mexican national and metropolitan history, a direct contrast with the deliberate framing of Lacandon subjects in early to mid-twentieth century ethnographic imagery foregrounding plants and canoes and showed thick jungle and homes in the background.

Another of the stills, similar in *mise-en-scène* to the previous still with the van in the immediate background and the façade further behind, gives less attention to this setting, though this still was also quite clearly taken in Mexico City. In this particular still, Gómez

Cruz and Gorostiza are absent, so that the boundary between film still and ethnographic photography so the film camera was not rolling when the shot was taken. While in each still the subjects' gazes are directed towards each other or out of the frame, in this one, a young Hach Winik woman holds a child on her hip, staring coolly out of the frame (Figure 5-10). Her stony gaze is not friendly or warm—and perhaps even defiant, as though intending to convey to the photographer her awareness that she is the object of ethnographic spectacle. While she cannot return the gaze to the spectator, her eye contact with the camera implies a challenge to the spectator, and a reminder that the spectator has no more right to gaze upon her than she upon them. In a subtle, imperfect way, she is challenging and undermining the comfortable voyeurism of ethnographic photography.³³

5.6.1 Image Making in the Chiapas Highlands

As much as the ethnographic photography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gobbled up opportunities to depict Hach Winik subjects, there was far less apparent enthusiasm for photographing the other people's indigenous to the forest. As Dorotinsky Alperstein notes,

en el caso particular de la selva chiapaneca, la historiografía de la región consigna que desde los años treinta se fue poblando con miembros de otras etnias además de la lacandona. Parte del problema de falta de reconocimiento y visibilidad de estas comunidades migrantes y marginadas de indígenas tzotziles, choles, tzeltales y tojolabales, se debió a la exagerada presencia y difusión propagandística que recibieron los lacandones. (*Viaje*, 12)

Understanding the historical context and trends of academic, state, and journalistic visual production in the early to mid-twentieth century allows us to comprehend the hyper-visibility of Hach Winik communities within Mexican territory and internationally, on the one hand,

³³ I draw here on Fatimah Rony's concept of the third eye, in which the object of ethnographic spectacle, aware that they are being objectified, return the gaze. In film, because the returned gaze is not direct, the defiance is incomplete.

and how other Maya peoples, including migrants, were erased from cultural, historical, and anthropological discourse. What distinguishes *Cascabel*'s visual economy from other ethnographic photography projects or even non-theatrical films is that, even as it narrates the creation of a film about the Lacandon people, it considers the Hach Winik, Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Chol peoples, amongst others, within a territorial framework. The Lacandon subjects on screen, rather than represent an exotic Other, become a community caught between the Indigenista policies of the Mexican government, influenced by ethnographic and anthropological research in the jungle, and the drawn-out land reform battle being waged nowhere more dramatically than within the Mexican state of Chiapas.

Photographic projects with Chamula residents as their subjects gained traction slowly and later than did those conducted in the jungle and with Hach Winik subjects. While tourists would enter the San Cristóbal de las Casas region with cameras, image circulation in relation to San Cristóbal, Chamula, and other cities was largely conducted outside of institutions and professional activities until 1956, with the production of *Nuevos horizontes* (José Arenas, 1956), a mid-length documentary produced by the INI crafting a narrative extolling the liberation of Tzotzil and Tzeltal people from their historic marginality thanks to the social and economic progress experienced by these communities thanks to the intervention of the Centro de Coordinación Indigenista in San Cristóbal de las Casas.³⁴ Photographer Nacho López was taken on as part of this project, presumably to procure film stills for the documentary, and produced a collection of images, taken principally in San Juan Chamula and Chenalhó. Following his lead, Agustín Casasola would visit Chamula and Oxchuc in

³⁴ The Centro Cultural Indigenista branches were all part of the INI and were both run and funded by it.

1960, taking more ethnographic images of Tzotzil and Tzeltal subjects. Today, both López' and Casasola's works are archived within the digital media archives of Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, a reminder that these photographs were—and are—approached as anthropological objects and are linked to an institution that has historically approached Indigenous peoples from an anthropological—and ethnographic—angle. Photographic activity in the highlands region of Chiapas or in the city of San Cristóbal would wane again, however, until the creation of the Chiapas Photography Project in 1992, under the direction of Carlota Duarte. Of course, photography and specifically that which depicted Maya peoples of the Chiapas highlands ballooned with the Zapatista Army's declaration of revolution in Chiapas since Maya peoples composed the grand majority of the Army's members.

