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# Imagineries of Abya Yala: Indigenous filmmaking in Latin America from a multimodal semiotic perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This article argues that multimodal semiotics can provide an analytical lens to critically understand recent film and media production by Indigenous people and communities in southern and central Abya Yala (or Latin America). It suggests precise ways to analyse this film and media production as the emergence of alternative public or 'counter-public' spaces that allow for the expression of 'emergent' forms of Indigeneity that contest dominant modes of representation. The argument focuses not only on these Indigenous texts' semiotic contents (their design and production) but also on their discursive features, distribution and reception. The article ends up revealing that a multimodal semiotic approach provides a very useful toolbox to make sense of the complex and multi-layered nature of the various emerging cinemas of Abya Yala. The article argues that this approach allows for a better appreciation of the diversity of Indigenous film production, while also facilitating a critical engagement with the issues this media production raises in terms of authorship and modes of representation, among other issues.

## KEYWORDS

Indigenous film; Indigenous media; multimodal; emergent indigeneity; Latin America

This article argues that multimodal semiotics can provide an analytical lens to critically understand recent film and video production by Indigenous people and communities in *Abya Yala* (a Kuna term used in Latin America to refer to the connected Indigenous histories of the Americas and the Caribbean).<sup>1</sup> It suggests precise ways to examine these film and media productions as the emergence of alternative public, or 'counter-public' (Salazar and Córdova 2008; Zamorano Villarreal 2017) spaces that allow for the expression of 'emergent' forms of indigeneity that contest dominant modes of representation. By focusing not only on the semiotic content embedded within the texts of Indigenous audiovisual production (their design and production) but also on their discursive features, distribution and reception, the article argues that a multimodal semiotic approach offers a useful framework to uncover the complex and multi-layered nature of Indigenous and community film productions. The method also allows to better appreciate the diversity of this artistic production while engaging with the critical issues of authorship, the modes of representation authors use, and the cultural and political significance of their works.

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This article seeks to complement the insights of previous transnational studies of Indigenous films from Abya Yala (Schiwy 2009, 2019; Schiwy and Weber 2017a; Blanco, Rodríguez, and Manuel 2016; Gleghorn 2017; Pace 2018a; Salazar and Córdova 2008, 2019). Taking some distance from a more 'ethnographic' or 'identitarian' focus, this article seeks to better understand and highlight how a set of diverse Indigenous audiovisual productions can foster a collective cultural space where imaginaries of ethnic identity and belonging are simultaneously evoked, contested, and put to work for diverse purposes.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a multimodal semiotic approach to the cinemas of Abya Yala can offer a precise framework to understand the local, national, and transnational nature of Indigeneity and Indigenous audiovisual productions.

After discussing some of the difficulties of defining 'Indigenous film and media' in the first section of this article, I discuss the usefulness of the concepts of 'design,' 'discourse' and 'distribution' within a multimodal semiotic framework to fully appreciate Indigenous audiovisual productions. Finally, the article discusses several case studies.

## The cinemas of Abya Yala

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there have been a number of initiatives with the objective to put the production of film and media into the hands of rural, Indigenous communities, communities that had been historically disenfranchised by the state and under- or misrepresented by mainstream media channels. The fact that many of these initiatives emerged simultaneously across the globe suggests that some of the influences behind these changes were not just local but global. On the one hand, new video technologies made filmmaking more accessible to rural communities in terms of equipment and technical training required to make films, from drafting to post-production. On the other hand, global discourses and attitudes towards Indigenous communities in national and international political life shifted, producing a perceived need to move away from the more paternalistic models of ethnographic filmmaking about Indigenous people to find new models that gave agency to Indigenous community members themselves. This was a movement often led by Indigenous media activists. These global processes went hand-in-hand with the emergence of Indigenous activism and political movements locally and in different national contexts throughout Latin America. They were linked to the increase of mass urbanisation in the second half of the twentieth century, which led to a so-called 'return of the Indian' (Albó 1991) in Latin American politics (e.g. Van Cott 2005). These processes must also be contextualized with reference to the emergence of new – at the time – international discourses, such as a specific language of human rights related to Indigenous peoples (as evidenced in the language of the ILO C169 on the protection of Indigenous peoples). This general discursive change has developed alongside and in response to what has been called a 'multicultural turn' in Latin America (e.g. Hale 2005; Sieder 2002), and some scholars have spoken about this recent phenomenon in terms of an 'emergent indigeneity' (Bengoa 2007; de la Cadena 2010).

Terms such as 'Indigenous media' or 'Indigenous film' have emerged to refer loosely to this body of film and media productions, which has arisen because of this complex confluence of factors towards the end of the twentieth century. This production is highly diverse in almost every imaginable aspect, in terms of who produces it, how it is made, for

what purpose(s), for what audience(s), and on what topic(s). It can represent everything from fictional treatments of the mythical tropes of a particular community's folklore to documenting historical memory for posterity, forms of political activism, to disputes over land rights or testimonies of environmental devastation. It thus becomes difficult to speak of a collective body of film and media activism without seemingly effacing or obscuring important differences. Indeed, the diversity of approaches and contributions to this film and media production varies enormously from project to project, even within the same organisation or production company. The astute reader will have already noticed my very own terminological dance around the numerous names employed to describe this kind of production – often qualified by the terms 'Indigenous' or 'community' and referred to as film, video, cinema or media – each implying not only the inclusion, exclusion and privileging of certain kinds of production over others, but each having its history, not only within scholarship on Indigenous film and media production but also within actual production processes themselves. As Salazar and Córdova have noted:

(. . .) not only do the ideas of Indigeneity and Indigenism have very distinct cultural ideas and histories attached to them in the Latin American case, but Latin American notions of *cine indígena* (Indigenous films), *video indígena* (Indigenous video), or *audiovisual indígena* (Indigenous media) also carry distinct social meanings. (2008, 41)

The continental festival Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas (CLACPI) refers to the production of 'Indigenous peoples,' for example, Bolivia's Coordinadora Audiovisual Indígena Originaria de Bolivia (CAIB) to 'Indigenous' and 'originaries' (*originarios*), the two different terms in usage in Bolivia to refer to Amazon lowland Indigenous peoples and highland Indigenous peoples, respectively. The term 'Indigenous video' has been credited as being a term developed by the National Indigenist Institute in Mexico, which created Centres for Indigenous Video as part of their 'transferable media' project in Indigenous communities in the 1990s (Wortham 2013, 65). Schiwiy and Weber (2017b) have recently proposed the expression 'independent, community-based, collaborative and Indigenous-language video.' For the sake of brevity and to capture some of the complexity involved, I will refer herein to 'the cinemas of Abya Yala,' taking my cue from one of the leading scholars and curators in the field, Córdova (forthcoming).

