

Entre Espacios.  
Movimientos, actores y representaciones de la globalización

**Foto de la portada:**  
Representando a Oaxaca con vestimentas étnicas.  
Foto: Ingrid Kummels

Ingrid Kummels (coord.)

# Espacios mediáticos

Cultura y representación en México

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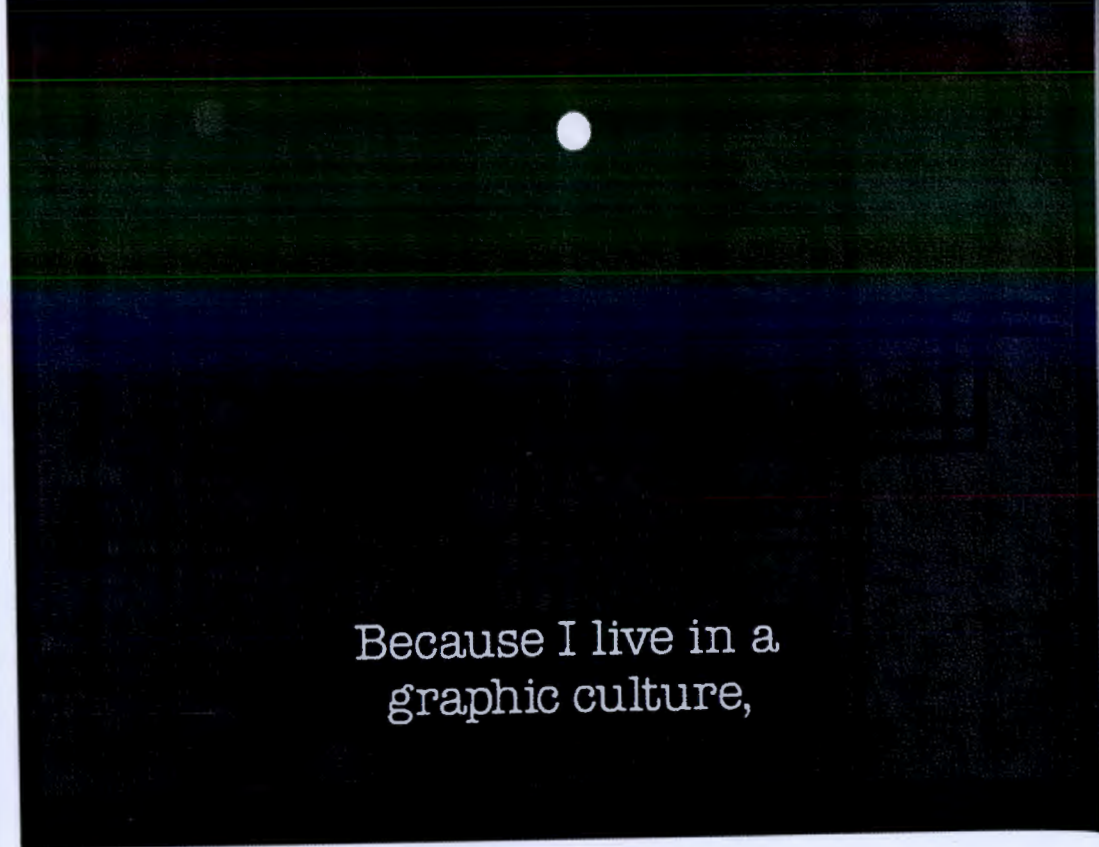
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Because I live in a  
graphic culture,

## *Cine Indígena: Video, Migration and the Dynamics of Belonging between Mexico and the USA*<sup>\*</sup>

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Since 2006, and in contrast with the film representations of television and mainstream cinema in Latin America, a growing number of films that have been screened at the International Festival of Indigenous Peoples Film and Video<sup>1</sup> have presented a novel perspective of the way of life of indigenous people in Mexico. In the documentary *Sueños Binacionales/Binational Dreams*, the audience is offered an insight into the life of young Chatino-speaking adults from Southern Oaxaca who have relocated to Durham, North Carolina, where they work in hotels and gardening centres. In *Cheranastico Town* we see how a Purépecha-speaking family in the rural community of Michoacán gets together to watch a *video-carta*, a taped message shown on TV, informing them about the everyday lives of their relatives who reside in the United States. These and other video productions like *Día 2* and *Tama Milwaukee* display an indigenous lifestyle in settings that a film audience of the past would hardly have associated to such a life-style: at non-places (Augé 1992) such as websites, highways and the bare brickwork of a multi-story house under construction. Thanks to the *migradolares*, which a young man working in the United States invested in, the building now adorns a rural community of Purépecha-speakers. The protagonists of these documentaries are simultaneously involved between localities in both Mexico and the USA, leading a translocal life between the two countries. The film scenes seem to mirror real life, as they have been created by filmmakers whose biographies are evidence of the migratory movement between Mexico and the United States: Yolanda Cruz, the director of *Sueños Binacionales/Binational Dreams*, emigrated to California with her parents as a child from a region of Chatino-

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<sup>\*</sup> This text has been first published in: Albiez, Sarah/Castro, Nelly/Jüssen, Lara/Youkhana, Eva (eds.) (2011): *Ethnicity, Citizenship and Belonging: Practice, Theory and Spatial Dimensions*. Frankfurt a.M.: Vervuert.

