Los Con Voz
Those With Voice
Anthropologists, Media, and Indigenous groups: Finally working together.

(For use with the DVD of the same name)

Jeff Arak
Brandeis University
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Confronted by a world where genocide, exploitation and deprivation of control over one’s own life are constant facts of life for fellow human beings, social science must become the indefatigable eye watching over human inviolability. Only then will the social scientist become anything more than a predator consuming data. And only then will the concept of responsibility mean more than a buttonhole flower worn at academic ceremonies.

- Helge Kleivan (in Wright, 1988)

A Note On The Process of Editing

Often the process of editing a film is cited as the garrison at which most of the manipulation of information occurs- or at least where the author’s voice may be most heard. While I do not wholly agree with this analysis, I do see its reasoning. Editing, for me, has been both a difficult and enlightening process. On one hand, it is where the most of my information is lost. Whereas with writing, the text is expected to be quite long and inclusive, most people are not accustomed to watching films much longer than three hours. In my case, I was given an hour limit by my thesis committee, which made the choices about what information to exclude even more difficult to make. Generally speaking, I saw my task to synthesize the most important themes of my research and leave the analysis for this text. On the other hand, it became an interesting exercise because most of what I had to work with was other peoples’ words. Images, music, video clips and text were employed to compliment the interviews, but the majority of the film was edited to verbal testimony. One could use the analogy of writing an essay comprised exclusively of pre-written statements. This text, while not exhaustive, is designed to compliment and continue the issues brought up in the video. It is suggested that the video be viewed before reading this text.
Research Methods

My second year at Brandeis, I was enrolled in a class called Latin American in Ethnographic Perspective taught by my advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Ferry. I was a student interested in anthropology and Latin America and had spent a few eye-opening months in Central America before coming to college. I remember one day coming to this class and watching a video called Reclaiming Justice: Guerrero’s Indigenous Community Police, which I have seen various times since then. I remember Professor Ferry saying something about members of the community in the video being involved in the video’s production, which struck me as peculiar. Later in the semester I contacted the production company that trained members of that community to make the film. The production company is called Promedios, in Spanish, or The Chiapas Media Project in English. I was looking for some interesting summer work, not entirely interested in getting paid and wanting to learn more about these Zapatistas that I had been reading about. I was offered an internship by Promedios, and a few months later I was on my way to Chiapas, Mexico on a travel grant offered by the Latin American and Latino Studies Program. During this first stint of my “fieldwork” I lived in a hostel for young people doing social work in San Cristobol de las Casas, one of the largest cities in Chiapas, and worked five days a week at the CMP office a few blocks away. I spent my time at the office translating videos and putting subtitle tracks onto DVDs. Because all the programs were in English, I was pressured to become an expert in professional level editing and DVD authoring software, which I did. I also became accustomed to things like hearing pueblo used to refer to an ethno-linguistic group rather than a town by people around me. I learned about the urban-rural divide in Chiapas and about how small media production companies survive on
grants and deep commitment. I also began training myself to think of my new Canon Optura 10 digital video camera as my second set of eyes. Since I first decided to go to Chiapas I had intended to make a video that could synthesize the work that Promedios was doing with Zapatista communities into a short film that I could show back at Brandeis. My longstanding interest in filmmaking had partially led me to intern for this somewhat off-the-beaten-path Production Company.

After two months I had collected about twenty hours of footage, including about ten interviews with indigenous filmmakers, employees of Promedios, members of other media organizations, and an anthropologist from Berlin. This footage was assembled for the 2006 Greater Boston Anthropology Consortium at Wellesley College into a thirteen-minute overview of indigenous media production in Chiapas. The film was successful in that it did synthesize quite a lot of information, but I felt that it barely scratched the surface of some of the meatier issues about Mexican indigenous media making like language or political resistance. So I decided to return to Mexico in the summer of 2006, this time to Oaxaca, a neighboring state, for the 8th International CLACPI1 film festival.

Serendipitously, the festival was being organized during my summer break and many of my contacts from Chiapas (and surprisingly, my advisor Dr. Ferry!) were able to connect me with the festival coordinator, Guillermo Monteforte. During three months in Oaxaca, I lived in an apartment with my compañera, Erica, who was also a student at Brandeis and was interning with a public health organization in Oaxaca city at the same time. I worked for two weeks in preparation for and then during the film festival in the logistics department.

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1 CLACPI: Latin American Coordinating Committee for Film and Communication of Indigenous Peoples
The office of Ojo De Agua, the NGO that was organizing the festival, was a hub of intellectual and creative minds. There were always people popping in being greeted with warm words, cups of coffee and shots of Mezcal. The staff was comprised of a ragtag assemblage of media activists, university students and Oaxaca City residents. The head of logistics was a marine biologist from Mexico City whose brother lived in Oaxaca. After the festival was over I continued to visit the office and help with decompression from the festival, although I also began doing some traveling on my own in the last few weeks of July 2006.