The other exception to the erasure of highland Maya from photography and filmmaking during the twentieth century is, of course, *Cascabel*. Raúl Araiza's inclusion not of photography but of film sequences that track the quotidian movements—and uncomfortable interactions—of Maya peoples in San Cristóbal de las Casas offers an unflinching, ethnographic visual archive of highland Maya peoples in Chiapas. One of the scenes in the film centering Maya peoples of the Chiapas highlands rather than Lacandon, shot in San Cristobal de las Casas, blurs the line between fiction and documentary. After a panning shot across San Cristobal's zocalo, the sequence cuts to a close up of a man's face, staring outside the right edge of the frame, against a blurred backdrop of bottles and jars. The storekeeper speaks animatedly in Maya, and a reverse shot—this time an extreme close up—shows his interlocutor, a man with a sun-leathered face, yet hair without a fleck of gray in it. His eyes look outside the left edge of the frame, back at the storekeeper. The farmer shakes his head. Cutting back to the storekeeper, we see that the mestizo man is becoming irritated,

and his voice grows louder. He utters the words “treinta y cinco,” and the camera cuts, now, to a close-up a woman’s somber face, her eyes trained to the lower left corner of the frame, and another cut reveals two small children, one clutching a chicken (Figure 5-11). We have seen the woman and girl before: an early sequence depicts an *atajadora* wresting a chicken away from the woman. Alfredo approaches the scene, asking for a pack of cigarettes, innocently inquiring to the shopkeeper about why the farmer is protesting.



Figure 5-11. Coffee Farmer. *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976).

The medium shot of the woman and girl who fall prey to an *atajadora*, combined with the close ups taken of the same woman and girl, as well as the boy and man, offer intimate—perhaps invasively intimate—portraits of suffering. While there is no way to confirm whether these scenes were unscripted and filmed spontaneously at the direction of Araiza with non-actor protagonists, the invasive camera, inspects economic and labor exploitation of Indigenous farmers at such a level that the ethics of the scene, were they shot of non-actors,

deserve to be questioned. The film obtains cultural capital amongst liberal viewers because it bears witness and claims sympathy with the farmers.

On the other hand, in a seemingly self-reflexive gesture, Araiza's alter ego, Alfredo, asks Chankin if he might film Chankin's wife, Margarita (Margarita Gallegos) giving birth because "lo necesito para mi película." Like the aforementioned sequences in which apparent documentary close-ups penetrate the intimate spaces of one family's exploitation, Alfredo's proposal to film Chankin's wife giving birth is similarly invasive and extractivist in nature. Alfredo's intentions, far from altruistic, will give his documentary the drama of a woman's pain and of the emergence of new life—certain bait for his propaganda-hungry producers.

As Ignacio Sánchez Prado points out, this technique, even more common in contemporary filmmaking, often leaves spectators with the impression that they have done something ethical in watching the film and thus do not need to intervene politically through any real action.³⁵ When Araiza turned his camera on this family, did he do so with their permission? With the offer of financial compensation? Having won various awards, we can only imagine that the film had modest success, or perhaps a fund could have been established to support the family economically using box office profits. If none of this was done, who is to say that *Cascabel* is any different from the atajadora or the coffee-buyer who wishes to lowball the farmer's price by 265 pesos? While this may seem a rather harsh stance, it is pertinent to take films to task because, as mediated forms of communication that today are consumed on a hyper-massive scale, scenes or discourses that seem to miss the mark must be critiqued in order to push filmmakers toward accountability.

³⁵ Sánchez Prado, *Screening*.



Figure 5-12. Carved Rattlesnake Statue from Tenochtitlan. Museo de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City.

5.7 Serpent Space, Symbolism, and the Revolution to Come

The rattlesnake, or *cascabel*, tends to remain within a particular space, but is not a territorial reptile.³⁶ The *cascabel* is an omen to be sure, and the warning signs climax when Alfredo, relieved of his documentary-making duties and stranded in Chankin's home, is killed by the venom of a rattle snake bite. But if the snake is not territorial—and thus not protecting its territory—then why did it seek out and fatally bite Alfredo? Alfredo's premature death hardly seems coincidental.

³⁶ Charlesworth, 92.