<sup>1</sup> These festivals have been organized by the Coordinator of Latin American Cinema and Communication Indigenous Peoples, CLACPI, since 1985. At first, non-indigenous ethnographic filmmakers and their creations dominated at the festival. Starting in 1989, the festival was appropriated by *Cine Indígena* advocates who conferred a more multifaceted, plural character to the film screenings.

speakers in Oaxaca. She studied film production at the UCLA School of Theatre, Film and Television. Contrarily, Dante Cerano and Eduviges Tomás (*Día 2, Cheranastico Town*) grew up in the small Purépecha community of Cheranzicuri in Michoacán and have never crossed the border in search of employment. Nevertheless, the community in which they and their families continue to live has experienced a profound transformation due to the transmigration of the majority of its inhabitants over the past three decades. While the Mixe filmmaker Filoteo Gómez of Oaxaca (*Tama Milwaukee*) decided to settle down in the United States only a few years ago, having married a US-American geographer and media scientist.

The films of these creators constitute an important, but not necessarily representative, recent part of a media scene in Mexico that is currently known by the name *Video Indígena* or *Cine Indígena*. This article focuses on the contribution of this scene to the emergence of novel, shifting and multifaceted forms of indigenous<sup>2</sup> collective identity and subjectivity. Since the 1990s, indigenous persons of Mexico have increasingly used videotaping, as well as the production of documentary and narrative films, as a means of decolonising existing representations of the indigenous people as exotic, subordinate and passive "others". The hypothesis of this article is that these novel ways of conceiving indigenous subjectivity and collective identity are connected to the interplay between, and increasing use of, new forms of geographic mobility (migration from the countryside to large cities as well as international migration) and of virtual mobility (the use of electronic mass media, among them video, to construct transnational social networks). At the same time, such development entails new forms of exclusion and inequality, but how these changes are to be conceptualised remains a cause for investigation. I will also try to specify the connections that exist between transformations in the different fields mentioned above. Questions that arise in connection with *Cine Indígena* are: To what extent do film creators, collaborators and viewers construct new emotional attachments as a basis to the collective feelings of belonging brought about by these new forms of mobility? How do

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<sup>2</sup> In the following, the English term "indigenous people" is used as an approximation to the Spanish terms *indígenas* and *miembros de pueblos originarios*. The latter are the terms which are most commonly used in Mexico today, either by institutions of the government or by social movements made up of actors who identify as *indígena*, such as activists of *Cine Indígena* or members of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), among others. This translation, however, is not unproblematic since "indigenous" is currently used most often beyond the Americas in regard to the debate for the rights of indigenous people worldwide. This debate often does not refer to the specific history of the imposition, rejection and appropriation of discriminating and derogatory terms such as *indio* in Latin America. The terms *indio* and *indígena* have, in the course of the 20th century, been appropriated by the successors of the population which was homogenized and oppressed during the Colonial period. It has thereby been converted into a unifying term of self-identification and a basis for common social action.

these people make use of the images constructed and conveyed in their films to tell novel narratives about gender roles, local community, nation and transnation? To what extent do such images transform the social contexts they are set within? Does *Cine Indígena* constitute a specific political project and is it related to politicised concepts of indigeneity designed in a transnational context between Mexico and the United States? Changes to be studied also include the emergence of new concepts of cultural citizenship within this same context.

### The Multiethnic Dynamics of Migration between Mexico and the United States

This paper supports the idea that the migration of Mexicans to the United States is one of the key socio-historical arenas through which *Cine Indígena* has been developed. This argument requires the analysis of the migration of Mexicans to the United States as a multiethnic process in which actors according to gender, class and ethnicity have been compelled to choose diverse migratory paths over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. For example, migrants who spoke an indigenous language participated in the binational *Bracero* Program, initiated in 1942, mainly involving members of the ethno-linguistic groups of the Purépecha of Michoacán, Oaxaca's Mixtecs and Zapotecs and the Nahuatl of the Estado de México and Puebla (Fox/Rivera-Salgado 2004: 2). When the *Bracero* Program was unilaterally ceased by the United States in 1964, the wave of undocumented migration into the country soared. In contrast to the common assumption that the poorest and most marginalised persons are those whom are compelled to migrate, there is no direct correlation between the lowest-income municipalities and those with the most out-migration (Fox/Rivera-Salgado 2004: 6). International migration requires certain financial resources in order to pay for essentials such as the expenses of a smuggler known as a "coyote" and fake documentation. As the majority of Mexico's indigenous population belong to the lowest-income sector of the country, most participated in international migration at a relatively later date. Until recently, members of this sector who depended upon agriculture for a living migrated mainly within Mexico's national borders. Following a seasonal and cyclical pattern, they would move from the countryside to the large cities or labour camps of agribusiness enterprises on the Pacific coast in order to earn money (Nagengast/Kearney 1990; Nolasco 1995). In the 80s this pattern underwent a dramatic transformation due to the economic and social dynamics that spread throughout the Mexican countryside, such as weakening state support for peasant agriculture. Since then, the native peoples of Mexico have relocated in significant numbers from the countryside to the large cities. Besides this and incited by the economic boom of the United States in the 90s, members of communities who until then had little experience of crossing the border, began moving to the United States. For this reason, Mayas from Yucatán and Chiapas now

work in California and Texas, Mixtecs and Nahuas from Central Mexico have settled in the Midwest and Texas, while Mixtecs from Puebla and neighbouring Veracruz have gravitated to the New York area (Fox/Rivera-Salgado 2004: 6). Since the 90s, the number of indigenous people migrating to the US has grown so considerably that California has surpassed the traditional Indian state of Oklahoma in terms of its number of indigenous residents.