Yet during my stay with acclaimed Ecuadorean Kichwa director Alberto Muenala and his daughter, also a film director, Frida Muenala, it became clear that in a country where official discourses focused more on the language of 'nations' and 'peoples' and where Kichwa filmmaking has developed to become an independent and critical enterprise, the notion of 'Indigenous' cinema revealed to be highly questionable. Both filmmakers explained how they wanted to distance themselves from the ethnographic label attached to their cinematographic productions by scholarship and film critics. I found that the rejection of the term 'Indigenous' to characterize their film productions was particularly widespread in the Kichwa filmmaking community around Otavalo. When I approached another young Kichwa film director during my stay, I explained that I was in Ecuador for a research project on 'so-called Indigenous or community cinema,' to which he quickly replied, with a friendly, teasing smile, 'so-called by scholars like yourself.'

These highly serious and political debates, even if often expressed with humour and cynicism, present one of the most challenging issues academics face when conducting

research on, writing about, and teaching on recent Indigenous film and media productions. It is a problem of what was once called in Latin American Subaltern Studies 'restitution' (e.g. Moreiras 2001, 25): the question of how to avoid reifying the fixed identity of an object of study (in this case, 'indigeneity') even in the most critical instances when you hope to deconstruct and pull apart their imaginary Western and Orientalist constructions of otherness. What some of the best research on Indigenous film and media has consistently pointed out to, however, is that this is not an issue only for scholarship. It is actually inherent to the work of Indigenous film and media activists themselves, as well as other filmmakers, curators, and archivists, as my example of discussions with Kichwa filmmakers from Ecuador shows. In that sense, it is important to understand scholarship as just one more critical instance of the circulation of different debates and discourses, ones related to but also exceeding the idea of 'indigeneity,' in which film and media activists (Indigenous or otherwise) are always already engaged. Indeed, I would suggest that the multi-layered nature of this terminological difficulty reveals something about the context and conditions of this kind of audiovisual production. These examples of film and media are constructed as 'Indigenous' as an effect of communicative practices somewhat outside of the control of Indigenous filmmakers themselves. This means that the contemporary significance of indigeneity across national and transnational contexts – and from both a cultural and political perspective – are shaped and disputed, at least partly, within this audiovisual media landscape, which necessarily extends beyond (and is more dynamic than) what is captured in and by the audiovisual product itself. Indeed, Richard Pace has noted that the appreciation of how this new media ecology is shaping the social organisation and self-understanding of different groups has been given relatively little scholarly attention considering its increasing importance across transnational contexts (2018b, 2). The fact that emerging film and media practices shape communities' self-understandings (as well as mainstream understandings of different Indigenous communities) is, of course, inevitable to some extent. Still, it has significant consequences when it comes to considering its implications for power: who has the authority and the capacity to intervene in this emerging audiovisual space, to identify themselves in or with its project(s), and what thereby becomes 'emergent' in this 'emergent indigeneity.' It raises the question of how to responsibly understand, study and teach these media practices, above all when situated as teachers and researchers within disciplines such as 'Latin American' or 'Indigenous' studies, where we act as mediators and, to some extent, as gatekeepers for the intelligibility and legibility of these terms. For me, writing as a white European scholar positioned within the academy, collaborating with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers, curators and archivists, but operating in a field of 'knowledge production' to which these collaborators often have limited, if any, access, this responsibility is particularly problematic, albeit not always appropriately recognised.

Perhaps due to the difficulty of such questions, scholarship has conventionally focused on such problems or questions of definition (for a good, recent and detailed overview of this issue, see Pace 2018b). Ginsburg (1991), who is often considered to have coined the term 'Indigenous media' as a field of study, has argued that such media is defined by its 'embedded aesthetics,' a term used, in her words, 'to draw attention to a system of evaluation that refuses a separation of textual production and circulation from broader arenas of social relations' (2018, 40; see also Ginsburg 1994). The term has been subsequently used to include cinematographic practices from Abya Yala (e.g. Córdova 2011).

This includes the productions' embeddedness in social relations. Scholars have drawn attention to the importance of these productions of self-representations (Salazar and Córdova 2008) as a diasporic and accented cinema (Weber 2017), and on the building of audiovisual sovereignty or the ability to control self-image (Raheja 2011), in a media landscape where images have historically been circulated *of* rather than *by* Indigenous peoples and communities. As the research project *medios indígenas* based in the Universitat de Barcelona emphasizes, Indigenous film and video production tends to differ somewhat from other types of media production insofar as it is often explicitly designed as an element of intercultural communication for a transnational audience with more or less explicit political content. Many Indigenous filmmakers and organisations speak of their production in terms of *cine intercultural* or *comunicación intercultural* (intercultural cinema or communication).

In contrast, the Maya director and anthropologist Ana Rosa Duarte Duarte prefers the term 'intracultural communication' (Duarte Duarte 2017, 88–89), highlighting how such films attempt to open a bridge between dominant and subaltern cultural understandings. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that many scholars have emphasised these political aspects of such film production, whether in terms of decolonising or 'Indianizing' film (Duarte Duarte 2017; Schiwy 2009), as a contestatory practice (Wortham 2013), as a practice of ethnic citizenship of being 'counted' (Salazar 2016), or as a means of building solidarity via a politics of affect (Schiwy 2019). In this sense, such film and video practices can be seen as generating a counter-public sphere of self-expression and audiovisual sovereignty, as argued by Zamorano Villarreal (2017), or as an alternative 'media nation,' as Alia (2010) claims for the Canadian case.

