

Representing Inter-culturally on the Example of Indigenous Filmmaking of Colombia

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Abstract

This paper investigates the idea that film has a potential to become an efficient way of intercultural communication and open dialogue between the nations. It uses a case study of indigenous filmmaking by a small Arhuaco community from Colombia, which emerged as a response to violence and displacement, and concluded in a golden era of the Arhuaco filmmaking in the region, with more far-reaching influence than initially expected. I examine the questions of the politics of representation, intercultural audiencing, the notion of the 'Other' and the question of 'translation' of concepts which are not culturally universal. I also explore the issue of 'reversed audiencing' where people who were traditionally the subjects for Western filmmakers turn to criticise these productions and use this impulse as an initiative to self-represent themselves. Ultimately, this paper proposes that film, using universal qualities of storytelling and narrative, has a potential to bridge the gap between the nations despite cultural divisions. As such, it encapsulates the most effective way of intercultural dialogue, regardless the diverse backgrounds and aims of the creators and the audiences.

Keywords: Indigenous, communication, Colombia, representation, other, intercultural

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Introduction

Communication is a complex process which can be achieved using various tools, and it is undertaken for many different reasons. However, we can never assume equal distribution of literacy, and therefore the effectiveness of traditional modes of communication cannot be taken for granted. Two factors contributing to the success of communication are the relevance of the message and mutual understanding between the producers and audiences, reinforced by the willingness to participate in the process.

This paper draws on an extensive fieldwork conducted in 2015 and 2016 over the period of several months. Hidden on the picturesque slopes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia live four indigenous nations: the Kogi, the Arguacos, the Wiwa and the Kankuamos. They feel responsible for protecting us, the Younger Brother (as they call us) from the destruction we bring to the planet. They, as our Older Brother, possess a deep understanding of the spiritual word of nature, something we lost long ago (which made us the main culprit endangering the wellbeing of the planet). But the Sierra Nevada was also a place occupied by the guerrillas and paramilitaries involved in the internal civil conflict troubling Colombia for decades. Many indigenous people became involuntary victims of this struggle, often getting forcibly involved in the collaboration with the guerrillas or facing life-threats if they do not comply. This was the fate which disrupted a peaceful life of Amado Villafaña, an Arhuaco farmer and family man. His mother did not speak Spanish, and till then his contact with the non-indigenous world was minimal. When he refused to collaborate with the ELN guerrillas in 2002, his entire lifestyle was turned upside down. Forcibly displaced to urban dwellings, first to the nearby city of Santa Marta and then to Valledupar, Villafaña sought the guidance of a *mamo*, a spiritual leader of his community. The advice he got was to disseminate the knowledge about what happens in the region in order to gain understanding and support of external allies, but also to protect the community from any future persecutions. Villafaña, who never expressed the slightest interest in film or any other form of Western art during his quiet, rural life, found a supporter and adviser in the person of Colombian filmmaker and anthropologist, Pablo Mora. Together, they managed to secure funding for the initial training and equipment. A Collective Zhigoneshi was formed, consisting of the representatives of all four communities and focused on initiating first indigenous video productions from the region. In 2007, after five long years, they finished their first film, 'Yuawika sia: En el río del entendimiento' ('The River of Understanding').

However, adopting the new technology was not without challenges. It was not only a question of learning a tool which was previously unknown in the community, but also gaining the trust of the elders who eventually agreed to perform a ritual of the spiritual approval of the equipment to make it accepted by the community. Also, learning the film language was not enough to secure the successful application of the medium. An even more significant challenge was to 'translate' indigenous concepts into a more universal message which could be understood by the audiences which are not familiar with the Kogi or the Arhuaco world. It is not only the question of the language (the communities of the Sierra speak their own indigenous languages, with Spanish being used only by a small percentage of their society) but mainly the concepts which are fundamental to the indigenous cosmology and often have no

equivalents in Western philosophy. Finding a way around it and using correct analogies which can describe the often very complex ideas for the external viewers was identified by Villafaña as one of the biggest challenges of this endeavour. Additionally, in order to get themselves understood, Villafaña and his team made an effort to comprehend what Western audiences expect from films. As a result, they deployed into their productions a sophisticated film language backed up with a thorough understanding of the technical aspects of filmmaking, narrative and contemporary storytelling, reinforced by a perfect photography and traditional music. In many films, Villafaña recounts his personal stories and makes his children witnesses of the rediscovery of the Arhuaco history; other times he uses re-enactments of historical facts, archival photography, and the commentaries of various experts.



The first title was followed by eight others, with 'Nabusímake, Memories of the Independence' and the 'Resistance on the Dark Line' as the most influential ones. The film language in the subsequent titles got increasingly refined, and the content grew more sophisticated. Initially, the productions addressed the questions of violence in the region and served as a form to give evidence of the persecution which overshadowed the lives of the communities. They were a perfect tool to re-establish facts and give testimony of the recent traumas. However, the newly adopted tool inspired the Zhigoneshi communicators to dig deeper into their history and to address the pains of the colonial past, as well as the contemporary cultural persecution in the form of films made in the region by the external (European) filmmakers. The past encounters with external filmmakers proved traumatic for the communities of the Sierra - most of the time they were portrayed as an exotic 'Other' which can be 'discovered' and 'saved from oblivion' by European anthropologists or filmmakers (who, very often, made little if any effort to understand and align with the indigenous system of values and cosmologies). By making themselves aware of the role they played in these externally made films (the process I label 'reversed audiencing' - when the subjects become the audience of the films which depict them), they gained an agency and urge to self-represent themselves, to prove that they are a culture which

is very much alive and can speak for itself, without relying on external help. One of the most recent titles made by the collective, 'Sey Arimaku', is a highly self-reflective film contemplating the very idea of creating portraits of the 'Other' and touching on the subject of the spiritual dimension of indigenous filmmaking.