Back in the states, I worked as a translator at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian film and video festival in November and December of 2006. I also invited Alexandra Halkin, the founder and international coordinator of Promedios and Juan Jose Garcia, the program coordinator of Ojo De Agua to Brandeis in April 2007 to present about their work and the popular protests happening in Oaxaca. Since then I have been compiling all of my data into this text and the accompanying film.

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The data for this report and the accompanying film were gathered using informal and formal interviews, participant observation, and extracted from literature on indigenous media and visual anthropology. My informants were mostly people working in the fields of non-profit media advocacy and training, video making, radio broadcasting, and anthropology. Contact with my informants was made on both personal and professional levels. Since both times I was in Mexico I worked with non-profit media advocacy groups, contact with people at my jobs resulted in both of these types of connections. Furthermore, living in areas in which these groups operated offered me access to other organizations and individuals that I then incorporated into my informant web. Thinking about everyone I interviewed as intersection points in a web is a very useful hermeneutic, as they are all more or less aware of each other, a fact which becomes obvious in the transcripts of the interviews. Furthermore, thinking about the
community in which I did my fieldwork as not geographically or ethnically bound, but as a much more imagined (Anderson, 1983) one of indigenous filmmakers and media activists in Latin America and the world, affirms this model of a web with connected loci.

Normally I would get to know individuals through my interactions with them at work or during events like the CLACPI film festival. On rare occasions I would approach an individual that I had no previous contact with and ask them some questions pertinent to my research right off the bat. Normally people were very forthcoming as my questions were never invasive and as a college student obviously interested in their work, I neither posed a threat nor seemed too forward. My position as a student and furthermore as a young person in general helped me gain access to certain areas and conversations and I suspect this was because others felt themselves taking on the complimentary role of teacher. Oaxaca especially, is a state that is very concerned with education and university students play a very present and political role in the civil arena. There were a number of college students studying media production and engineering that worked with Ojo de Agua throughout the festival and then continuing during the *desalojo* of the teachers union and the following popular resistance.
Figure 2
My “Fieldwork” was conducted mostly in the cities of San Cristobol de las Casas, Chiapas, and Oaxaca City, Oaxaca. Photo from Navtech Inc.

Demographics of interviewees

Most of the indigenous people I talked to that lived in Chiapas and Oaxaca belong to the Mayan, Zapotec and Mixtec ethno-groups. (I refrain from using the term ethno-linguistic group because not all of my informants identified with their communities on the basis of language.) Of my informants that did identify as indigenous, I interviewed fifteen males and four females, and only two of these females in depth. Only one of these two females was from Mexico. This deficit of female informants is in part due to the fact that most indigenous communicators are male, but compounded by the fact that the female video makers at the festival tended to stick together. If I had been female doing this work I’m sure my ability to initiate conversations and ask for interviews with other females would have been greatly improved. I interviewed two native people from other
parts of the world: one from Finland and one from Canada. They are included in the statistics above.

Of my informants that did not identify as indigenous, I interviewed three Mexicans, two Americans, one German and one Spaniard. All of them had spent a serious amount of time (at least two years) in Southern Mexico or Guatemala.

The people that talked to me were between 19 and upwards of 80 years old. The youngest were members of the youth group in Santo Domingo Petapa, on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and the oldest were members of the same town’s elders council. Most of my informants and interviewees were between 20 and 50, with a majority of the filmmakers aging closer to 20 and the organizers and seasoned media activists averaging closer to 50.

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Visual Eloquence

It would seem that the cultural function of social documentaries in western society has become to change, at least the viewers’ perceptions of the topic covered; effectively demonstrating the capacity to convince. In other capacities, some films are designed to change not just minds, but institutions, paradigms or activities in society.

One goal of this paper is to compare this type of film with ethnographic film in a way that will make the descriptive distinction very clear, and at the same time thoroughly blur the prescriptive ideological and linguistic separations to a point where we will need to accept a new mode of defining the commodities that our filmmakers are producing.
Social scientists will hopefully use this paper as an opportunity to question their own motives in the creation of ethnographies, visual or otherwise.

There is a conception that film is somehow more impressing than text in a very dangerous way, and so the makers of films have a stricter responsibility to adhere to rules or standards, especially if one is engaging in “documentary” film where the content is “actual” (Minh-ha, 1990:78). What we are assuming is that because scholarly texts are less accessible to a general audience than film, due to the complexity of the language as distinct from the visual language, which has come to be ubiquitous in mainstream culture in a way that the intellectual lexicon never has; we assume that the possibility for misinterpretation is magnified and this is something that scientists (even social ones) are not ready to accept.

The truth of the matter is that our society’s (and increasingly the world’s) obsession with visual imagery as art will never allow a film to lose its artistic qualities. Even the security camera at the bank, arguably the most utilitarian use of a camera has aesthetic qualities. The high angle, the grainy texture, even the omission of frames to save tape draws one’s gaze. The proliferation of cameras in western culture has arrived us at a situation in which any visual image can be interpreted as a Point Of View shot, or in other words, there is a whole suite of suppositions that one assumes viewing a film that are absent when one picks up a copy of American Anthropology.