Recent scholarship has seen a move away from questions of what constitutes the cinemas of Abya Yala as a body of work, as part of an effort to 'unmoor the notion of independent, community-based, collaborative and indigenous-language video from its ethnographic constraints, but without reducing such media to mere aestheticism' (Schiwy and Weber 2017b, 4). This has involved deconstructing and questioning earlier tendencies within scholarship in its attempts to define the scope of the field. One of the issues with conventional scholarly definitions is that many of these definitions have emerged in an Anglophone context where, as Halkin (2009) has noted, there is some level of state support and national distribution networks. Therefore, ideas about Indigenous cinemas in those countries cannot be directly compared to the rest of Abya Yala, where there is a level of precarity that makes some types of community production difficult, if not impossible. Partly as a response to this precarity, the cinemas of southern and central Abya Yala have been sustained by the emergence of large film festivals that have fostered Indigenous film productions as a transnational enterprise in the region – the most significant of which is, without a doubt, the biannual festival CLACPI (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas) founded in 1985 (for more on these types of festivals, see Salazar and Córdova 2008, 2019; Gleghorn 2017). This has been a double-edged sword, as such festivals have both fostered cinematic production from Abya Yala as well as determined to some extent its boundaries, definition, and spaces as a recognised body of work. It is only relatively recently that Indigenous peoples themselves have dominated main leadership roles within, or founded such spaces. Another particularity of the production in the area conventionally referred to as 'Latin' America is the historical extent of cultural mestizaje and the focus of Indigenous

rights on culture, as also highlighted by Engle (2010, 19–35 and 56–57). Thus, on the one hand, the idea itself of ‘indigeneity’ may be less stable than in Anglophone or Francophone contexts, whereas, on the other hand, it is difficult to disentangle the cinematographic practices of Abya Yala from the tutelage and influence of ethnographic and third cinema practices that have long included Indigenous involvement but which, at the same time, have also served to make some forms of production more visible than others (see Schiwy 2016 and Gleghorn 2017 for more on the influence of these earlier film practices). More generally, Pace (2018a) has identified the difficulty of knowing how to interpret Ginburg’s well-known notion of ‘embeddedness’—whether it refers to being embedded in social relations only or includes also being embedded in specific Indigenous worldviews or epistemologies – and of course the difficult question of authorship, especially when we consider that many Indigenous filmmakers themselves eschew the hierarchies of the traditional film industry and seek to highlight collective authorship even if, as the Tzotzil director María Sojob recently lamented in a recent roundtable, the structures of film festivals often force Indigenous filmmakers to follow these conventions (Sojob 2021; see also Zamorano Villarreal 2017 for more on collective authorship in the case of Bolivian Indigenous film). Scholarship has recently made efforts to address such issues, reflected in part by focusing on the particularity of specific cases (Wortham 2013; Zamorano Villarreal 2017; Weber 2017, among others).

The field of Indigenous film scholarship on southern and central Abya Yala has thus emerged as a necessarily multidisciplinary field. In recent years, this field has drawn attention to the plurality and diversity of audiovisual production from Abya Yala. It develops on insights from visual studies and anthropology, Indigenous studies, media studies, and political economy, among others. Such studies also generally recognise that a conventional film analysis of this audiovisual production does not do sufficient justice to the importance of the context in which it is produced or distributed. This article does not seek to offer an alternative disciplinary perspective on these issues but rather adds to the tapestry of current approaches while at the same time furthering recent efforts for a more nuanced, deconstructive lens which takes account of the diversity of Indigenous participation in filmmaking. It puts forward that a multimodal semiotics perspective can help to refocus the question of the multi-layered process of meaning-making in which the cinemas of Abya Yala are involved, including the processes by which ideas such as ‘Indigenous’ film emerge and take on particular meanings. It examines this film history as socially embedded, not only at the level of its production but also at the levels of design, discourse and distribution. Such contributions are essential, I argue, because they provide a precise framework in which to critically engage with a complex field in a way that does not threaten to flatten out this diversity. At the same time, it can help to understand some of that diversity in ways that could, I hope, support and bring attention to the plural Indigenous voices and struggles within that cinematographic production. It can help Indigenous film production and draw attention to issues such as why specific films have not received the same attention or how local film production responds to local, national, and transnational factors. It may also contribute to understanding how discourses at other levels of the semiotic process may overdetermine those meanings central to individuals and communities involved in film production. Like the Tzotzil filmmaker María Sojob referenced above, who talked about her struggles, shared with other female Indigenous filmmakers, for having to perform to the expectations of film festivals’

categorising of films while also seeking to highlight the community-nature of their production. During the third Ñawipi film festival in Ecuador, other filmmakers have found that such external forces and expectations limit the expression of their work, as well as obscure understandings of the different levels of Indigenous participation in distinct projects. Both Duarte Duarte (2017, 86) and Weber (2017, 16) speak of the difficulties for their and other Maya films to gain recognition because they did not meet the generic expectations under the considerations of 'video indígena' within Mexico. Such a multimodal semiotic perspective can thus contribute to 'a way of drawing attention to multiple parallel traditions informing the collective work of indigenous and nonindigenous social communicators, community members, and independent filmmakers' (Schiwy 2019, 27). To understand the cinemas of Abya Yala today, I argue, we must take into account the elements of design, distribution and production, as well as the various discourses which shape local conditions.