The serpent in biblical mythology is symbolic of the exile of the first humans from the garden of Eden into the desert and represents the emergence of the dialectic of good and evil. The very way in which the Selva Lacandona has been described by journalists and depicted by artists has at times evoked the notion of the biblical desert, or the savage space.³⁷ In journalism and art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Selva Lacandona is represented, Dorotinsky Alperstein has observed, as a “portadora de una fuerza primera donde los extremos de la creación, el bien y el mal, lo abyecto y lo bello, se tocan, pero no se mezclan. La vegetación cerrada es también un velo que los exploradores van descorriendo a golpe de machete para develar una belleza y un horror igualmente sobrecogedores” (*Viaje*, 52). Considered in these terms, the selva becomes a logical *mise-en-scène* for the lurking snake to emerge and attack in this mythical space, nature poses the greater threat—and wields more power—than the Mexican government. If the snake is somehow a reference to the Selva’s mythical power, then Alfredo’s death must somehow be fate, a parable for the ways Mexican filmmakers and activists with best of intentions are foolish to think they can stand up to a force as powerful as the Selva itself—or the Mexican government.

This is one possible interpretation of the recurring shots and final appearance of the serpent. It is undoubtedly the most cynical of the bunch, as well as the most literal. Yet the serpent has also been treated as a symbol of fertility, for example, in some Aboriginal Tribes, the rainbow-snake has historically symbolized conception. The *kurupi*, mythical Guaraní beast, had a penis wrapped around his body, like a serpent, and was said to impregnate women who left their doors or windows open. Even the founding of Tenochtitlan was bound

³⁷ Dorotinsky Alperstein, *Viaje*, 52.

up with the image of a rattlesnake clutched in the talons of an eagle, helped signal to Tenoch and the Mexica that they had come to their new homeland. The ancient Egyptians believed that Atoum, the snake, gave the day to the gods, which allowed for the creation of air and earth and as such, symbolized life, and power.³⁸ For ancient Nordic peoples, snakes may have been perceived as protectors or guardians of those who bore the symbols on their clothing or belongings. Moreover, the snake may have symbolized both life and regeneration, as the act of skin-shedding was clearly one of renewal.

In Mexica mythology, Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent, may have signified the creation of the world and human life. As such, Quetzalcoatl, Chac, and Tlaloc, all symbolized as serpents in various culture throughout Mesoamerican history, often was associated with rain and thus life. Miguel León Portilla even indicated that Quetzalcoatl was the personification of wisdom. Quetzalcoatl, suggests David Carrasco, was the “occasional creator, organizer and sometimes ruler of the cosmos, which undergirded city and state” (64). In other words, the plumed serpent was tied to the arrangements of space. Snakes were not only important to Toltec or Mexica symbolism, however. Indeed, at Palenque, a well-studied fresco depicts a serpent making an appearance at a sacrifice scene. These serpents are unique: they are jeweled serpents, which Claude-Francois Baudez has suggested, represent the trunk and the branches of the cosmic tree. Another fresco at Palenque shows what Baudez describes as a “transvestite male dancer” adorned with a serpent themed headdress, a serpent like helmet, and grasping a serpent in each hand. This dancer, depicted as being sacrificed only to reappear as a Thunderer, or part-human-part-serpent. Depicted as a snake-headed

³⁸ Menez, 10.

baby in an adult's arms, the dancer has died only to be reborn. It would seem, then, that Palenque's serpent dance frescos, while unidentified backdrops for portions of sequences in which Alfredo shoots his documentary, recall Palenque's role as a ritual space in which the



Figure 5-13. Close-Up of the Rattlesnake Approaching Alfredo. *Cascabel* (Raúl Araiza, 1976).

serpent dance would have taken place. Palenque, then, is an architectural and ritual space of historic significance for cycles of death and rebirth. While this information is not readily available to spectators of *Cascabel*, it does inspire me to consider the end of *Cascabel* beyond the most literal interpretation.

Considering the multidimensional symbolism of snakes, and in particular the significance of snakes, space, and ritual to what is both landscape and setting,³⁹ we might do well to roll back hasty assumptions about the rattlesnake motif in *Cascabel*. While *Cascabel* is mostly realist, the film blurs the lines between fiction and non-fiction with its seamless

³⁹ For a distinction between setting and landscape and their relationship to the verbal or aesthetic narrative, see Lefebvre, *Landscape*, 20-24.

montage of interviews and scripted scenes. The snake appears non-diegetically five times during the film, only appearing diegetically in the plot's dénouement, seems to become part of reality rather than non-diegetic shots of a snake suspended in nothingness, rattling its tail. The day Alfredo quits as director of the film, Margarita, Chankin's wife, goes into labor. In a powerful sequence preceding Alfredo's demise, the snake approaches an unwitting Alfredo, who lies in prone sleeping bag, and the sound of Lacandon elders chanting is audible. As the elders chant, presumably in support of Margarita, another arrival—that of the rattlesnake—is imminent. The scene is thus one of visual, narrative, and auditorial anticipation of the coming of something.