This is not an entirely new idea. It has been stated often by visual media critics and anthropologists that film resembles reality or dis-reality in a visceral way that may affect the viewing experience (See Kracauer 1960, and Macdougall, 1992 for two examples) but it is becoming the trend that film now resembles other film or video. The
dolly zoom was made famous when used by Alfred Hitchcock in *Vertigo* (1958), and later became an industry standard in *Jaws* (1975). Today when a filmmaker deploys this particular technique, for those familiar with it, it is iconic of danger as opposed to simply symbolic of it. Because we are familiar with the concept of a security camera, and we know that they are placed for security and that they have a very specific high angle panning style of motion, a filmmaker can employ a technique that is iconic of this point of view and have it carry all the cultural assumptions that go along with security cameras (i.e. surveillance, danger). In this way, filmmakers *do* have a responsibility to know about these types of assumptions and to guard against their misuse just as a writer must be eloquent in text. What we fail to appreciate is what visual eloquence looks like.

**Activism**

It seems as if historically, to be an anthropologist first and an activist second is forbidden; for what one learns as an anthropologist, one must forsake as an activist. (Wright 1988:365) If a filmmaker/activist wishes to improve his work by immersing himself in the intellectual discipline of visuality and becomes a scholar on top of an artist, his work can only improve. Indeed, we often appear to be stuck in a bind, paralyzed with the fear of continuing our research to its logical conclusion of advocacy, and yet it is a fear that we must overcome if we are to survive as social scientists and if our field is to remain a viable member of the scientific community and our practitioners contributing members of our society and planet.

In the case of indigenous media in Southern Mexico, the opportunities for academics to have a positive impact on a society are at least matched by the need. People
that study journalism, communication, anthropology, videomaking, the Internet, Latin America, political systems, power structures, history and language are needed to make connections between resources (intellectual and otherwise) and communities that lack them. In the film that accompanies this guide, Alexandra Halkin explains that while communities should be ultimately responsible for their own development, certain elements of that development need to come from outside the community and importation of these elements often needs to be initiated by outsiders.

Many of the people that work with indigenous groups training in production or helping with distribution of media come from an academic background. Terrance Turner, Guillermo Monteforte and Faye Ginsburg to name three. Their experience in the academy has allowed them to understand the phenomenon within a wider perspective of power relationships and also to form connections with institutions like The Smithsonian and The Basque Government. The connectivity of the academic community and the desire and motivation to communicate on the part of indigenous media makers seems almost too convenient. This is not to say in the least that indigenous media is not the only way for anthropologists to become involved with the modern communities with which they work.

**Applying Anthropology**

Robin Wright (1988), in a compelling history of anthropologists’ involvement (and dis-involvement) in the politics of indigenous groups, offers three different types of applied anthropology developed outside Latin America. The first type is exemplified by practitioners like Raymond Firth and Lucy Mair. Wright purports that this British “structural-functionalism” held that cultures could not develop into other “higher” forms,
But that acculturation, was inevitable. It was not supposed that cultures could and should be in charge of their own development. This bred a distrust of anthropologists, who saw the societies they studied as means of research and nothing more. Furthermore, efforts to document and preserve (Mead and Metraux, 1953) cultures through “urgent” or “salvage” anthropology “at a distance” were generally aimed at the data and not actually preserving the communities in any social, cultural or political sense (Wright 1988:367). Wright’s hypothesis about why this situation arose is linked to the political situation in which the field emerged,

In part, this attitude reflected a strategy adopted by anthropologists in light of their own powerlessness and incapacity to intervene in social processes and colonial policies. The anthropologist’s role was to fit in, as technical specialists in the colonial process. (Wright 1988:370)

Born out of a colonial environment, anthropologists were conditioned to think in the same way that many still do today.

Wright’s second type of applied anthropology, he writes, is typified by the work of George Foster, and while it retained an ethnocentric set of suppositions, it did put the anthropologist in a position of agentive assistant rather than passive observer.

The third type resembles what others have called Action Anthropology (Bennett, 1996:535), and puts the anthropologist in a less rigidly defined role where he or she acts on behalf of and works with the community in which they are working. The anthropologist must operate “in alliance with the community, respecting its cultural code and seeking a favorable adaptation to the natural and human environment.” (Wright, 1988, 370) This transcendent mode of doing anthropology seems necessarily the most
important and worthwhile. As Sol Tax defined the technique, morality and a responsibility to our fellow humans guide the actionist.