### **Multimodal semiotics: design, discourse and distribution**

Multimodal semiotics, particularly in the work of its pioneer Gunther Kress, offers a critical framework for understanding Indigenous film production beyond the immediacy of its overt semiotic content. This framework provides a way to appreciate *both* the production of emergent senses of the meaning of this filmic work at local and transnational levels in and through the circulation of such production *and* the complex and multi-layered contexts which feed into understanding the relationship of this production with 'actually lived' experiences of Indigenous people and communities in their various forms. One of the critical tenets of multimodal semiotic theory is its insistence that the production of meaning in any particular text depends not only on *production* (the material articulation that organises the expression as a semiotic event) but also on *design* (the organisation of what is to be articulated into a blueprint for production), *discourse* (socially constructed knowledges) and on *distribution* (how the communication act reaches its audience) (see Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). This provides a methodological way of approaching the cinemas of Abya Yala without interpreting it in isolation from its social practices, which, as we know from Faye Ginsburg, should be understood as being 'embedded' within the audiovisual text (Ginsburg 1994). Indeed, it allows us to appreciate its production as part of a multi-layered and internally differentiated network of such social practices rooted in particular institutional settings, which also include the influence of socially constructed knowledges and the ways in which film and media are made available for others to watch and interpret. As the concepts of production and design tend to be taken for granted in the analysis of film work, I will focus here only on the concepts of 'discourse' and 'distribution' and how these may contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of contemporary Indigenous film and media production.

On the one hand, the category of 'discourse' refocuses our attention on the ways in which existing narratives can be seen as influencing the production and design of Indigenous media. In the case of Indigenous film, these discourses include the notions of what it means to be Indigenous (or to belong to a specific community) as expressed in the public sphere at local, national and transnational levels. It is therefore also determined by the institutions where those discourses are produced, including international frameworks of human rights and narratives of national identity, as well as institutions that

organise Indigenous media practices. Indeed, it is important to emphasize that, for Kress and van Leeuwen, discussions of discourse in scholarly work are often problematic because they usually assume two things: firstly, that discourse is only embedded in language, forgetting the question of mode (or of how those discourses are articulated), and secondly, that discourses are often not connected in scholarly work to their material basis (2001, 24). Instead, discourse should not be understood as standing outside of its institutional setting but rather in light of the material basis through which those discourses are articulated and, in turn, can overdetermine other possibilities of discursive practices. On its most basic level, this notion of discourse can be used to understand differences in the articulation of different film and video projects across different areas of Abya Yala. Whereas Bolivia's national system of communication has been cautiously articulated as part of the pro-Indigenous MAS's (Movimiento al Socialismo) reorganisation of government, for example, in Chile, Mapuche cinema often builds instead on a historical memory articulated as being distinct to and against the state, whether in the form of Paillán's *Wallmapu* (2001) or *Santiago, pueblo grande de huincas* (Goldschmied 1987), reflecting the state's exclusion of the Mapuche from the national narrative, where Mapuche resistance is often labelled as terrorism. Juan Francisco Salazar writes: 'The Chilean state has consistently implemented several strategies whereby indigenous peoples have been excluded from civil society, consistently made absent from the public sphere, invisible in the national imaginary and typified in the media' (2004; 107; see also Córdova 2018). Each production must therefore be understood as embedded within a set of discourses to which it can be seen as responding or engaging with simultaneously.

Given the embedded-ness of Indigenous film in local community practice, the communication of Indigenous films and media beyond those communities depends as much on their 'distributions' in international Indigenous film festivals, in Indigenous categories in mainstream festivals, and in criticism as it does on the production process itself. It is striking that although these networks of distribution form such an essential part of the consideration of Indigenous film and media as a genre, they have not been given more attention. There is indeed no doubt that concerns about 'distribution' have informed both design and content or 'discourse' in the production of different cinemas from Abya Yala. In this sense, the importance of transnational Indigenous film festivals, such as CLACPI (mentioned above), has given the region's film production a particularly transnational flavour. If distribution accounts for the way in which the communication act reaches its audience (to paraphrase Kress and Van Leeuwen), then it is important to understand the mutual relationship that exists in each case between the production process and the different spaces of reception where production is exchanged and interpreted. Specific distribution networks have become part of the emergence of Indigenous film production since the 1980s – creating Indigenous and community films has also entailed creating interested audiences, a need that Indigenous film festivals fulfilled. Additionally, over the years, many more mainstream film festivals have included special prize categories for Indigenous films.

Where a commercial market emerged with a demand for Indigenous films, there are a greater number of fictional filmmaking more focused on entertaining and not only on informing audiences. That offer differs dramatically from the usual politically-engaged documentary productions that are still more frequent at film festivals. Over the years, the growth in demand in the festival circuit for Indigenous films has encouraged a production

more diverse and of high quality. Technological changes support the expansion of digital filmmaking enterprises; many production centres host their own YouTube or Vimeo page, and Indigenous film festivals have managed to sustain their activity through online events throughout the pandemic. Finally, with the emergence of highly sophisticated full-feature-length films in Indigenous languages, such as Alberto Muenala's *Killa* (2017) and Itandehui Jansen's *Tiempo de lluvia* (2018), we are witnessing an increasing presence of Indigenous-produced films on the commercial big screens.

The categories of 'design,' but particularly of 'discourse' and 'distribution,' thus provide a way of appreciating the diversity of the different cinematographic practices of Abya Yala. Although they are always an important part of the production process, I would argue that it is essential not to lose sight of these factors when considering an analysis of Indigenous films. On the one hand, the notion of 'discourse' reminds us that the sense of what it means to belong to a particular group or community, the significance of certain cultural practices or restoring historical memory must be understood in terms of how other institutionalised discourses have overdetermined those communities, as well as how emerging discourses about the meaning of particular production contexts have shaped their aesthetic practices (or 'design'). On the other hand, the notion of 'distribution' reminds us of the importance of the different distribution networks in determining the kind of production that becomes possible in each context. Finally, 'design' cannot be understood in isolation from these previous considerations. In the second part of this article, I demonstrate the usefulness of this approach for a nuanced understanding of Indigenous films by looking at specific examples from across the central and southern regions of Abya Yala.