In migrating to new transnational contexts, ethnicity, understood as a community imagined on the basis of "cultural" differences and as politics, has become more salient. Focusing on Mixtec-speakers, the anthropologist Michael Kearney has pioneered research in regard to this development. Kearney (1996, 2000) explains how commuting and establishing networks between the communities of origin in Mexico and the satellite communities in the United States has triggered a spatial expansion of the economic, social and cultural reproduction while also inciting new reflexive forms of collectivisation along ethnic lines. In the rural home communities of Oaxaca, such as in the Mixteca region, individuals would first self-identify as members of their rural community, occasionally consider themselves to be *campesinos*, but would never label themselves as *mixtecos*. However, members of different Mixtec-speaking communities would move in together when living and working in the United States. In the late 70s they began highlighting a new, broader ethnic identity as Mixtecs, Zapotecs or as *indigenas* in opposition to the non-indigenous population. They appropriated a label formerly used by linguists, anthropologists and the Mexican government, utilising the latent identity horizon of their shared mother tongue.<sup>3</sup> On one hand, this ethnic identification constituted a reaction to racial discrimination and exclusion on behalf of the "Anglos", English-speaking US-Americans, as well as on behalf of the "Chicanos", US-Americans of Mexican origin (Velasco Ortiz 2008b: 160). On the other hand, the actors exploited the more inclusive ethnic dimension of identity for collective action in order to enforce demands *vis-à-vis* representatives of the Mexican State and their employers. Self-identification as indigenous people offered them the advantage of greater visibility within the group of "ethnic Mexicans", a group which is homogenised and discriminated against within the United States.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Mexican government has classified the nation's population according to linguistic criteria; the government therefore classifies the native population in around 60 ethno-linguistic groups. This classification was at first part of the State's indigenist policies, which aimed at "Spanishizing" the indigenous peoples, among other techniques, through education. Currently Mexico adheres to a multicultural nation model and officially seeks to preserve and promote indigenous languages and collective identities.

<sup>4</sup> The part of the population that is lumped together under the category of "Mexicans" or "Mexican-Americans" in the United States is in reality quite diverse. It includes among others people of Mexican origin whose ancestors were naturalized as an outcome of the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 as well as recent immigrants. I use the term "ethnic Mexicans" to highlight this diversity.

The new self-identification as Mixtecs in these contexts had repercussions on collective identity in the rural home communities, transforming it within this context too (Nagengast/Kearney 1990: 87). Besides this, Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Chatinos, Nahuas and others do not only express a shared identity to an indigenous language group, but also in many instances, a new feeling of belonging simultaneously to a transnational community. This is reflected in new community names that have been coined half-jokingly and half-earnestly "Oaxacalifornia", "Cheranisticotown", "Puebla York" and "NewYorktitlán" (cf. Smith 2005: 19). The transmigrants reposition themselves socially within this transnational field. On one hand, indigenous migrants have to cope with economic, social and political exclusions in both Mexico and the United States (Fox/Rivera-Salgado 2004: 3). While on the other hand, they seek and find new opportunities to extend their range of action in private and public spaces in order to overcome these exclusions. For instance, they may be able to attain new advantages in regard to their social status due to the re-appraisal of services in the tertiary sector such as gardening and child-care in the context of transnationalism (Pries 2008: 56). Further still, women assume new roles in both private and public spheres, including, for example, roles within the family, migrant networks, local communities, trade unions and political organisations (Velasco Ortiz 2005). Ethnicisation does not always take place in the course of relocation to the new social context. Actors may also disapprove of and avoid being categorised as "Indians" by abandoning the use of their indigenous mother tongue. Fox and Rivera-Salgado (2004: 7f) caution that "not all migrants have formed satellite communities in the United States (...) and even fewer have formed ethnic, regional, or pan-ethnic organisations". While the experience of migration and collective identity building are definitely closely interconnected, they do not inevitably lead to actors adopting a new, broader ethnic identity.

To be able to trace these diverging processes of collective identity construction, it is instrumental to conceptualise ethnicity as a sense of belonging, that is, as a flexible way of creating emotional attachments to various collectivities and groupings in the context of hegemonic categorisations at certain socio-historical moments (Yuval-Davis/Kannabrian/Vieten 2006). In a binational context and whether caused by the relocation from countryside to large city, from one country to the other, or simply participation within different everyday and institutional settings; it is important to understand how actors adapt and react when moving between different national and local forms of ethnic categorisation. The social agency and the creative actions of the "indigenous" migrants show us that they do not harbour one sole immutable ethnic identity. Instead, in the course of transmigration they relate to different overlapping and interacting ethnic regimes, of which some are more flexible and others more rigid (Velasco Ortiz 2008a; Apitzsch 2009).