The American Anthropological Association does not encourage nor discourage advocacy based on sound anthropological research. Their Code of Ethics (Approved in 1998) contains this phrase in section ‘C’: *Responsibility to the Public:* “Anthropologists may choose to move beyond disseminating research results to a position of advocacy. This is an individual decision, but not an ethical responsibility.” (1998:2) This standpoint is very distinct from documents such as the Declaration of Barbados for the Liberation of the Indians (1971) that demands the participation of social scientists—specifically anthropologists—in activism and policy setting. The responsibility as far as those involved in the writing of the Declaration of Barbados are concerned is historical.

*Anthropology took form within and became an instrument of colonial domination, openly or surreptitiously; it has often rationalized and justified in scientific language the domination of some people by others. The discipline has continued to supply information and methods of action useful for maintaining, reaffirming, and disguising social relations of a colonial nature. Latin America has been and is no exception, and with growing frequency we note nefarious Indian action programmes (sic) and the dissemination of stereotypes and myths distorting and masking the Indian situation—all pretending to have their basis in alleged scientific anthropological research. (Declaration of Barbados for the Liberation of the Indians, 1971)*

Again, those that see potential for the discipline take the colonial roots of anthropology very seriously. The concern seems to be a combination of feeling some sort of “white man’s burden” and of wanting to distance today’s practitioners from those that took part in the colonial systems of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Alexandra Halkin, founder of the Chiapas Media Project in Mexico told me in an interview that she too saw advocacy on the behalf of the communities that academics study as an obligation.
I think that academics that work with indigenous people in Latin America need to be activists as well... These communities must get something in return for opening themselves up to be researched. There’s a lot of research that academics do that can be really useful to indigenous communities- absolutely- but it’s a lot more work to actually collaborate than to just take. (Alexandra Halkin, personal interview: June 2006)

Ms. Halkin’s position is understandably community-oriented, as she has been working sometimes in close contact with marginalized groups in Chiapas for nine years. For her, academics need to earn their careers through humanist work, much the same way that Sol Tax encouraged his actionists to.

Faye Ginsburg (1995) and Terrance Turner (1991) have both testified to the importance of media making in self-determination and identity control. Again, the work of our academics is needed and useful. The task remains however to integrate our academics and our advocacy in a meaningful way and without compromising either.

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Figure 3
Antonio Guzmán Ramirez acts as a guide through the video, introducing concepts and endearing viewers to my arguments. Photo by Jeff Arak.
Strategic Essentialism

The notion of “strategic essentialism” was both created and then later abandoned by Gayatri Spivak (Davis and Jonsson, 1993) in pursuit of a richer understanding of the complexity of essences. Nevertheless, Sally Engle Merry, of New York University employs the concept thankfully in her article Anthropology and Activism: Researching Human Rights Across Porous Boundaries (2005). She reports that while research methods are similar for academics (and specifically anthropologists) and activists, the form in which their information is presented is very specialized. Both types of professionals use mainly surveys, personal histories and case studies to gather data, but activists employ it in simple personal stories designed to motivate action, and academics “create complex involuted stories for intellectual gain”. (Merry, 2005:242) The agendas of each of these types of actors are obviously not identical, but they do overlap as both are attempting to explain the world in a certain way (strategically) so that an audience will take away a particular message. So employing the notion of “strategic essentialism” benefits Merry in that it gives her grounds on which to explain the tactical use of essentialisms in reaching a political goal.

The distinction between activist and academic can stand to be blurred a bit more however, and who better to do it then the champion of objectivism himself, Roy D’andrade.

Even D’andrade’s most “objective” scientific explanations are written for a reason, carry months (if not years) of research and thought and drip with intentionality. Furthermore, to address the way that information is presented, D’andrade himself engages us to consider even the most detailed anecdotal account as a generalization.
It is a natural assumption of the reader that any narrative is, in some important sense, typical of what happens in that place, unless told otherwise. Kenneth Burke (1945) calls this rhetorical strategy that of the ‘reductive anecdote’ – the world is “summarized by” and “reduced to” the story one tells about it. Presenting an anecdote is just as essentializing and totalizing as stating a generalization. (1997:405, original emphasis)

As Merry has described, activists must engage in strategic essentialism to reach the goals that they see worth this generalization. But what D’andrade is explaining is that even the most anecdotal, specific description of an isolated incident becomes essentialistic when consumed within a finite text. In other words, if one text is all we have to understand a topic, la parole acts as an icon of la langue.

Activists in fact, do this strategically, but academics do it accidentally and then feel guilty about it. My position is that we need not. As academics we have an extended array tools that we may employ to prove why action is needed. Furthermore, we do not stop at any single text, but try to continually create a larger body of work made up of individual publications.

There is so much to be gained from border crossings. Anthropologists may gain a sense of the major global crises and moral issues that warrant attention and activists may refine their theoretical concepts and analysis of social problems. (Merry, 2005:254)

Imagine a biologist studying HIV/AIDS and refusing to put to use her findings that could possibly lead to a cure. Imagine a meteorologist hesitant to warn the greater population of tropical storms that threatened the lives of coastal dwellers. It would seem almost maleficent to withhold this information. This is how we must begin to start thinking about social science and about the role of anthropologists in shaping social change. Is there any other discipline that has sustained arguments against allowing a morality to enter into its practice and theory? John Bennett (1996) outlines what Sol Tax
called “populist inspired anthropology” which renounced “employing practitioners and was in favor of voluntary academic projects engaging in intensive intervention in the problems and needs of local communities.” (1996:524) Roger Bastide (1971) also felt that what he called *applied anthropology* should help deprived classes achieve a better life.