### **Imagineries of Abya Yala from a multimodal semiotics perspective**

I suggest that a multimodal semiotic framework critically assesses the porous borders that delimit the cinemas of Abya Yala as an ambiguously defined corpus. It does so by providing a lens to analyse, in a nuanced way, similarities and differences between works, taking into consideration a variety of factors. This is particularly so concerning the factors of discourse and distribution. As the borders of what constitutes Indigenous film and media properly speaking is, at the same time, a question over the authority itself of (self-)representation or who has the authority to narrate, this question is a highly political one. It is intimately connected to the critical yet problem-riddled articulations of identity politics which are so often the gateway to being able to claim rights as an Indigenous person. From this perspective, a complete overview of Indigenous film and media production from the region would be impossible.

In this article's final section, I offer three specific examples to explore how the notions of 'design,' 'discourse' and 'distribution' help to better appreciate the diversity of Indigenous film productions in Abya Yala.

#### ***Cine regional in Peru***

Considering its long, popular history of indigenismo, it is surprising that Peru has not produced large film production centres as was the case in other countries with similar traditions (Brazil, Bolivia and Mexico). Indeed, Amalia Córdova, in her comprehensive and

crucial forthcoming book on the cinemas of Abya Yala, notes that Peru, despite its rich history of ethnographic film and important Indigenous population, has only a very incipient Indigenous film production (Córdova [forthcoming](#)). In Peru, some Indigenous film production has been made possible thanks to the emergence of an internal market for film consumption called *cine regional* (regional cinema), outside of the circuit of bigger film productions from Lima. This internal market has arisen exponentially and independently in many cities since 1996, with the circulation of digital films, at-home productions, and local distribution networks. As of 2005, regional film production in Peru surpassed the number of productions coming from the traditional film industry based in Lima (Bedoya [2015](#), 228). Why, then, with such a large production, haven't these films be seen as part of the 'Indigenous film' archive? Why have many regional productions not appeared up until relatively recently in specialised Indigenous film festivals or Indigenous film categories in mainstream festivals? It is a fact that many of the films that circulate in mainstream film festivals are urban-centered rather than rural or regional community productions. It is also a fact that mainstream cinema is very often produced in Spanish by a mestizo filmmaking team, even if they are about Quechua or other Indigenous imaginaries and folklore. However, the same is also true of many of the film productions that otherwise do make regular appearances on the Indigenous film distribution circuit. I argue, however, that the explanation for this non-inclusion of regional cinema into what is called 'Indigenous film production' has to do with the particularity of Peruvian regional cinema's distribution, which in turn impacts on its design.

Peruvian regional cinema has emerged due to incipient internal markets that were geared exclusively towards commercial interests and entertainment. This means that regional cinema has emerged organically for a commercial audience's demand for B-movie quality recordings reflecting regional realities that were not given enough attention by the mainstream film industry in Peru (based in and around Lima). This independent and organic emergence of local markets created spaces to produce a local cinema that did not depend on a network of film festivals to foster its production. In turn, the differences in regional cinema's distribution networks have meant that this production does not often conform to the conventions promoted by larger production centres or film festivals and is more diverse in design and in terms of who produces it. It is also at times somewhat challenging to classify that film production as 'Indigenous cinema.' However, regional film productions are often about local historical memories that explore Indigenous or at least Andean pasts, utilize cultural symbols of great importance to Indigenous communities, and reflect on contemporary issues that affect communities from local perspectives and includes elements of spoken Indigenous language (although many of these productions are in Spanish rather than in an Indigenous language).

The fact that this incipient industry emerged independently and in response to demands for entertainment means that regional cinema has produced films which are quite atypical compared to what has been taking place elsewhere in the region. One of the unique elements of this regional cinema has certainly been the emergence of a genre of Andean horror movies, which develops narratives with Andean mythical figures such as the *Jarjacha* (e.g. [Ordaya 2002](#); [Ortega Matute 2002, 2003, 2014](#)) or the *Pishtaco* ([Martínez Gamboa 2003](#)). Partly in response to this boom, since 2006, Peru's Ministry of Culture has granted official film grant prizes to film projects developed outside of Lima, which has significantly expanded the scope of regional cinema's production and distribution and,

therefore, the potential for local community productions. Catacora's (2018) opera prima *Wiñaypacha* (Eternity) has been considered a watershed moment for the coming of age of regional cinema in Peru – which has often been dismissed for its B-movie quality. Filmed in Aymara, *Wiñaypacha* tells the story of an elderly couple in a remote part of the Peruvian Andes who is awaiting the homecoming of their son. The film won the Ministry of Culture's film award for that year. The Peruvian example suggests how distribution networks can significantly shape the production and design of the cinemas of Abya Yala. Where internal markets exist and thrive, the additional focus on the entertainment value of such films triggers the production of a striking diversity in design, as the example of Andean horror films demonstrates.