## The Multiple Origins of *Cine Indígena*

The emergence of *Cine Indígena* has to be understood in the context of the indigenous autonomy movement too (Wortham 2004: 365). Indigenous peoples' movements in Canada, Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, among other countries, articulated their demands on an ethnic basis for the first time due to the inequalities and racial discrimination they suffered in the context of homogenising nation models such as in those that focused on *mestizaje*.<sup>5</sup> By the end of the 60s, indigenous identities had been revitalised in Canada, the United States, Mexico, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. In the context of Latin America, common historical factors that contributed to these developments can be identified: As a consequence of the formal abolishment of the Colonial subordinate status of the *indio* in most of the young republics, native peoples paradoxically lost their former special rights with regard to semi-autonomous administration and communal proprietorship of land. Furthermore, they still experienced cultural and racial discrimination in spite of their equality as citizens before the law. The dominant elites regarded the cultural heterogeneity of the independent states as the cause of their deficiencies. They therefore placed the blame for economic and political problems on the sector of the population which they marked as the indigenous "ethnic" minority, thereby excluding it from the aspired homogenous nation. Precisely because of this exclusion, the indigenous peoples rejected *mestizaje* and the homogenising nation model. At first, inhabitants of rural communities tried to enforce their claims in regard to land property and an agrarian reform by taking on the class affiliation known as *campesinos*. Nevertheless, they found that their demands ultimately did not elicit a response from the farmers' confederations and trade unions. Increasingly, they raised political demands on an ethnic basis and asked for collective cultural rights: rights for the proprietorship of land and natural resources along with those for self-administration, thereby demanding partial autonomy within the nation-state. Furthermore, an upcoming indigenous elite that trained as government school teachers, and that is dealt with later in this text, still suffered discrimination in spite of efforts to assimilate into the dominant Mestizo society. For this reason, the educated elite chose to appropriate and redefine the indigenous identity in their own positive terms, employing it as a political weapon. By the 90s the new political subjects designated themselves as *Native Americans* (USA) and *First Nations* (Canada), while in Spanish-speaking countries as *Pueblos Indígenas* or *Pueblos originarios* and in Portuguese-speaking countries as *Nações Indígenas*. They contributed signifi-

<sup>5</sup> *Mestizaje* (Mestizoisation) refers to a model of nationhood to which numerous Latin American elites have adhered to since the end of the 19th century. In the concept of *mestizaje* genetic and cultural mixing are conceptualized as being intertwined and as natural and desirable processes.

cantly to the initiation of constitutional reforms, which officially set the basis for the multicultural character of a number of countries.

It is no coincidence that during this same period, indigenous people in many parts of the Americas began to create their own documentaries and narrative pictures as cameramen/women, sound professionals, directors or producers. Media centres related to film production were principally inaugurated in these countries with strong indigenous movements. Even local television stations were founded. Among the most notable ones in Mexico are the non-governmental organizations *Ojo de Agua Comunicación*, *Chiapas Media Project/Promedios de Comunicación Comunitaria* and *Exe Video*.<sup>6</sup>

The emergence of these media projects in Mexico can be traced back to several sources. On the one hand, they were "invented" from above, since the government agency for indigenous affairs, the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI)<sup>7</sup>, started an important initiative by launching the program *Transferencia de Medios Audiovisuales a Comunidades y Organizaciones Indígenas*. In 1989, INI's director at the time, Arturo Warman, a former member of the group of the progressive *antropólogos críticos*<sup>8</sup>, intended to bestow indigenous people with access to and control over the institutional resources by training them in modern audiovisual technologies (Wortham 2004: 364). Non-indigenous media experts and ethnographic filmmakers designed the program through which the asymmetrical access to mass media (due to its control by a few transnational corporations) was to be at least in part overcome. Instructors trained 87 *indígenas* in the basics of video production and editing by imparting eight-week crash courses delivered between 1990 and 1994. The trainees generally recorded video films that dealt with a multitude of subjects close to the indigenous communities interest, while – probably due to their non-indigenous instructors, documentary filmmakers such as Luis Lupone, Guillermo Monteforte and others, – they took their inspiration for the most part from documentary realism (Wortham 2004: 363).<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, the interest in audiovisual media also developed from below, as a means of cultural and political empowerment seized by grassroots indigenous social movements. Since the late 60s, indigenous professionals have

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the media centers of *Cine Indígena* in Mexico cf. Plascencia Fabila and Monteforte (2001); Köhler (2004); Córdova and Zamorano (2004); Smith (2006); Schiwy (2009) and the Website [www.nativenetworks/si.edu](http://www.nativenetworks/si.edu).

<sup>7</sup> The *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* founded in 1948 was dismantled by the government in 2003 and its functions transferred to the *Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas* (CDI).

<sup>8</sup> In the 70s, the group of "critical anthropologists" along with the indigenous autonomy movement were instrumental for Mexico's change to a multicultural nation model.

<sup>9</sup> The film *Tejiendo Mar y Viento/Weaving Sea and Wind* by Teofila Palafox, a collaborative effort between an indigenous Huave and the non-indigenous filmmaker Luis Lupone produced in 1987, is a showcase of this early effort.

turned against the perception of Mexico's native people as a "problema indígena". They began to oppose the governmental policy of "integrating" this sector of the population via "Spanishisation" and transforming them culturally into Mestizos. This indigenous educated elite, consisting of teachers employed in governmental schools (known as *promotores culturales* at the time), trade union activists and local politicians, were a driving force in re-orienting Mexico towards a multicultural nation model. They opposed INI's policy goals in spite of the fact that they themselves worked as employees in indigenist governmental organisations. "When Our Media Belong to the State", is how Antoni Castells-Talens (2009) accurately characterises this interrelationship. In his investigation of the radio stations installed by INI in the Maya region of Yucatán in the 80s, he observes how contradictory and conflicting interests were negotiated within these institutions. Maya-speaking announcers raised demands for cultural and political autonomy *vis-à-vis* the Mexican state and showed solidarity with the Zapatista uprising of the 90s – even while working as employees of government-owned radio facilities. In several regions these minority sectors advanced a politicised ethnicity, identifying for the first time as members of an ethnic group such as "the Maya", "the Purépecha" or "the Rarámuri", though not in the sense of an ethnic minority, but rather as an incipient nation thereby entitled to rights similar to those of the nation-state (cf. Kummels 2006: 261f, 290f).