Thus, while the literal interpretation of the film's end leads us to believe that Alfredo has died—in a skin like sack of a sleeping bag—as the culmination of his misfortunes and perhaps as an atonement for his complicity in propagandistic and racist filmmaking, it is worth considering the ending as allegorical. Like a snake shedding its skin, Alfredo has developed a renewed sense of political commitment to drive his art, sloughing off the layers of ideology, posturing, and aspirationalism leading him to take employment with the Mexican government and to put his creative energies at the service of reproducing the image of Mexican territory as imagined through a Mexican habitus. Alfredo's death is not an end but perhaps marks the death of a way of making film or approaching film. Alfredo, alter ego of Araiza and perhaps of other filmmakers during the 1970s, may either accept the terms of his contract as a propagandistic filmmaker or may let propagandistic filmmaking die and nationalistic, ethnocentric, and capitalist values with it. The irony is, of course, that Araiza worked for Televisa for decades, creating soap operas, noting bluntly that “lo que pasa es que

en Televisa no me puedo expresar como lo hago en el cine, porque la televisión es una compañía privada que tiene su política y ahí me ajusto a sus normas.”⁴⁰

Araiza was no soothsayer and did not nor could not anticipate the Zapatista revolution. Still, his film presents a compelling case for the ability for film to perceive, encapsulate and foreshadow future territorial conflict in the Lacandon Jungle. In the same sense that *El año de la peste* (Felipe Cazals, 1978), feels chillingly prescient for 2022, the eponymous reptile in the film *Cascabel* shakes its ominous rattle-tipped tail at the audience as if wagging a finger in warning. Is the warning that the de-territorialization of Chol and Tzeltal communities will eventually drive them to form the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional?

⁴⁰ “Entrevista con Raúl Araiza,” 28.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Ayautla, *Etnocidio* and *Cascabel* offer a patchwork portrait of Mexican territory, composed of grids, ethnographic film, or photographic frames, sweeping aerial landscapes, soundscapes, labor spaces and architectural spaces. Naturally, these films are a miniscule and non-representative sample of Mexican territory's textures, colors, angles, and frames, yet this is perhaps its very nature: Mexican territory, like Mexican national identity, is a myth constructed on a foundation of referents that have been buoyed up by cinema, along with photography, painting, music, architecture, and literature.

Golden Age Mexican cinema demonstrated that Mexican national identity was a concept which, when translated to the screen even in the most theatrical, melodramatic iterations conceivable, still came apart like a prototype mathematically viable on paper as a two-dimensional object but inoperable when built. In Golden Age Cinema, the breakdown of social unity was allegorized in the death of protagonists or the demise of the interracial—or cross-class—couple, but melodrama and the Manichean morality of the films pushed spectators to believe that their own actions and interactions could right the wrongs of the silver screen parallel Mexican universe. By the time *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio*, and *Cascabel* were each filmed, though, there was no longer the same didacticism in cinema about how to be Mexican and how to have Mexican values. To the chagrin of the political elite, the myth of national unity rooted in a shared identity had proved insufficient to avoid students from protesting and disabling Mexico's image on the global scene as a beacon of burgeoning

economics and modernity. To the dismay of subsistence farmers, students, and factory workers, the myth of national unity was insufficient to keep the government and the political elite from restricting their right to free speech, their economic solvency, and to keep the military from massacring hundreds of young activists. By the time José Rovirosa began filming *Ayautla*, the kid gloves were off, and the curtain pulled back, revealing that the narrative of national unity, whether or not at one time a tale spun with good intentions, had ultimately been weaponized to strengthen the power of the single-party system at the expense of the individual and collective rights of people living within Mexico.