### **Mapuche video and installation art**

Another important example of filmic expression to be considered when dealing with the different cinemas of Abya Yala are without a doubt Mapuche video and installation art. These have received relatively little scholarly attention and are rarely included in Indigenous film festivals or similar special categories in other film festivals. The reasons for this situation are complex. I suggest that these filmic practices must be understood as being situated within the contemporary Chilean art scene. Francisco Huichaqueo is one of the most prominent Mapuche artists today in Chile, and is a prolific filmmaker and art curator. His experimental films reflect on the conflict between the Mapuche people and mainstream Chilean society in ways that do not fit with the usual documentary and docudrama styles often associated with the idea of 'Indigenous film.' His short *Fuego en el aire* (2010a) was filmed using Super 8 in black and white, made as a series of dream-like images shot in France and Chile, to evoke war and fascism, first in France and later in the conflict between the Mapuche people and the Chilean state. It uses newsreels and footage as a kind of surrealist montage, blending together a mixture of landscapes, dreamscapes, cityscapes and soundscapes. He is considered one of the most influential artists in Chile today – a country with a vibrant artistic history centred around Santiago, the capital. He was given an honorary mention by the Museum of Visual Arts (MAVI) in Santiago in 2017, where one of his most important recent visual exhibit, *Wenu Pelon* (Gate of Light) is housed. Another young Mapuche artist, Sebastián Calfuqueo, has also created numerous art and video art installations in the style of Huichaqueo. He, however, focuses on a queer aesthetic (a topic still relatively rarely treated in cinemas from Abya Yala). For example, the video installation *Alka domo* (2017) explores and deconstructs the masculinity of the heroic Mapuche leader or *toqui* Caupolicán, who was elected by his community after holding a log on his shoulder for two days. Using a hollow trunk (playing on the Chilean term 'hollow' [*hueco*] as an insult to non-heterosexual people), the artist films themselves in numerous symbolically charged settings which explore themes of the relationship between Mapuche and Chilean history. Calfuqueo is seen wearing in each of these locations different coloured high heels corresponding to the colours of the LGBTQ+ flag, while lifting and carrying the log. Through this and other similar works, Calfuqueo offers an innovative vision as a contemporary video artist, which pushes the boundaries of thinking about the relationship between the Mapuche cultural heritage, gender, and sexual fluidity. He does all that while also addressing the Chilean state's violence against the Mapuche people.

Such contemporary examples of video art in Chile must be placed in the context of the national art movement and the high levels of Mapuche urbanisation, particularly around Santiago. As famously documented by cultural studies scholar Richard (1983), Chile has a particularly prolific and politicised art movement stemming from the 'Escena de Avanzada' that emerged in opposition to the Pinochet dictatorship. Artists and intellectuals built on this tradition throughout the complex process known as the transition to democracy after 1990 to foster institutions dedicated to the critical appreciation of this history, promoting the creation of a lively scene of critical debate and artistic innovation still felt in Santiago today. Thus, this particular history has fostered both specific discursive frameworks supporting the development of challenging, anti-state and experimental artistic trends, on the one hand, together with spaces of distribution for such artwork in urban centres, on the other. These influences come together to create a space for original design of and in Mapuche art productions that are relatively independent from ordinary networks of distribution in the region. These influences can be seen in the work of Francisco Huichaqueo, who dedicated his experimental short *Antilef, la caída del sol* (2010b) to the neoexpressionist Chilean painter Omar Gática. It is perhaps owing the fact that their work is seen in light of this tradition that it is often not mentioned alongside Mapuche community film productions. Salazar (2016), in his otherwise excellent analysis of the development of Mapuche cinema in Chile, makes no mention of these contemporary video artists, nor does Córdova (2018) in her chapter on recent Mapuche video. This shows how issues of 'discourse' and 'distribution' affect production and design, and uncovers the centrality of the questions which constitute what is thought about as 'Indigenous film.'

### ***The big three***

Finally, as I have argued above, a multimodal semiotic perspective can help us appreciate how the 'Indigenous film' category has been shaped by local contexts. We must be aware of the influence of these discursive features on productions across the region.

In terms of the dominant film production centres in the region, which have been most studied and have held the most influence over the idea of what makes Indigenous film production, there is Ojo de agua comunicación in Oaxaca, which has, in turn, emerged from the state-coordinated media transfer project; Video nas aldeias in Brazil and CEFREC (Centro de Formación y Realización Cinematográfica) in Bolivia, now part of the national network APC (Agencia Plurinacional de Comunicación). These are production centres with a long history (most beginning in the 1980s – during the earliest years of Indigenous film production). In different ways, these projects emerged under the tutelage of ethnographic filmmakers, in some cases with some level of support from the state and its tradition of Indigenism, who sought to put the technical and intellectual capacity for filmmaking in the hands of local communities. As Salazar and Córdova have also analysed (2008, 45–50), these three centres had a crucial role in the development of the transnational film festival CLACPI (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas), and there was a great deal of collaboration between the three countries during the early years of Indigenous film production (see also Himpele 2004, 362). This collaborative dialogue explains to some extent how the discourses that developed around Indigenous film and media and its purposes were very similar across these

three major production centres. Each of them emphasises community production (rather than highlighting the work of specific individuals) and the importance of film production coming from the social practices of local communities. In design, all three production centres are focused principally on politically engaged documentary-style filmmaking (although CEFREC's early productions include several docudramas). This perhaps gives an indication of the extent to which the dominance of certain discourses around what defines Indigenous film and media have been influenced by the dominant position of these specific forms of organising community media from the earliest years of its production and then promoted through the international film festival CLACPI. At the same time, the increasing diversity of CLACPI's membership over time, which has not been without its internal critics, has also led to the development of different discursive characteristics based on the needs of community media development and more diverse input into the leadership of CLACPI. Salazar and Córdova write: 'Looking at the awards for best films granted at CLACPI festivals from 1996 onwards, we see a significant shift away from rewarding impeccable technical *products* towards praising *processes*' (2008, 48). Thus, whilst CLACPI has perhaps uniquely informed the discursive framework defining notions of what 'Indigenous film' is, this process has been one which has been evolving and subject to the influence of an ever-greater diversity of actors involved. Since 1996 this process has been much more strikingly Indigenous-led. This also explains why some alternative, Indigenous-led film festival initiatives, such as the Cinema and Video Festival of the First Nations of Abya Yala in Ecuador and later its successor Ñawipi, organised by the Kichwa director Alberto Muenala, were designed to create spaces of distribution more directly controlled by Indigenous filmmakers and to showcase other visions of recent audiovisual productions (see Salazar and Córdova 2008 for details about the emergence of this festival). The perceived need for such spaces reflects the extent to which they are also themselves institutions of influence over aspects of discourse and design, and in this sense, without denying the continued importance of CLACPI, it reveals democratic mechanisms of representation that have been well-developed over recent years. The expansion of such spaces of distribution (particularly Indigenous-led ones) must be seen as a positive influence thanks to the democratisation of such spaces and processes. The use of digital media and internet platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo have been further diversifying distribution for several years. With the third wave of the internet and the emergence of platforms such as Biblioquinoa, these issues of distribution will likely become more important in the future. However, it remains to be seen whether they will shape in significant ways production, design and discourse, given that so much of the influence of more traditional in-person spaces of distribution depends as much on workshops and proper contextualisation of the work as they do on creating viewership (see Pace 2018a for more on the impact of digital technologies on recent film production).