There is evidence that a significant number of the *Transferencia de Medios* trainees were members of the indigenous educated elite, among them former employees of the INI radio stations. Many of them had gained experience with communications technology such as radio in the context of local grassroots initiatives, using it as a form of cultural and political empowerment before participating in the *Transferencia de Medios* program (Smith 2010; Márquez 2009). Within a relatively short time, the indigenous activists advanced their own objectives of a self-determined, continuous and autonomous media production, identifying in many instances with the cause defined by the indigenous autonomy movement. For this reason, local organisations such as the TV station *Video Tamix* (1992) and the NGO *Ojo de Agua Comunicación* (1998) in Oaxaca were keen upon the idea of becoming independent with regard to their finances and infrastructure, and to some extent they severed ties with INI. Formerly integrated as *Centros de Video Indígena* of INI, they began relying more upon sources of finance from international NGOs for their infrastructure (Wortham 2004: 365f; Smith 2010: 266, 269).

In further instances, video was seized upon by popular social movements due, by the most part, to its accessibility and low production costs compared to customary 16mm-cameras. Indeed, it was picked up by grassroots movements in Chiapas including, for example, the Zapatista movement (Halkin 2006). It was used as a means of documentation to be able to record the statements of political actors, in particular government representatives in the context of negotiation and conflict over cultural and political rights. Covering an event through visual media



Cell phone filming at the *Danza de la Pluma* in San Bartolo Coyotepec, Oaxaca, Photo: Ingrid Kummels, 2010.

enables activists to force government representatives to be more cautious of their declarations, thereby enabling activists to exercise a certain control over officials (Brysk 2000: 95). The indigenous filmmakers who used media to such ends, had no aspirations of converting their raw material into an edited film (Köhler 2004).

Finally, the use of video can also be traced to the dramatic changes, which indigenous communities have experienced in the course of transmigration to the United States over the last decades. Persons with a migratory experience or participating in a "culture of migration" (Cohen 2004) even while remaining in their community of origin are, in general, consumers of mass media such as radio and television. They also make use of electronic communication technology in creative ways. As part of their private and commercial necessities and interests, they are keen to communicate with relatives and friends in different communities, transferring remittances, engaging in the local politics of their community of origin and completing commercial transactions in a transnational context. Migrants rapidly turned to increasingly accessible mobile telephones, photocopiers, fax machines and particularly video for these purposes (Smith 2005: 64). These technologies prove to be especially attractive for persons who are illiterate or are not functionally literate. Camcorders may be of particular appeal to individuals acquainted with television broadcasts, which applies to most migrants. They developed the genre of the *video-carta*, which consists of messages that are re-

corded with a camcorder and that frequently document central family gatherings. The persons filmed often speak directly to the camera and occasionally wave to the spectator in mind. In his master thesis, the Purépecha filmmaker Dante Cerano (2009) analyses how, starting in the 90s, migrants introduced easy-to-use digital video cameras to Cheranatzicurín, Michoacán, encouraging the recording of family celebrations such as weddings and their circulation among relatives and friends on both sides of the border. Based on the local demand for such *videocartas* or *registros*, local individuals developed enterprises; they render their services as video-makers or as *video p'itari* as they are called in Purépecha.

The use of communication media as part of migratory processes may entail new subjectivities and collective identities. This is due to the fact that actors can exploit the potential of communication media to tell their own narratives and to portray the world in their own terms, thereby obtaining the power to intervene in political actions (Rodríguez 2009; Martín-Barbero 2002). Videotaping and filmmaking are not about representation in the sense of a "passive" mechanical creation that renders something or someone visually. Instead, film representation can be conceived as a rhetorical act, as "an attempt to influence action or persuade viewers in some way" since it implies and is directed to a community of receivers, both indigenous and non-indigenous (Leuthold 1998: 28). Gabriela Zamorano (2009: 263) emphasises the active and productive qualities of filmmaking as a process of "intervening into reality" instead of conceptualising it as one of representation. Her concept highlights the possibilities communication technology harbours to construct and thereby transform a particular political reality. A number of investigations document how actors, in the course of processes of production and consumption, raise their voice for the first time and formulate a vision of the future that is strong enough to form part of the public sphere and to attain political power (Rodríguez 2009; Stephen 2007).