**Zapatistas Use of Media**

My original interest in indigenous use of media was associated singularly with the Zapatistas, who have arguably gotten the most notoriety for their use of video and radio. This fame is in part due to the multitude of organizations like Promedios that have aligned themselves with the Zapatista ideology, but also due to a very specific type of organization and leadership.

In a publication sponsored by the US Deputy Chief of Staff following research that was conducted in 1996, by “RAND Arroyo Center’s Strategy and Doctrine Program, which is a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the United States Army” (Ronfeldt, Arquilla, Fuller & Fuller, 1998: Preface), the organization of the Zapatistas was said to be one that facilitates something referred to as *social netwar* (Ibid: Definition of, 20). The term *social netwar* is used to describe militant activists operating in or as Segmented, Polycentric, Ideologically integrated Networks (SPINs) (Ibid: 14) or “issue networks”, which are groups consisting mainly of NGOs with common agendas in communication with each other. The main components of this classification are communication between many independently functioning bodies, a centrality of information, and a lack of hierarchy. Indeed, this last point is nicely demonstrated in the context of the Zapatistas, as their *all-channel* networking eliminates the need for a central command or headquarters, which allows for local initiative and autonomy, important
since the Zapatista support base is made up of numerous indigenous communities scattered throughout the state as well as an array of domestic and foreign NGOs. In 1992, against the backdrop of the “Earth Summit” and forums that NGO spokesmen began to attend in great numbers, Timothy Wirth, the US Undersecretary of the state of Global Affairs noted the presence of NGOs in the political sphere and their ability to “define the issues” (Ronfeldt, Arquilla, Fuller & Fuller, 1998: 39) discussed by politicians.

A social netwar is likely to involve battles for public opinion and for media access and coverage, at local through global levels. It is also likely to revolve around propaganda campaigns, psychological warfare, and strategic public diplomacy, not just to educate and inform, but to deceive and disinform as well. (ibid: 22)

The Zapatistas (in the form of the NGOs and IGOs [Inter-Governmental Organizations] tried to depict the Mexican government in the traditional authoritarian role of Latin American governments while presenting themselves as the underprivileged and overlooked people of Mexico. The government on the other hand, engaged themselves in a “hearts and minds” campaign of preferential treatment towards people willing to support the them by giving haircuts and material incentives, a strategy that weakened communities throughout Chiapas. The Zedillo administration also refused to implement changes decided upon in the San Andres accords, which were signed by both parties in full view of the public eye. It is important to illustrate that the signing of the accords was perhaps the more important act for the government from a hegemonic point of view.

Michel Foucoul used the model of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon to explain how a watchful eye can be used to pacify a governed body. Foucoul described the Panopticon as a building that allows a watcher in a central tower to control the behavior of many watched placed in single-celled wedges of a circular building surrounding the tower. The
watched are pacified because they fear the potential force of the watcher who can see everything that they do. For Foucoul, knowledge was power, and so the watcher with the knowledge had power over the knowledge-deprived watched. (Foucault, 1957)

Figure 4.1 and 4.2
A military caravan passes through La Realidad, Chiapas, Mexico. Photos by Lyn Stevens.

Lynn Stephen illustrates a contemporary application of this model in the rural town of La Realidad, in Chiapas. She observed the following phenomenon first hand,

At about nine o’clock in the morning, just when the sun is beginning to heat up the mud, a very slow-moving caravan of about sixteen ‘humvees’ and a few tanks move through La Realidad. Most people hide in their houses, peering through the windows and doors. A few continue their activities, ignoring the army’s presence. Machine guns are mounted on top of the humvees, and about four to eight soldiers sit in each vehicle. While one soldier stands behind the machine gun, another one or two in each vehicle are snapping photographs with still cameras, while others are videotaping. The faces of the soldiers holding the still cameras and the video cameras are not visible, hidden behind the cameras. They appear as human machines mounted on the humvees, filming all that comes into their line of sight. These machines extend a very slow, deliberate, and intimidating gaze over the community. They travel at about two miles per hour and slow to a standstill periodically in their journey through the village. When they stop, everyone ceases moving and stands frozen. In about fifteen minutes, the humvees have passed through the two-block town. (Stephen, 2002: 200)
Stephen goes on to explain the behavior of residents in reaction to the caravan once it has left,

Some break the tension by joking about whether the soldiers were really taking pictures: ‘They would have to spend thousands and thousands of pesos on all of their film and pictures of La Realidad.’ Others talk about the army being able to watch them on video even when they weren’t there. Such a suggestion leaves a chilly pall over conversations. (Ibid: 201)