This journey into filmmaking and the surrounding politics of representation in the Sierra not only proved therapeutic but, unexpectedly, it also opened the door to participation in a much wider international dialogue with other indigenous nations and the non-indigenous world. Step by step, the voice of the Sierra started to be heard beyond the community, first in the academic circles in Colombia, and increasingly in the artistic ones beyond the border of the country and the Latin-American continent. At this moment, with a big push from Pablo Mora (who also collaborates with various film festivals), the work of the Zhigoneshi Collective is slowly reaching mainstream audiences. However, regardless of this success, the communicators from the Sierra never abandoned their own people, and they regularly screen their productions within their own communities. Years on, having attended a significant number of international film festivals and events, Villafaña and his team became a symbol of indigenous cultural resistance, not only for their region.

What makes this case study particularly fascinating is the realisation that this level of dedication and international involvement has been achieved out of deep necessity to respond to the situation of oppression and misinterpretation, rather than any particular artistic ambitions. Communication crossing the cultural divisions and the right to self-represent are at the core of the Zhigoneshi filmmaking. Against all odds, a far-reaching interest has emerged on international grounds in response to this call from a relatively small and isolated community hidden on the slopes of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The collective and their productions got multiple awards and travelled the world showcasing their work. They also managed to present some of their titles in commercial cinemas (just before the regular screening), and they made a film for a

local TV channel. In the end, the motivation behind reaching the non-indigenous audiences was not only to educate those who were or could potentially be the Arhuaco's and Kogui's perpetrators but mainly because the communication became the ultimate goal of their filmmaking. This also explains why they call themselves 'communicators' rather than 'filmmakers' or 'artists'. This is often of no consequence for foreign audiences, as they might still apply Western criteria for the reception of these works: they might look for an entertaining, educational piece of work with an interesting story and pleasant visual style. However, despite various expectations, what matters is that the 'message' reaches foreign audiences regardless of the cultural divisions. If this message is accepted, contested or ignored all together is a different question. What matters is the emergence of this unprecedented opportunity for the communities of the Sierra to communicate their ecological concern and engage into this intercultural dialogue which bridges divisions between the filmmakers and audiences, often coming from very different backgrounds.

The story of Villafaña and his team only proves that finding the right language and mode of communication is the crucial element of successful communication processes. The Arhuacos, in the vast majority, rely purely on oral communication in their native language. By using the film medium, they allowed for the original language to be registered and translated. The DVD set which they released included subtitles in English, French, and Spanish (as most of the films were recorded in the four native languages of the region). The translations allowed to bypass the language barrier. But even more importantly, film enabled them to 'travel' beyond the borders of their community lands, often reaching audiences on the other side of the globe.



These two factors proved critical to reaching the aim of raising the awareness of the situation in the region beyond their original environment. Except for the leaders (and now, the communicators), the community, in great majority rarely leaves their settlements. As a result, the direct communication beyond the community is

significantly reduced. The communities are also largely beyond the written communication circle. The internal communication within the Kogui and the Arhuaco world happens on a very participatory level in the form of assemblies attended by all the community members - elders, man, woman, children. They discuss the issues which concern them till all the community come to a common conclusion, without any time restrictions. Most of their activities are performed collectively, and the participation in the collective decision-making of the community is obligatory and rarely gets questioned. In the face of that, the perspective of initiating a dialogue with external partners and reaching foreign participants in this communication process might sound like a daunting task. The unexpected success of this endeavour might have surprised the makers themselves. What follows, the dedication applied to perfecting the technical skills of filmmaking and a thorough understanding of the needs and expectations of Western audiences served two purposes: to get understood by exigent non-indigenous audiences, but also to prove technical proficiency of the communicators from the Sierra in order to assure that they are treated seriously by the Western public. Unlike the Western films made in the Sierra, indigenous media, in turn, do not call for discrediting or criticising Western values. Instead, the only requests respect for the indigenous beliefs, without any ambitions to impose them onto the non-indigenous world.



Conclusion

In summary, the situation in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is an example of the emergence of strong self-representation initiatives of the traditional community which reached for a video tool which was alien to their culture in order to respond to the situation of violence and cultural misrepresentations. Having given evidence of their traumas and having re-established facts, the Zhigoneshi Collective created the archive and preserved memories for future generations. They also benefited from therapeutic effects of filmmaking, which cleared them from the heaviness of the situation and the impossibility to transcend the impasse. As an unexpected result of this situation, they gained a voice in international communication processes by their participation in academic events and international film festivals in various parts of the world. Having satisfied the initial reasons which initiated their filmmaking, they now moved onto more universal topics which no longer deal with traumas and repressions from the



past. They are at the stage where they refined their style and reached what I call a golden era of their filmmaking. The ambitions to self-represent themselves empowered the communities of the Sierra and gave them access to a tool which was the missing element for the success of their external communication.

We can conclude that communication undertaken with the right tools and enough effort to ‘translate’ and explain the culturally specific contexts has a potential to bypass the national and cultural divisions. Visual media offer an attractive option for communication and offer a promise of a successful intercultural dialogue. The question which follows is what we can do with this opportunity and if the filmmaking from the Sierra will remain yet another anthropologic curiosity or a genuine invitation to bridge the gap between the indigenous and non-indigenous world.



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