In this dissertation, I have demonstrated that *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio* and *Cascabel*—films on the fringe of the New Latin American Cinema tradition—lay bare the failure of the national identity project but go further than films of prior decades: each film demonstrates that the mestizo national identity myth not only failed to deliver equality for all inhabitants of Mexican territory, but it in fact also benefitted certain communities at the expense of others. Just as New Latin American Cinema filmmakers across the hemisphere swung their cameras to point to the sorest spots in politics and society, so too did Rovirosa, Leduc, and Araiza look to the gaping wound of Mexican nationalism and, in particular, its impact on the populations who had never stood to benefit from it in the first place: namely, the Indigenous societies whose territories were dissected by nineteenth and twentieth century political borders and who were expected to either act the role of ancestor to the modern nation or to assimilate. Either way, by the 1970s, it was clear that the political war being fought in Mexico was the one for modernization, and the battlefield was land—land that could be bought, sold, mined, pumped, gridded, and cultivated. Like their peers in Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, and Cuba, the filmmakers and film crews responsible for the films discussed in this

dissertation zoomed in on the ground zero for social, economic, and political inequality in Mexico: Indigenous communities and Indigenous territories.

This dissertation has attempted to think through the ways national territory, like the myth of national identity, is present in Mexico-made cinema. My analysis has rested on a geocritical approach which borrows from the scholarship of theorists like Massey, Raffestin, and Saquet, who define territory in terms of power and labor, interpersonal relations and their effect on space. Geocritical approaches to nationalism, identity, or the arts in Mexico, much less in Latin America, are still in an emergent phase. While Border Studies scholars have consistently included geocriticism in their toolkits, I sense these theories are underutilized in Latin American Studies, broadly, and in Mexican studies, specifically. Beyond Lomnitz' *Exits from the Labyrinth: Culture and Ideology in the Mexican National Space* (1993) and Luiz Lara et al.'s *Spatial Concepts for Decolonizing the Americas* (2022), precious little publications take up a geocritical analysis of culture, national identity and art. Latin American film studies could be greatly enriched by an expanded application of geocritical studies particularly as an approach to addressing nationalism, globalization, and travel in cinema. Geocritical studies also allows scholars to attend more carefully to landscape, to set design, and even to frame composition: three film components I have used to anchor my analyses in chapters Three, Four and Five.

In Chapter One of this dissertation, I addressed epistemologies of space and territory, and traced the relationship between these epistemologies and teleological deployments of space and territory in the shaping of New Spanish and Mexican territories. In Chapter One, we observed how territory in Mexico has been shaped both epistemologically and materially through the consolidation of racialized space, gridded space, and the use of particular

landscapes or architectural styles as referents for national sovereignty or even national identity. In Chapter Two, we considered the significance of the 1970s as a period for politically and socially-conscious filmmaking, as well as a distrust in the Mexican government's benevolence toward its political subjects—particularly towards Indigenous constituents. Moreover, in Chapter Two we learned how the Mexican government redoubled its efforts to develop the rural portions of Mexican territory—including Indigenous communities—through the incongruous tactics of industrialization, the activation of Indigenous youth in mainstream politics, and the designation of certain territories for certain communities (let us recall the Zona Lacandona and the Isla Tiburón). Considering government policy of this decade alongside the themes and styles most pertinent to the New Latin American Cinema Movement, we begin to understand that the emphasis on changing rural and Indigenous communities and territories in *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio* and *Cascabel* is hardly coincidental but rather a reflection of concern for the unevenness of benefits from modernization for inhabitants, on the one hand, and a recognition that Mexican territory is an epistemology of spatial control justified through legal, racial and infrastructure that finds coherence in discourse, but rarely even in practice.

Chapters Three through Five each invite the reader to consider the mechanisms by which individual films may reproduce or recreate teleologies of space bound up with epistemologies

national identity myth, national territory, modernity, and racial difference. In *Ayautla*, we are offered a portrait of a municipality whose defining feature, as depicted in the medium length documentary, has nothing to do with local borders, but instead is predicated on the way labor is organized and deployed to sustain and reinforce the communal and reciprocal nature of life

in San Bartolomé Ayautla. The film offers a counternarrative to the paternalistic Indigenista maxim that Indigenous territory must either be entirely assimilated into non-Indigenous society for Indigenous communities to prosper or that the government must mediate relations between Indigenous communities and other spaces, keeping them separate in order to ensure that Mazatec communities are not exploited. *Ayautla* demonstrates that government intervention is not the pre-condition for change in Indigenous communities like San Bartolomé Ayautla: Mazatec communities can and do shape Mexican territory in ways benefitting them without organizations like the INI making such determinations for them and about them. Though *Ayautla* does not tell us what becomes of the highway project, news

reporting from 1976 demonstrates that, eventually, the federal government supplied funds

Entregó el Presidente Echeverría carretera vital a los oaxaqueños

TELIXTLAHUACA, --- Oax., 21 marzo (Télex)— En un acto de entero reconocimiento a quien sacó al país de la opresión y lo encaminó por senderos de libertad y justicia, el régimen del Presidente Echeverría entregó hoy el "Camino Juárez", que conectará a la capital del país con Oaxaca, pasando por Tehuacán, y que acerca, comunica a gran parte de esta región siempre tan marginada.