The parallels between this case and Foucoult’s description of the functionality of the Panopticon are startling. All the important aspects of the Panopticon are here: A watcher and a watched, a method of watching that allows a unidirectional flow of knowledge, and a method of watching that allows the watched to know that they are being watched. Besides these ingredients, even after the watchers leave, the residents of La Realidad are left with creeping suspicions that they are still being watched. This is proof of the most powerful aspect of the Panopticon, for it is not necessary in the model of the building for there to actually be a watcher in the tower as long as the watched understand that there could be one. The other comment about there not necessarily being film in the cameras is an interesting intuition but more proof of the power of the system since there is no real way that the people could know one way or the other. The watching only works, however, if there is also a threat of force – clearly presented in this case as soldiers and weaponry. Stephens explains another feature of this potential force that the people of these communities – specifically women – have grown to be very aware of. She says that the condition of low intensity war that Chiapas is experiencing right now, as well as the proliferation of male military personnel in indigenous communities has resulted in heightened awareness of women and the possibilities of sexual violence involving women. (Stephen, 2002: 178) Stephen calls “the threat of rape and psychological control
exerted over communities through a male army presence… probably the strongest weapon used against indigenous women.” (Ibid: 199)

The presence of the military initially is imposing enough to prohibit a notion of freedom within the communities and over time has the power to create a feeling of being watched even when the watchers are not physically present. Eventually however, there may be more disastrous consequences to constant military surveillance and the threat of violence that accompanies it. Linda Green, an anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in neighboring Guatemala during a comparative time of low intensity state repression, reports a phenomenon called susto or “fright disease”, comparable to kinds of post-traumatic stress disorder that can come from constant fear. Green says “subjectively, the mundane experience of chronic fear wears down one’s sensibility to it. The routinization of fear undermines one’s confidence in interpreting the world.” (Green, 1994: 230) This alarming result of continuous fear can put into perspective, perhaps, the true violent nature of military presence in rural towns.

In Oaxaca, a similar tactic has been used more recently during the popular protests (organized by APPO) in the capital that arose from the annual teachers’ strike that began in May of 2006. On the night of June 14th, Erica woke me up saying that she smelled something burning. It felt like chile oil was in the air because our eyes stung. We assumed that there was a fire somewhere and ran across our courtyard to our neighbor’s house to warn them of the danger. Our neighbor and sub-letter, Peg, emerged from her apartment with a cloth over her nose and mouth and told us that it was not smoke that we were breathing, but teargas. Moving up to our roof in search of fresher air, we could see a battle playing out on the streets right in front of our building. No more than five state
police were guarding the entrance back to the Zocalo where the teachers had been striking, while a group of maybe a hundred teachers had formed under a streetlight further down the same road. Periodically the police would fire a gas canister into the air and down the street to break up the amassing teachers. The next day a helicopter circled the city and dropped teargas on groups well into the afternoon, and even after the policemen on the ground knew they were beaten. The feeling that the police were still watching the city from the air was unnerving to say the least. Interestingly enough, the helicopter became a favorite icon of the state repression used by the teachers and later the APPO in the ensuing protests. The placement of iconic representations of the governor (at whose resignation the protests were aimed) inside the helicopter made the analogy even more interesting and the tactic of flipping the fear into an accusation even more clear.

Figure 5
A man uses a Papier-mâché helicopter to drop flour on protesters at a march organized by the APPO in Oaxaca, Mexico. Picture by Erica Weston.

So far in this section we have discussed both the power of media in Chiapas in exposing political discourse and in persuading public opinion. We have also touched upon the possibility of using a camera as a weapon of repression in the example of the caravans in La Realidad and Bentham’s Panopticon. It follows then, that the camera has a
very unique sort of power role that it plays in these situations. It is not a power of direct force, but rather one of potential recourse. Unless it is sending a live feed, there is a temporal delay between using the camera and receiving its retribution. The camera threatens its target with the actions that may come as a result of the target being seen by another party (the international community, the Mexican military etc…).

The last relevant application of the camera’s power is one that doesn’t threaten to harm its target, but to empower it. The Zapatistas use this application of film to its fullest capacity; well aware of what it offers their cause. The hegemonic practices described in the earlier parts of this section are a direct result of the utilization of this type of power by the Zapatistas,

What distinguishes the Zapatista rebellion from prior indigenous revolts in Mexican history is that so many knew about it instantly and continued to follow its changes. The presence of the media (television, radio and newspapers) in Chiapas on the first and subsequent days of the rebellion, as well as the constant transfer of EZLN communiqués from printed to Internet versions, made a critical difference in the impact of neo-Zapatismo outside Chiapas. 'This 'third army' of news reporters, as they were called in Chiapas, made the difference between an uprising that exposed the impoverishment of the majority of Mexicans to a world audience and a skirmish that could be buried by a government dedicated to a course of neoliberal 'modernization' and entry into international investment markets.' June Nash wrote in reference to a story that might have appeared on the first day of NAFTA, 1 January 1994 (Nash, 1997: 48 cited in Stephen, 2002: 148)