At the same time, it is worth exploring the question from a multimodal semiotic perspective as to why these three particular cases produced such large and significant production centres from the earliest years of Indigenous film production, whereas other areas did not. Whilst nothing predetermined the emergence of these centres and not others, understanding their histories (of the influence of different discourses and distributions) can also help to appreciate essential differences in their production and aesthetics. As Charlotte Gleghorn has argued (2017), the format of different productions (or, in the language of multimodal semiotics, its *design*) was influenced by histories of ethnographic

filmmaking that preceded them. For example, Ojo de agua comunicación in Oaxaca was developed as a community project with state-funded Centros de video indígena, whose aim was to provide Indigenous communities with the expertise and equipment to produce their film and media (as explored extensively by Wortham 2013). A similar statement can be made for the Brazilian Video nas aldeias (Video in/from the villages) project, which was also heavily influenced by ethnographic film traditions under the tutelage and training of Vincent Carelli. This was very different from the Bolivian case, which experimented with fictional work and docudrama from the earliest years to represent cultural heritage or historical memory issues. We see this in early productions such as *Llanthupi munakuy* (Loving Each Other in the Shadows, 2001) and *Qulqi chaleco* (Vest Made of Money, 1999), through later productions, such as *Sirionó* (2010). The case of Bolivia in particular demonstrates how national discourses can determine and change the shape of film production. With the election of the pro-Indigenous MAS government in Bolivia in 2005, CEFREC (Centro de Formación y Realización Cinematográfica) became incorporated into a wider national network. Many of its productions since 2004 have been focused on telling the stories of Indigenous participation in the national process of change, such as the struggles of cocaleros in *Cocanchej Sutimpiy* (In the Name of Our Coca Leaves, 2004) or the 1990 March for Territory and Dignity and 1996 March in *El Grito de la Selva* (The Cry of the Forest, 2008). These examples demonstrate how local histories of design and institutional discourses influence the design and production content of these different centres, even though they have a shared history, similar conditions of production, and shared discourses concerning the overall objectives of community media production.

### **Preliminary conclusions: media literacy, citizenship, and Indigenous media in teaching and research**

This analysis has considered how multimodal semiotics' categories, particularly 'discourse' and 'distribution,' can provide for a nuanced understanding of the production of film and media from and in collaboration with Indigenous communities and individuals. This framework is comprehensive in its discussion of this emerging production, as it is able to explain to some extent the historical emergence of particular kinds of production, in certain places and at certain times, while also critically appreciating how the expression 'Indigenous films' or 'Indigenous media' have at times privileged the inclusion of certain kinds of production over others, and why.

By understanding semiotic production as a holistic process, we can better appreciate how the production context, the local, national, and transnational discourses involved, and the distribution networks affect the overall design and production of different kinds of 'Indigenous cinema.' It also allows us to appreciate with more nuance the implications of this diverse cinematographic production in terms of its cultural and political imports from different Indigenous communities. Furthermore, these perspectives help bring into focus how Indigenous film and media practices can be seen as constituting what has been called in multimodal semiotics 'multimodal communities:' communities formed and informed by and through the multimodal practices simultaneously instituted by those same communities. By participating in an emerging counter-public sphere through transnational film festivals and, more recently, commercial distribution networks, this

cinematographic practice partly constitutes, and intervenes in, discourses and imaginaries of indigeneity across local, national, and global contexts. This is complex in the case of Indigenous film and media. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001, 8) have argued that communication also depends on an 'interpretative community.' It is clear that Indigenous film and media producers (as well as other actors with a stake in the development of this new media) are as much producers as they are the interpretative community which then feeds into new projects. Indeed, Kress and Van Leeuwen remind us that interpretation is also an already semiotic action (40). As we saw above in the case of the 'big three' production centres in Brazil, Bolivia and Mexico, senses of what it means to produce Indigenous films can be defined discursively by Indigenous production centres themselves, as well as by film festivals that screen the films, and other national and transnational discourses. But it is important to remember that this interpretative community is not limited to this, nor only to Indigenous communities. As I have shown, the public for Indigenous film and media is not clearly defined; it is something that is further complicated by the diversity of the particular contexts in which this media is produced and screened. In this sense, it is important to take seriously the responsibility that is placed on the activist or scholar who promotes, researches, and/or teaches Indigenous film and media. As a result of these films' 'embedded aesthetics,' there is often a process of translation that necessarily takes place in the act of explaining the films and their significance, and this process cannot be but a violent one. Multimodal semiotics allows for the possibility, in future research, of contributing to our understanding of this translation process, where often a recorded history of such processes does not exist and requires further work to be elaborated. At the same time, while research and teaching (including the writing of this very article) may apply scientific methods to take critical distance from its object, multimodal semiotics also force us to accept that these are immanently implicated in the circuit of distribution and, therefore, in the semiotic process, with all of the consequences that this entails.

Understanding Indigenous film and media as the emergence of multimodal communities allows the study of how such film and media practices constitute a new public sphere of action outside of the state (even if they are sometimes loosely connected to state practices and discourses). I argue that multimodal semiotics allows to take further, in analytical terms, the insights given elsewhere under the name of alternative or 'counter' public spheres. It enables the study of the complex and heterogenous phenomena of Indigenous film and media-making without first having to posit the idea of indigeneity as some existing and stable 'thing' or 'content' simply expressed or reproduced. It allows us as scholars to draw attention to the complex ways in which meanings and discourses of indigeneity are not only being made visible to different audiences in different ways, but also to appreciate how those meanings and discourses are disputed or go in different directions within that same terrain. The question of power cannot be avoided: indeed, we must recognize that who has access to making and interpreting these audiovisual texts will be more or less able to steer contemporary meanings of 'indigeneity,' and we must pay critical attention to what kinds of experience are left out of these emergent meanings.