Clemencia Rodríguez highlights the democratising potential of media within her idea of "citizens' media".<sup>10</sup> She bases her concept on the findings of media and visual anthropologists such as Juan Francisco Salazar who indicate that media are used to express more complex forms of belonging. The Mapuche, for example, question the equation of citizenship to Chile's nation-state by using radio and video to manifest their language and culture in a public sphere. They thereby exercise a form of "ethnic citizenship", appearing in the public sphere not only as the citizen of a particular nation-state, but as a member of a linguistic and ethnic community (Rodríguez 2009). Migration and the various forms of translocation related to transnational processes also incite the formation of novel,

<sup>10</sup> In regard to politicized forms of communication media appropriation, Clemencia Rodríguez (2001, 2009) pleads for considering them less as "alternative media" and rather as "citizens' media". Whereas the term "alternative media" accentuates their difference from media driven by the need to produce a profit, the term "citizens' media" emphasizes their democratizing potential.

more complex forms of belonging such as sustaining a binational attachment to communities on both sides of a political border (Anthias 2006). Indigenous migrants that move between Mexico and the United States often aspire to become active members of two communities, their community of origin as well as their community of residence (Fox/Rivera-Salgado 2004: 27). "Small media" or "alternative media" may contribute to this, triggering an accordant social change and playing a central role in the construction of migrant civil society. Media may be employed to express new concepts of "cultural" or "community citizenship". According to *ciudadanía*, concepts existing within the rural indigenous communities of Mexico such as community obligations, the participation in community cargos and communal work, entitle a person to specific rights as a member of that community. Such concepts have been developed further in the context of migration. On this basis, "cultural" or "community citizenship" are being conceived as more open-ended with regard to the arena of inclusion, thereby comprehending a binational or transnational context.

At this point it is important to address the issue of the modernising potential that is attributed to technical film devices and the art of filmmaking per se in a hegemonic manner. Digital media are culturally inscribed with respect to gender, race/ethnicity and geopolitical standing as belonging to "the West". In this context, women, indigenous people and inhabitants of developing countries in general are denied the capacity of possessing a "natural" affinity for modern mass media. Eurocentric media theories reinforced these popular notions, as they parted from the assumption that a command of writing was the central indicator for progress. The empirical findings, however, contradict these assumptions: Dante Cerano, for example, documents the use of media in rural communities in Mexico by indigenous and, in part, illiterate individuals over several decades. This appropriation of "modern" media is subdued to a power hierarchy as Donna Haraway (1997: 89) reminds us, as only those participating in this hegemonic field receive recognition as rational actors.

### Cine Indígena as a Transnational and Transcultural Cinema

*Cine Indígena* or *Video Indígena* is, even within Mexico alone, a field in which heterogeneous actors are engaged. To begin with, I will highlight what these actors have in common. The filmmakers who mostly prefer to call themselves *videoastas* or *comunicadores* often portray everyday life in the rural indigenous communities, its agriculture, its commerce, the preparation of local dishes, community work, fiestas, political organisation and religion. Further topics include social movements and political activism, among others in relation to the Zapatista movement. Apart from this, some films deal with migration and transnational life, to which I will return below. *Ojo de Agua Comunicación's* film catalogue includes the films *Pueblos de México* and *México Intercultural*, a series that was



commissioned and produced by the Mexican education ministry for educational TV, and therefore obtained a large audience.

The term *Cine Indígena*, however, unduly suggests an ethnic homogeneity of the actors and their products since it conveys the impression of exclusively indigenous people creating films with indigenous themes. In reality, diverse actors, among them non-indigenous collaborators and members of the anti-globalisation movement, participate in the filmmaking. For this reason *Cine Indígena* rather more constitutes a transnational network of places of production and consumption (Wood 2008: 105). According to their cultural and social positioning the people involved in this field interpret *Cine* or *Video Indígena* differently and without reaching a consensus. Italian-Canadian Guillermo Monteforte, a key actor since the time the term *Video Indígena* was coined, explains:

“This term does not refer to a determined cinematographic genre (...) it also has nothing to do with whether the creator is indigenous or not. In essence, (*Video Indígena*) it includes productions and creators who use audiovisual media to bestow a dignified voice to the visions, engagements, knowledge and cultures of the native peoples” (Plascencia Fabila/Monteforte 2001: 57).

Whereas Monteforte belongs to the directors of *Cine Indígena* who advocate for an indigenous cause, but who are neither categorised nor self-identify as *indígena*, others explicitly position themselves as filmmakers of an indigenous identity, like the group of filmmakers mentioned at the beginning of this article. Comparable to the European *auteurs*<sup>11</sup> they convey a personal note in their films by individually shaping and influencing the basic film idea, the script, the production and the editing process. Besides this, they convey their subjective point of view by means of the camera perspective, sound and commentary. Their films are concerned with the transformation of the cultural and social positions of indigenous actors who live in the transnational context of Mexico and the United States. Interestingly, the Purépecha filmmaker Dante Cerano draws a much more rigid line than Monteforte between “indigenous audiovisual artists” and “indigenist Western documentary filmmakers”. With this distinction he triggered a huge debate at a panel on indigenous media at the *Second International Film Festival* in Morelia in 2004 (Salazar/Córdova 2008: 39). His stance makes it clear that indigenous filmmakers aspire to the further expansion of their autonomy within media production as distinct from non-indigenous ethnographic filmmaking. Still other *videoastas* distance themselves from the term *Video Indígena*, since they do not conceive of their work as belonging to an ethnically separated realm, but instead as part of a universal realm of documentary and feature film production (Gómez in: Smith 2006: 114; cf. García in: Wortham 2004: 365).

<sup>11</sup> An *auteur* is understood as a film director who plays such an important part in making his/her films that he/she is considered to be the author.



Juan José García at *Ojo de Agua Comunicación*. Photo: Ingrid Kummels, 2009.