El acontecimiento, profundamente emotivo y tan esperado por los oaxaqueños, desde hace 128 años, el Presidente Luis Echeverría develó la placa conmemorativa que abre al tránsito esta carretera de 235 kilómetros. Al mismo tiempo, se entregaron simbólicamente las carreteras

Puerto Escondido-Pochutla; Pochutla-Puerto Angel, de 70 y 12 kilómetros, respectivamente.

En acto que culminó con una comida servida en honor del Mandatario mexicano y de su esposa, señora María Ester Zuno de Echeverría, el secretario de Obras Públicas, Luis E. Bracamontes indicó que al término de la actual administración federal, la red vial de Oaxaca, pasará de 3 mil 900 kilómetros que existían en 1970, a 11 mil 650.

Bracamontes señaló más adelante que, firmes en el propósito juarista de hacer, de nuestro suelo un templo de la igualdad y la democracia, hemos de proseguir en estos programas.

(Sigue en la Pag. 5a.)

Figure 6-1. Announcement that President Echeverría has Given the Highway to Oaxacans. *Avance*, March 22, 1976. Hemeroteca Nacional, UNAM.

and machinery to the state of Oaxaca, which then constructed the highway, officially “handed” to Oaxaca on March 21, 1976, would connect San Juan Bautista Tuxtepec, Oaxaca, with Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca, passing through Ayautla.¹ Highway 182, a “templo de la igualdad y democracia,” according to the Secretaría of Public works at the time, was not, in fact, the concept of the government but rather than of a small Mazatec community whose

¹ “Entregó el presidente,” np.

collective work changed the literal face of the terrain in their region and eventually propelled the government's involvement in catalyzing this change.

In *Etnocidio, notas sobre el Mezquital*, the use of a full range of cinematic techniques, such as talking heads with a permanent backdrop, panoramic landscape shots of the Tula power plant, with interviewees in the foreground, and disorienting shots taken from inside factories convey the degree to which industrialization has transformed both the environment in the Mezquital and how it has been conducted in a way that threatens the already fragile ecosystems of the Mezquital and the livelihoods of the Hñáhñú farmers working and living there. The Mezquital is the territory of interest in Leduc's feature length film, and the film demonstrates the consequences of centuries worth of capitalist spatial organization upon the environment, labor opportunities and relations, and the cohesiveness of Hñáhñú communities, affected by water conflicts and pressed to seek industrial work or to migrate in search of employment.

Cascabel, for its part, explores the relationship between territory, environment, racial discourse, and media. The film reproduces some of the same visual compositions and aerial shots used by the likes of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista as well as National Geographic, perhaps in order to play into spectators’ expectations about the way the Chiapas Jungle, like its inhabitants, are exotic, ancient, and available for consumption, even though they are technically part of Mexican territory. The way the “Selva Lacandona” as it came to be known

