

*Circuits of Culture: Media, Politics and
Indigenous Identity in the Andes* by Jeffrey D.
Himpele

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Traditionally, the focus on Latin American film and media has been divided between the biggest production industries, those of Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. *Variety* and other trade magazines frequently focus on the Brazilian telenovela; the strength of recent Mexican and Argentine films; and the global movement of directors from the abovementioned countries. Bolivia, with its diminished media output and limited cinematic releases, gains significantly less attention. Academic writing continues this trend: Michael T. Martin's significant two-volume anthology *New Latin American Cinema* (1997) has dedicated national sections yet Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru are covered together in just one article. This approach is also repeated in John King's book *Magical Reels: a History of Cinema in Latin America* (2000). Taking this into consideration, Jeff Himpele's *Circuits of Culture: Media, Politics and Indigenous Identity in the Andes* (2008) marks an important attempt to outline the history and contemporary workings of film and media in Bolivia. His book represents one of only a few full length studies into Bolivian film and media in the English language.

Particularly significant to Himpele's analysis is his focus on indigeneity. Rather than presuming a homogenous Latin American identity in Bolivia, Himpele draws forth the particularities of indigenous identity; how it intersects with hierarchies entrenched in

the rural lower class, the urban middle class and the ruling *mestizo* class; and the effect these elements have on the circulation of film and television. He begins by annotating an event in 2006 when the left-leaning president-elect Evo Morales was 'lauded...as Supreme Leader of the Aymara' (p.xiii). This was a spectacular piece of public relations work in which Morales confirmed his place within the Aymaran indigenous culture and enforced the popularity of indigenous discourse. The importance of this moment for national film and media was clear as,

the histories of cinematic media in Bolivia have been intertwined with two historical processes in La Paz: the popularization of indigenism and the indigenization of the popular. (p. 9)

Throughout the remaining chapters, *Circuits of Culture* returns to the way indigenous images have been produced in Bolivian media as a way to create a popular national project. By outlining a historical trajectory, Himpele is able to reiterate the continued tensions between integrationist proposals based in *mestizaje* (mixed identity) ideology and calls for distinct indigeneity.

The focus on the contextual events that formulate media practice, rather than a strict reading of media texts and their aesthetic qualities, places the book firmly within an anthropological framework. It is a quality that becomes increasingly apparent when Himpele looks beyond film and television to dissect the way that folkloric spectacle, particularly street parades, offers a form of popular mass media. He notes that

these folkloric spectacles in Bolivia challenge the uniformity with which the industrialized mass media can be argued to be the most salient space of collective

imagination and modernization across Latin America.
(p.7)

The combination of the various cultural events that produce popular communication in Bolivia allows for a theoretical framework in which the impact of circulating social, political and personal issues cannot be underestimated.

While there is carefully researched attention to the production of domestic media in *Circuits of Culture*, an equally strong thread throughout the text is the way non-domestic media flows through La Paz and Bolivia. More than 80% of screened film titles in La Paz come from the US and the remaining titles come from Europe and other Latin American countries (p.14). This has the effect that the majority of cinematic images seen by Bolivians are from external locations. Rather than taking this information at face value, Himpele closely investigates the way that these cinematic images circulate in a particular way. He describes the way films enter La Paz through the wealthy, centrally located cinemas and then move on to other cinemas in the marginalised and poorer areas. This has the effect that the marginalised areas receive not only degraded copies of film but a delayed access to them, forcing further their marginalisation from centralised cultural production.

By outlining this process, Himpele follows in the footsteps of recent scholars such as Janet Harbord and Charles Acland who outline the way that cinematic flows, their paths and destinations, have as much importance as the content within the cultural object. The particular emphasis that Himpele uses is the importance of circulation, employing this concept as a link between the production and exhibition of media and the content within it. He says that

I [...] use circulation as a frame to overcome the misleading bifurcation between political and corporate structural conditions, seen as production, and the cultural meanings within them, seen as consumption. (p.13)

This concentration on interactive elements and, in particular, circulatory matrices, provides a constructive framework although at times it feels as if Himpele overuses the verbal and nominal functions of the term ‘circulation’ rather than allowing his research findings to speak for themselves.

Another slight problem within *Circuits of Culture* is the (lack of) clarification of time periods. With regards to events that took place more than ten years ago, Himpele is effective at outlining when they happened and in which historical context. However, his analysis is less clear when he is noting media events and aspects of circulation that have taken place in the last ten years. He states that the research for this text took place over a period of more than ten years – yet it sometimes feels as if he has failed to put the events of these ten years into a chronological order. One of the most troublesome examples of this is his discussion of Bolivian videotape piracy in the present tense (p.87). There is no mention of the fact that during the last five years video piracy, and the conditions specific to it, have been eradicated in favour of DVD piracy.

At the same time, the findings presented in *Circuits of Culture* do produce some interesting questions that can be applied to other marginalised areas of media production and consumption such as the problems of uneven distribution and the role class and social identity play in film circulation. The importance of Himpele’s work should not be underestimated as it offers important analysis into the often overlooked area of study: film and media in Bolivia.

References:

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