Furthermore, even the sector of these indigenous filmmakers is divided. An ongoing controversy among them concerns the following question: Should films, as representations, be elaborated collectively in order to reflect community life and the opinions of members of a community in a representative manner? Or are individually elaborated *auteur* films expressing the creator's view of things as admissible, perhaps even a way of filmmaking to aspire to? The Oaxacan video-makers working at *Ojo de Agua Comunicación* sustain that film creations should be based on the notion of *comunalidad*. They use this term as shorthand for the collectivity they attribute to the structure of indigenous life in general, which in their view traces back to pre-Colonial times. What sustains *comunalidad* is the participation in community work, giving mutual assistance within the extended family and assuming community cargos – in summary, serving one's community.<sup>12</sup> Their films, for the most part, deal with the subject of communal indigenous life, portraying it intimately “from inside”. The creators of these films avoid expressing their personal points of view and instead let the protagonists have

<sup>12</sup> The author of this article interviewed Juan José García, the then director of *Ojo de Agua Comunicación*, on August 22nd 2008 in Oaxaca City. García's film, *Llallcho/Nuestro Pueblo/Our People* made in 2003, is a good example of the notion of *comunalidad* as it is a visual portrait of an indigenous community which is preparing for and celebrating the Day of the Dead.

their say, taking pains to represent a certain cross section of the population in regard to age, gender and authority.<sup>13</sup>

Even though the actors of *Cine Indígena* may be divided on these issues, by relating to the same production, diffusion and consumption structures, they create a common public sphere. In the meantime, the heterogeneous directors and audiences participate in this sphere to negotiate their notions of local community, nation and transnation. The term *comunicadores*, which is how the creators of this scene prefer to call themselves, stresses this aim of network building via media. *Cine Indígena* circulates geographically within different transnational and Panamerican contexts such as the *Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas* (CLACPI) film festivals as well as non-indigenous film festivals, educational TV programs, and international activist and media distribution organisations like *Promedios* in Chicago. This is similarly the case with the following films that I will be examining, which were also distributed by the small film enterprise established by Dante Cerano (*EXE Video*). The prizes that the respective films have won also contribute to their popularity.<sup>14</sup>

#### Filmmaker Dante Cerano

Dante Cerano lives in the Purépecha-speaking community of Cheranatzicuirín, where he has been working as a filmmaker since 1997. He has been known amongst a broader audience of *Cine Indígena* since 2003, when he presented “*Día 2*”, an aesthetically unconventional film due to its seemingly eclectic mix of genres. In 2004, together with his wife Eduviges Tomás<sup>15</sup> he produced the video *Cheranasticotown*, focussing upon the local impact of migration in Cheranatzicuirín. Cerano turned to filmmaking after his engagement as an announcer at the INI radio station in Cherán and after having attended courses at INI’s *Centro de Video Indígena* in Morelia. As a consequence of its participation in the *Bracero* Program and despite some Purépecha joining at a late stage, Michoacán is one of the primary states of origin for migrants heading to the USA (Anderson 2004). Talking to a journalist, Cerano explained how he himself became a videomaker:

<sup>13</sup> For a list of the video productions of *Ojo de Agua Comunicación* cf. <http://www.ojodeaguacomunicacion.org/> and in regard to the contents of specific films cf. Plascencia Fabila and Monteforte (2001); *Ojo de Agua Comunicación* (2006) and Wood (2008: 105-111).

<sup>14</sup> In 2004 *Día 2* won the prize for the best artistic creation at the *VII Festival Americano de Cine y Video de Pueblos Indígenas* in Chile.

<sup>15</sup> Eduviges Tomás works in the same community as an elementary school teacher.



Dante Cerano and Eduviges Tomás at their home in Cheranastico, Michoacán.  
Photo: Ingrid Kummels, 2011.

“I am a Purépecha from a community in Michoacán. I have been able to manage things in the community in such a way that I am able to survive there. Since a long time ago the indigenous people have been my main interest. In 1996, I began with this video stuff. My people form part of those who migrate to the United States. My first camera was a VHS, which one of them brought along for me from that country. With the camera I have found a form in which to express my ideas. I’ve never been to a film academy. (In my films) I have given the floor to people like me. It was as if I had been offered the possibility to narrate my own stories. So what I am doing now is to narrate a collective chronicle.” (cf. Cruz Bárcenas Enviado 2006)

Dante Cerano’s documentaries *Día 2* und *Cheranasticotown* convey the radical changes that his home community has undergone in a highly entertaining way. As a filmmaker he comments irreverently on the scenes and plays in an innovative manner with genres of images and audio. Both films convey how the encroaching forces of globalisation and heavy investment in local culture find their expression in a distinctive local culture, in the simultaneity of tradition and innovation. The film *Cheranasticotown* takes us into a spacious house with two floors due to the *migradolares* respective investment. Nevertheless it is built and inaugurated according to readjusted local traditions. The film allows us to experience the current form of veneration of the Patron Virgin of the community:



La Virgen de la Asunción in Cheranasteco. Photo: Ingrid Kummels, 2011.

she is adorned with a necklace made of American dollar bills. The music which community members listen and dance to during their leisure time resembles a pastiche of disparate musical choices, including the *ranchero* music of Northern Mexico with its *narcocorridos* and Purépecha rock music. He explains with regard to this kind of apparent juxtapositioning that:

“When I mentioned the indigenous people (*pueblos indígenas*), I contrasted the native people (*pueblos originarios*) with the Western world, but the native people are in fact Western, since they live in that type of context. They nevertheless maintain a particular perspective on their times and spaces. (...) I will soon present a film about Purépecha music and I call it Purépecha music because language is the heart of a culture, but the rhythms belong to the world: There is something similar to Pink Floyd within that music and similar to all the other influences that have touched me throughout my life – myself as a Purépecha who has listened to the music, to the duets and *pireris* of (the local banda of) ‘Los Chapas de Comachuén’, but who has also listened to the world.” (Cerano in: Márquez 2009)

In his films, Cerano shows us that it is within this context that indigenous identity and indigeneity are redefined, in a dialogue and debate between cultures or further still, a process of transculturation. As a consequence of the mobility of the actors and the movements and appropriations of cultural elements, which once were separated in space and time, music genres cannot be reduced to *one* origin alone.