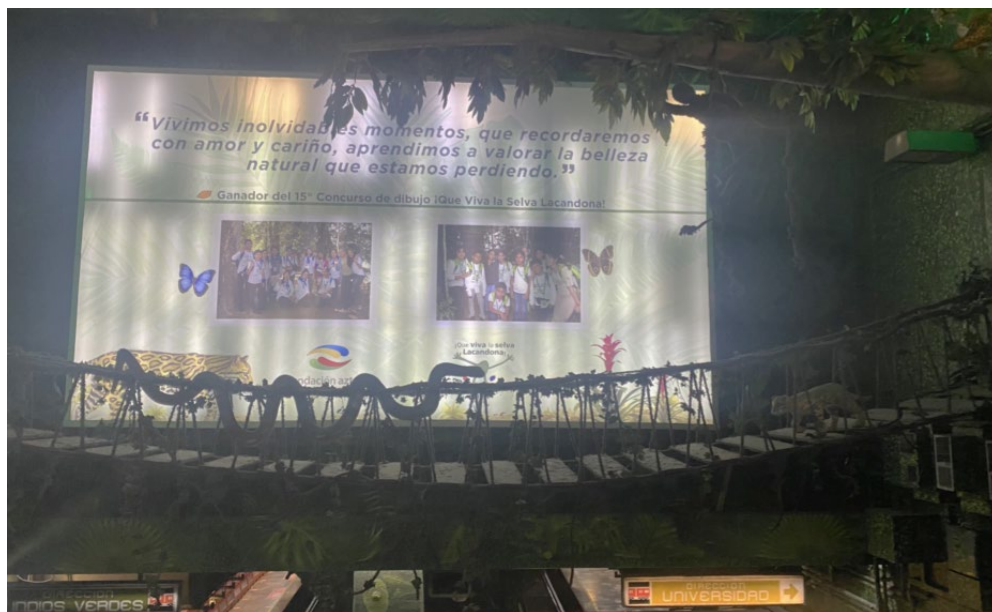


Figure 6-2. Selva Lacandona Exhibition at the Viveros Metro Station. Mexico City, 2022.

during the early and mid-twentieth century, is perceived today within Mexico still closely reflects the discourse of an exotic but also fragile ecosystem in need of state protection that *Cascabel* addresses. I was reminded of this not long ago, leaving the Mexico City Metro system at Viveros Station in March 2022.

The Selva Lacandona exhibit inside the Metro features a Rainforest-Café style three-dimensional exposition, complete with a rope bridge and an anaconda (Figure 6-2). The walls are plastered in colorful images against photographic backdrops of lush forest, with cartoon

snakes, parrots, and a cartoon girl dressed in hiking gear reminiscent of that worn by the likes of Ricardo López Toraya, Antonio Rodríguez in their highly documented travels during the 1940s. The exhibit alongside cute cartoon monkeys, parrots, tapirs, and cartoon plaques offering snippets of trivia about the Selva Lacandona, also displays information describing the mission and concerns of the sponsors for the exhibit: the Fundación Azteca, owned by the Salinas Group, which also owns T.V. Azteca and Banco Azteca. While I have been unable to research the value of the conglomerate, reports suggest Ricardo Salinas Pliego is the third wealthiest man in Mexico and whose wealth from telecommunications, amongst other enterprises, has been made an unfathomable environmental toll.² One exhibit reads: “La Selva Lacandona es estratégica para la provisión de recursos para el desarrollo y bienestar humano...es hogar de especies emblemáticas de nuestro país como el jaguar, la guacamaya roja, el tapir, el mono saraguato, entre otros.” These claims are a salient reminder of the ways the Chiapas jungle has been represented visually within Mexico as exotic and in need of protection so that it can catalyze development. Of course, no mention is made of the Hach Winik, for whom the jungle is named, nor the other Maya peoples who live in the forest. Moreover, the exhibition makes no mention of how the jungle is to be saved. As *Cascabel's* plot reveals, empty gestures like public campaigns and propaganda pay keen attention to the jungle's exotic animals, plants, and even human inhabitants without inviting considering the toll of state policy, corporate interests, and extraction on the environment and on Indigenous communities.

² “¿Cuánto?,” *Heraldo Binario*.

In this dissertation, I have focused specifically on the decade of the 1970s because it is a decade the cinema of which is understudied and reflects shifting politics—that is, state policy—Indigenous communities. Indeed, the government-run Archivo Etnográfico Audiovisual would support the creation of dozens of documentary films during the 1980s that mostly eschewed the matter of Mexicanization and development in Indigenous communities, focusing instead on music, dance, or other culturally specific customs. By the 1980s, the privatization of industries like logging and mining and the scaling down of programs targeting development and participation from Indigenous communities in national or regional politics. Then, with the 1990s came the five-hundred-year anniversary of Christopher Columbus' maiden voyage to the Antilles, followed closely by the signing of the NAFTA agreement and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional declaring war on the Mexican government. With this came the advent of the Chiapas Media Project and for the first time, a crop of audiovisual projects made by Purhépecha, Maya Yucatecan and Tzotzil filmmakers ended the hundred-year long streak of films made about Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous people, mostly for non-Indigenous spectators.³

Ayautla, *Etnocidio*, and *Cascabel*—three films which rarely find their way even to the most specialized of film clubs in Mexico City—are windows into the post-1960s disenchantment of filmmakers and intellectuals like Rovirosa, Leduc, Bartra, Araiza, and so many others with the myth of national unity, with Indigenismo, and with the filmmaking industry itself. Each film levels some sort of critique at nationalism, rooting its critique in

³ For more on the subject of community filmmaking in Mexico, see Schiwy, et al., 2017.