The question of the processes behind the production of a film and the filmmaker's perceptions of the communal nature of their productions, for example, matters because these insights are part of the meaning-making itself. Yet, the examples presented above show how and why some filmic productions have been given more attention, while others have been invisibilized. In other words, a multimodal semiotic perspective focuses

on the cinemas of Abya Yala as textual practices. It highlights the strictly political functions of the meaning-making process behind each text, including its social contexts.

On the other hand, that method also allows an appreciation for how multimodal practices (which have emerged because of globalisation and the collapse of more traditional liberal nation-state institutions' hegemony) are shifting the communication landscape of our increasingly transnational world. They form or open new spaces of public action, including pan-Indigenous media practices. In that sense, although I accept Freya Schiwy's rejection of Habermas's and Fraser's models of the public sphere as a state-controlled space of rational communication for understanding the import of Indigenous films (Schiwy 2019; see also Fraser 1990), I argue that we cannot do without the notion of a public sphere as a shared semiotic space wherein emerge alternative discourses of identity and belonging, and the relationship of these to political issues such as land rights and the environment. In the same way that printed media became the hegemonic form of communication at the time of the emergence of nation-state identities in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Anderson 1991), new mediascapes have opened up a new terrain for novel political identity formations, including through the creation, production and distribution of Indigenous film and media.

One of the pressing issues for the cinematic practices of central and southern Abya Yala is the elusive question of the archive, as has been noted by numerous scholars (Salazar and Córdova 2019; Wortham 2016; Ginsburg 2018). The film movement has gone from strength to strength despite difficult and precarious circumstances since the 1980s. It is perhaps entering a new stage of maturity when considering the number, diversity, and quality of productions. Yet these forty or so years of cinematographic production must be considered as cultural patrimony, which belongs to the world, but primarily to the Indigenous communities whose histories and voices it records and preserves, regardless of their involvement in the production of the audiovisual product itself. Even in the biggest production centres, many films require proper preservation and archiving. They are not accessible to the general public, never mind to the Indigenous communities whose heritage it concerns. Likewise, there is a dearth of publicly available records on specialised film festival programmes or the archives that house and preserve some of those Indigenous films, which, even when kept in libraries or museums, are often not appropriately catalogued. The value of a multimodal semiotic approach can only really be appreciated if there is enough data to allow for research on the history of this cinematographic movement, including those aspects of distribution and discourse that have so much to do with the spaces in which different films have moved. To further complicate this, in terms of the film festivals in particular, many of the developments in the history of the Indigenous film movement involve in-person events and workshops where ideas are exchanged. Thus far, insufficient studies have focused on the latter.

Finally, a 'multimodal community' around the making and viewing of Indigenous films and media highlights the importance of this emerging mediascape for articulating senses of belonging and for voicing alternative perspectives on contemporary social, cultural, political and environmental issues embedded in different understandings of the world. A multimodal semiotic framework allows for a precise understanding of how fractured the access to this kind of production is, in different places. It enables the putting back at the centre of consideration the question of power and authority over who narrates what. At the same time, that method fulfils the need for a diverse and sensitive approach to

important questions: how alternative knowledges are articulated, as they question a paradigm that takes for granted the transparency of the notion of ‘indigeneity;’ how can such a method remain sensitive to the importance of film and media activism embedded in community practices? These issues cannot help but raise one of the crucial questions that have long plagued the Latin American Republican projects: the political participation of communities whose modes of life and knowledge productions are distinct from – and threatened of extinction by – the liberal democratic institutions of modernity. In her early work, Freya Schiwy argued that ‘Indianising’ film offered a cultural practice that could take us beyond what Ángel Rama called the ‘lettered city,’ or the dominance of the written word as the central tool for the political power of representation (see Rama 1984). ‘I argue,’ Schiwy wrote, ‘that video bypasses literacy and thus overcomes the [representational] limitations of *testimonio*’ (2009, 26). I would add that Kress’s (2003) work on literacy stands as a reminder of how important access to dominant modes of expression has been in defining one’s ability to obtain a voice or political and cultural self-representation. From this perspective, the promotion of the multicultural or plurinational agenda in some Latin American Republics, and the policies of decolonisation and intercultural bilingual education programmes, have not taken seriously enough the potential significance of new media practices for the twenty-first-century claims of modern Indigenous citizenship. A multimodal semiotic perspective may help indicate some of the possible future directions for taking seriously such a possibility. The future directions of Indigenous film and media creations, the discourses they will engage with, their productions, and distributions.

## Notes

1. I capitalize the word ‘Indigenous’ following the common practice to do so in Indigenous studies scholarship (and beyond) as a mark of respect for, and valorization of, Indigenous peoples. The Chicago Manual of Style is now recommending this usage, although it has not found its way into common use yet in many academic journals. See for example the Q&A section on capitalisation from the Chicago Manual of Style website: <https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/data/faq/topics/Capitalization.html>.
2. In various places in this article, I paraphrase an understanding of the adjective ‘ethnographic’ by Indigenous filmmakers, as they use it in the expression ‘ethnographic film’ to refer to what they see as a colonising and ‘otherizing’ etic representation of Indigenous peoples. It is essential to recognise that this understanding of ‘ethnographic’ is partial and specific to the political articulations at stake in Indigenous film activism. It does not do justice to much contemporary ethnographic work that has responded effectively and creatively to such critiques, nor does it sufficiently recognise how many current Indigenous film productions build on experiments in documentary ethnographic practices. A complete discussion of this issue falls outside the purview of this article. The term ‘ethnographic’ should be understood to be internal to the multimodal semiotics through which different productions create and dispute discourses, at the same time as they respond to and are embedded in specific histories of Indigenous representation.

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