Calling the media a “third army” is telling enough of the role that they played in the movement. It makes an impression on the reader perhaps because it is in fact the ideal role for the press to play in the political and social sphere of world events. With the proliferation of information comes the proliferation of knowledge, and if you subscribe to Foucault’s idea that knowledge is power, then an active press is the great equalizer. The privileged have no need for an “army” that would diminish their ability to get what they want through control and domination, however, and so are often opposed to such
dynamic press. Those in positions of repression on the other hand, generally hold standards of nothing less than a transparent world in which people everywhere would be able to experience injustices anywhere. As Lynn Stephens describes regarding the transcripts of her interviews, it was very important to her subjects that their messages be transmitted to the public outside of the villages. Often they held her personally responsible for publicizing their stories as soon as she turned on her tape recorder. Subject after subject explained that it was important that she “get it right” or that she should “tell people what is going on here.” (Stephen, 2002: 191, 206, 207)

The camera here is an icon for the transport of information and can be used as a weapon or as a tool, working for or against its target depending on the intent of the person that holds it.

Interestingly enough, this dynamic press comes up in other discussions of media production in Oaxaca as well. Maximino Rojas Cortes and José Alfredo Jiménez Pérez both talked about indigenous media as an alternative to the commercial media and the members of Radio Chanul Pom in Chenaló highlighted the differences between their station and a commercial broadcasting station very frequently in our interviews. Even more frequently was a sense that indigenous media had the potential to reveal truths that the commercial media overlooked or ignored. This

Language

Language is one of the most interesting topics that I cover in my research and revisit in the film. I chose to both present language as a cultural aspect of indigenous media making, in both the technical skill-building and information acquisition, and in the presentation of information; but also as an analogy for media making itself.
Antonio Guzmán Ramirez, an elder from Santo Domingo Petapa, appears various times throughout the film, one of the topics that he refers back to is his maternal Zapotec language that “has been lost”. It is in this way that I seek to illustrate the connection between the cultural importance of speaking a unique and culturally identifying language, and creating media that reflects and eventually reconstitutes one’s unique social milieu.

Faye Ginsburg, in the comprehensive volume *Media Worlds* (2002) writes about a concept that she calls *Screen Memories*. She uses the term to refer to indigenous recuperation of collective stories and histories “that have been erased in the national narratives of the dominant culture and are in danger of being forgotten within local worlds as well.” (Ginsburg, 2002:40) The language of these representations is an important part of the representations themselves: both as a means of transmitting them, and as an aspect of the culture that is being represented. Ginsburg, who works in the arctic, explains that the activity and the fact of media making both contribute positively to Inuit cultural preservation. Language loss is part of Mexican indigenous realities today and in the same way that Faye Ginsburg explains that *Screen Memories* have the ability to recuperate culture, so do they have the ability to recuperate through representing, language. During my research, I found that native language is frequently an important element of indigenous video. This makes sense given the cultural importance of language in the formation of an identity. Those communities that have seen worth in preserving their language by teaching it to younger generations are also engaging in a cultural recuperation through representation. As Juan Jose Garcia explains in an interview (Brigido-Corachan) in 2004, “We are the repositories of communal knowledge; each individual knows a large amount of what happens in the community. We are very
familiar with our oral, natural and cultural patrimony, and in that sense our videos are documents that incorporate a collective knowledge.” (2004:371)

On a technical level, the software needed to make digital media like video and (sometimes) audio recordings, are almost always coded in dominant languages like English and French. Even Spanish is not as commonly used as one might assume. For instance, Final Cut Pro, a video editing software, is not distributed in Spanish, and so, in-depth understanding of the program becomes a much more challenging task specifically for First Nation people in Latin America. Because Spanish, the most likely language to be used as a bridge to the supported languages, is often second or third to a local language, few indigenous filmmakers can acquire all the skills necessary to master the software without considerable outside assistance. Similarly, workshops like the ones organized and executed by Red de Comunicadores Boca de Polen in Chiapas are sites of continuous linguistic tension due to levels of understanding and non-understanding. Often, a workshop will be halted for up to a half hour while those in training discuss with each other what was just said by the Spanish-speaking workshop leader. Oriol Poveda mentioned to me that running workshops in local languages makes a big difference, but since Boca de Polen and other media-training organizations serve such a large linguistically diverse population, learning local languages just isn’t an option. Furthermore, the people teaching training workshops (at least in Boca de Polen’s case) often only stay on for a couple of years.
Views of Indigenous Media

While doing my research in Southern Mexico, became exposed to the concept of video indígena or Indigenous video. While it is a widely used term, it can be misleading in its apparently one-dimensional signification. As Axel Köhler, a German anthropologist trained in Manchester very insightfully asked, “is it Indigenous Video if non-indigenous people collaborated on it?” He brings up an interesting point about purity in general, echoed in a later interview I did with Maximo Rojas Cortes, a filmmaker from Mexico city: Indignity is a tough concept to measure. Dr. Köhler says that once we start asking if a video is indigenous in the purest sense of the word, we must then start asking the filmmaker, “how indigenous are you”, and regarding the production of the film or video, how many indigenous people worked on it (and how indigenous were they?) how many Meztisos, how many ladinos, how many spoke a native language, and how many lived in
an rural indigenous community? Köhler believes that “this is ridiculous: what matters is that the film was made in good faith and that it has a message.”