spaces like the town of Ayautla, the Mezquital Valley, or the Zona Lacandona, which are represented as the ground zero of some the most marginalized and dispossessed communities in Mexico. The films discussed in this dissertation demonstrate how national politics along with a rhetoric of unity and equality have failed Mazatec, Hñáhñú and Hach Winik peoples, but also that if Indigenous communities survive or thrive in Mexican territory, it is largely in spite of national politics, not because of it. By examining these films, we can also perceive how Mexican territory isn't so much a material reality as it is a process. Incongruously while Mexican territory cannot be materially proven or defined, its production is much easier to identify, and *Ayautla*, *Etnocidio*, and *Cascabel* in turn gesture to the ways Mexican territory is produced—made—through processes ranging from the construction of thermoelectric plants to the ratification of the Zona Lacandona to the strategic establishment or absence of highways and agricultural cooperatives from particular regions. Mexican territory is made through these processes, but it is also made through repeated representations: through archetypal landscapes which recall the landscapes of early twentieth century nationalist art, through ethnographic visual techniques which reinforce the idea of Indigenous Otherness, and through the continued imposition of the Spanish language as the lingua franca for voice-overs, dialogue, and on-screen text. Just as the three films reveal how Mexican territory is produced, they also reveal how it is un-made: most obviously, Mexican territory is unmade through the denial of its very ontology as occurs in *Cascabel*. Other kinds of de-territorialization are more subtle, like the use of tequio instead of an individualized, capitalist labor economy undermines the structure of the national economy which benefits from the competition rather than collaboration of farmers and laborers in general. Emphasis on regional cultural histories, like

Hñáhñú oral and written histories about their relationship to the Mezquital Valley undermine the idea that Mexico's history has been experienced in generally the same way by all inhabitants of Mexican territory. Likewise, the emphasis on clouds, sky, and water in *Ayautla* which recall the town's Mazatec name, nguifi: beneath the clouds. Even though the municipality's official political name is San Bartolomé Ayautla, the film still establishes the community in accordance with its environmental identity rather than its geopolitical one.

Each film allows spectators to perceive that when Mexican territory is produced, it is almost always done at the expense of Indigenous communities. When Mexican territory is unmade or questioned, it may raise hackles, be considered radical, or may be met with confusion. While the EZLN took the approach of unmaking Mexican territory, neither *Ayautla* nor *Etnocidio* nor *Cascabel* propose rejecting or unmaking Mexican territory. Instead, each invites the spectator to question how Mexico looks on the screen: the rural, urban, labored spaces, the social spaces, and the racialized spaces which form the mise-en-scène, drive the plot, or invite the spectator's gaze to become the basis for spectators to respond to Sergio Jiménez' simple and powerful question: ¿Qué es México?

This dissertation deals with just three films because it takes care to demonstrate for its reader how geocritical studies are applicable to Mexican film. While the scope of this work is relatively narrow, it is poised to be expanded to include more twentieth or even twenty-first century cinema. In a future expansion of this dissertation, I would like to discuss film from the decades since 1970s, in order to consider how representations of space, racialized and industrialized, labored, and social space are thought through in conjunction with narratives

responding to globalization, migration, labor, and the environment, amongst others.⁴ In the meantime, the precarity of Indigenous territory due to the expropriation of watered spaces, labor, and the infiltration of paramilitary and cartel activity into the economic and social fabrics of community life are of grave concern for Indigenous activists, like Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, whose theories on linguistic and Indigenous territory have direct applications in her own life: since 2019, her hometown of Ayutla Mixe has been struggling for control over its groundwater, made unavailable because the town's well has been hijacked by paramilitary.⁵ Looking to written works by Aguilar Gil or by poets who write bilingually in Spanish and Nahuatl or Me'phaa of their hometowns and communities, alongside audiovisual media paying close attention to the shifting landscapes and biomes of Mexican territory,⁶ we are reminded that as illusory as the concept may be, the effects of the industrialization, gridding, mining, dividing and fencing of space are inarguably quite real.

⁴ The book manuscript to be based upon this dissertation proposes to do just that.

⁵ Aguilar Gil, along with twenty others, contributed to a book titled *El lugar del agua, palabras para Ayutla* deals directly with the demands being made in San Pedro and San Pablo Ayutla Mixe, Oaxaca, in defense of their water rights.

⁶ For example, Martín Tonalméyotl's *Istitsin ueatsintle/Uña mar*. Cisnegro, 2019, and Hubert Matiúwàa's *Xùkú xùwáa/Entre escarabajos*. Oralibrura, 2021.

FILMOGRAPHY

Antonio das Mortes (Glauber Rocha, 1969)

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Ayautla (José Roviroso, 1972)

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