The film *Día 2* portrays a Purépecha wedding, the marriage of Hitler and Gabriela. Based on typical Purépecha wedding *registros*, it irreverently chronicles the second day of the marriage from sunrise to sundown. One of the film’s most remarkable sequences is dedicated to the “Bellas del Atole”, the maidens who prepare the corn beverage for the wedding feast and who are eligible. The scene begins with a panning shot of the young Purépecha women wearing their traditional ankle-long skirts and aprons. In his voice-over Cerano introduces them as the *atoleras* and as the attraction of the feast (for the men). “But perhaps they think that we would prefer to trade them for blondes with a high neck” he comments before in the next scene the young Purépecha women, thanks to slow motion, seem to dance to Puff Daddy’s *Every Move You Make, I’ll be Watching You*. In the following scene, the indigenous women are juxtaposed to blondes by means of animation: Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, Pamela Anderson and Jennifer López, embodiments of Western female beauty, appear as frames within the frame. As media theorist Jesse Lerner (2009) writes, “Cerano is conflating several gazes here: the male gaze at an objectified female ideal, be it Caucasian or Purépecha, an ethnographic gaze of the outsider at the spectacle of otherness, the Purépecha gaze at the unattainable ideal of an imported and alien standard of beauty.”

I suggest that the success of *Día 2* is related to the film’s ability to speak to several audiences at once; it therefore forms part of different transnational public



Screenshots from *Día 2*, "Las bellas del atole".

spheres. This is why it is able to merge topics, which according to dichotomising racialised categories, are often isolated from each other: Indigenous people and "Western" eroticism. It reconstructs and relates "the indigenous" and "The Western". Watching or referring to Cerano's film, a spectator can therefore position himself explicitly *between* cultures. An indigenous spectator is for example able to relate to its bifocality in regard to "the indigenous" and "The Western", thereby reframing the meaning of local practices such as wedding celebrations, dancing and flirtation in relation to diverse cultural standards. This bifocality creates an alternative to the established stereotype of the asexual indigenous people that is conveyed by Mexican mainstream cinema.

Furthermore, Cerano's constant, ironic commentary on the Euro-American "othering" of native people shows that this has become an integral part of Purépechan self-identification. As dominated minorities, indigenous people have "accustom(ed) themselves to a bifocality reflective of both the ways that they view themselves and the ways they are viewed by others" to quote George Lipsitz (1990: 135).

The development of this innovative perspective in his film was the result of previous experiences, as Cerano explained in a recent interview<sup>16</sup>. As a trainee of INI's *Transferencia de Medios* program, he completed his first narrative film, *Uaricha in Death*, in 2003. The film deals with myths about witchcraft among the



Purépecha. The audience at the film festival of Morelia criticised it for the length of certain scenes amongst other things. Cerano had the impression that the critics did not understand the film due to cultural differences. Angry about this reception, he decided to make a film capable of crossing over cultural barriers and shot *Día 2*.

### Conclusions

The example of *Cine Indígena* illustrates how creators, collaborators and viewers may construct new emotional attachments as a basis of collective feelings of belongings in the course of new forms of geographic and virtual mobility. Films like *Día 2* and *Cheranasticotown* tell novel narratives about gender roles, local community, the Mexican nation and the US-Mexican transnation. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that the narratives entail according transformations in social reality. The impact of the films, can however be assessed with regard to the fact, that:

<sup>16</sup> The author of this article interviewed Dante Cerano on August 1st 2010 in Paracho, Michoacán.

- *Cine Indígena*'s structure of production, and of consumption, is conducive to the collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous allies.
- *Cine Indígena* circulates extensively within different transnational and Pan-american contexts such as the CLACPI film festivals as well as non-indigenous film festivals, educational TV programs, and international activist and media distribution organisations such as *Promedios* in Chicago.

Within both of these circuits, debate and dialogue take place. The imaginaries of the films dealt with, have triggered, among other things, a controversy about the elaboration of film representations which side either with collectivity or individuality with regard to film production and its visual images. Regarding this controversy, the sector of filmmakers that defines itself as 'native' voices different concepts of indigeneity. These concepts range from essentialist renderings to more nuanced and inclusive forms of indigeneity (cf. Smith 2010: 270f). For example, in Dante Cerano's films, Purépecha culture and identity imbued with either a bi- or multifocal character is highlighted. These manifestations, such as "hybrid" Purépechan music, resonate in the everyday lives of mobile people, whether indigenous or not. Mobile people are sometimes forced and often willing to cope with diverse everyday contexts, displacements and the geographical separation of members of their networks. They may therefore choose to mediatise their cultural interactions. In these respects, *Cine Indígena* as part of the field of popular culture and media has now become an important public sphere for the negotiation of multiple belongings related to local community, nation and a transnational space.

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