Guillermo Monteforte, an Italian National Canadian citizen and media activist, in an interview with Erica Cusi Wortham (2006) offered another perspective of what has become to be called “Indigenous Video” in scholarly literature. He said, “We invented it, we who are this side, wanting indigenous people to do video.” (2006: 362) This view of video indigena originally seemed revolutionary to me. In the same article, Juan Jose Garcia explained that even the word indigena is,

a broad administrative construction imposed on native people in the 19th century [and] video indigena is ‘invented’ from above through INIs (National Indigenous Institute) and TMA (National Indigenous Media Program funded by Salinas’ anti-poverty program “Solidaridad”). As such, in addition to carrying an uncomfortable symbolic load of government penetration and cooptation, video indigena does not reflect cultural specificities of the more than 56 native groups living within Mexico’s borders. (Wortham, 2006:365)

Continuing to try and understand video indigena, I traveled to the Sierra town of Guelatao San Pedro about two hours from Oaxaca City. I met with a man named Jaime Luna Martinez who works for the town government and had served as a Judge for the Indigenous Film Festival that had taken place the week before in Oaxaca City. Dr. Luna had worked extensively on media projects in Oaxaca, including on the community radio station Comunalidad in Guelatao. I asked him about video indigena and what criteria he used to judge the 100+ films screened during the festival. He mentioned a number of interesting things during our two-hour interview. First, he introduced me to his concepts of Imolata and Naturolatra. As I understand them now, they represent two kinds of societies. Dr. Luna explained them as descriptors of single societies, that is, a society can be either Naturolatra or Imolatra. He explained that a society Naturolatra is centered
around and mediated through the natural environment. In comparison, a society *Imolatra* is centered around “man” and the natural environment becomes a “tool” for use by man. It has come to my attention that these types may be analogous to the English words anthropocentric and ecocentric. Video indigena is an extension of this distinction for Dr. Luna, who tells me almost exactly as Axel Köhler and Maximo Rojas had, that the author of a *video indigena* doesn’t need to *be indigena*. In accordance with this understanding of the term, *Mi Primer Contacto*, a winning film in the festival, was co-directed by a non-indigenous filmmaker. Dr. Luna explains that as long as a film exhibits native concerns – a connection with the earth and the natural environment in this case – it will be *video indigena*. It is worth noting that while this connection to the environment is a very prevalent theme in Mexican Indigenous Video, it is not a prerequisite, that is, not every film exhibited this connection.

**Concluding Remarks**

Maybe the most convincing piece of evidence I can use to show the possible positive connection between anthropologist, media and indigenous groups is what you are almost done reading right now.

The video about the indigenous police force in Guerrero that I saw for the first time in an anthropology course at Brandeis delivered a joint message. The first was obviously that the community had organized themselves effectively enough to self-govern and police themselves without the help of the Mexican state. The second message, however, while somewhat implicit, had many more implications. I gradually over the course of two years began to understand that when Promedios produces films, the content
of the films are equal (if not subordinate to) the fact of the films for most viewers. When I first saw that video I walked away thinking about the act of making it and what went into video-making for that community in Guerrero. Indigenous video, simply by the virtue of being called Indigenous Video, carries this alternate message with it wherever it goes, as a testament to its singularity and importance. We cannot watch indigenous video as we do non-indigenous documentary or fiction films.

Through doing this research and becoming familiar with the roles that academics have played and are playing in these arenas, I began to develop standards for myself that the discipline did not require of me. In April of 2007 I received a grant to assist in building a media center in Santo Domingo Petapa, Oaxaca, in collaboration with the town government and the youth group. I see this as an opportunity to both perpetuate the processes that I have come to view as positive, and to experiment as an action anthropologist.

What I have tried to do on these pages, is present the issues surrounding indigenous video production and include anthropologists in the cycles of watching, creating, advocating and reconstructing, that characterize the social and cultural phenomenon of indigenous video. After seeing “Reclaiming Justice”, I was moved to travel to Chiapas and Oaxaca and create media of my own. Hopefully from what I have created, someone’s interest will be peaked and they will be able to create some sort of positive impact from the information presented here and in my video. The video and this essay, while being made available in Spanish for non-English speakers, are especially designed to be accessed by an American academic audience. It is in creating and distributing the work that I seek to educate, inform, inspire and advocate.
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