

Book Review

— *Indigenous Plots in Twenty-First Century Latin American Cinema*, by Maria Chiara D’Argenio, Springer, 2022

Indigenous Plots in Twenty-First Century Latin American Cinema is more than just a book; it is an invitation to rethink how cinema engages with indigeneity, past and present. D’Argenio provides a transhistorical, nuanced, and interdisciplinary analysis of the processes behind the conception, creation, and reception of significant Latin American feature films centred on indigeneity and released in the early twenty-first century. Many of these cinematic works productions are rooted in pivotal historical events that have shaped the region, ranging from bi-piracy in the early twentieth century to internal displacement in rural Peru during the 1980s, and the deforestation and violence against Indigenous communities in the Amazon Basin at the turn of the twenty-first century. As a reader, one is drawn by the book’s overarching aim to contextualize the events that inspired the eleven films it predominantly examines. This comprehensive method is one of the monograph’s most striking aspects, emphasizing its significance as an academic contribution. D’Argenio presents these films as genuine efforts to explore and explain, through layered and intricate aesthetics, the experience of being indigenous in contemporary Latin America.

The opening chapter, “Inter/cultural Films for Global Consumption,” highlights the need to understand how cinema functions on multiple levels. She stresses that the historical and social contexts of pre- and co-production are essential for engaging with films shaped by “encounters taking place on and off-screen” (p. 2). To grasp the full impact of internal displacement in 1980s Peru, the book argues, it is necessary to examine the living conditions of indigenous rural communities at that time. This chapter sets the foundation for the subsequent exploration of collaboration, participation, and implicit co-authorship between filmmakers and the communities they depict; a theme continued throughout the remaining chapters. Through this lens, D’Argenio provides in-depth analyses of *Madeinusa* (2006), *La teta asustada/Milk of Sorrow* (2009), *Ixcánul* (2015), and *La Llorona* (2019) in the second and third chapter. Central to her discussion of directors Claudia Llosa and Jayro Bustamante is their effort to evoke and reenact communal consciousness in post-conflict settings. The author

asserts that these four films illustrate how the deep wounds left by a turbulent past redefine recovery processes, yet must be visually addressed, even if doing so provokes controversy and reopens old scars. A recurring theme throughout *Indigenous Plots* is the role of cinema as a political tool for shaping collective memory and fostering critical reflection across time and space. Screening fragments of history is reenacting events that have defined its course.

The fourth chapter delves deeper into this intricate dynamic through an analysis of *El abrazo de la serpiente/The Embrace of the Serpent* (2015). Here, D'Argenio offers a detailed examination of the revisited travel journals of Theodor Koch-Grünberg (1872-1924) and Richard Evan Schultes (1915-2001), who journeyed through the Amazon during two separate periods in the 20th century. In the fifth and sixth chapters, the book's pace and focus shift notably. Through a detailed and multifaceted analysis of *Zona sur/Southern District* (2009) and *Terra vermelha/Birdwatchers* (2008), the author unpacks the intricate realities of indigenous societies in contemporary Latin America, both on- and off-screen. One of the volume's strengths is its careful examination of specific scenes from these films, highlighting the brutality, violence, erasure, and racism that marginalized communities endure daily. D'Argenio suggests that capturing these harsh realities in cinematic form not only underscores the inevitability of injustice and oppression but also showcases the educational power of cultural production to foster societal progress. This thread of hope continues in the seventh and eighth chapters, "Coevalness, Indigenous Modernity and Indigenization: *El sueño del mara'akame* (2016)" and "The Power of Aesthetics: *Retablo* (2017), *Wiñaypacha* (2017), *Canción sin nombre* (2019)." Returning to Peru, the book highlights the unique position of films produced by independent directors who often operate on the fringes of mainstream production and distribution networks. The author demonstrates her deep knowledge of Andean cinema and history, carefully analysing why hope is a central theme in the visual narratives emerging from more decentralized productions. Some readers might perceive a slight disproportionate emphasis on Peruvian visual culture compared to other countries; however, this is warranted by Peru's significant prominence in the cinematic landscape over the past two decades.

Indigenous Plots' title signals D'Argenio's approach to the films. The plots are indigenous not only because they are inspired by the histories and current reality of native communities in Latin America but also because they unfold through stories shaped by their experiences. Like any narrative, time is essential to understanding how the plot develops within the characters' spaces and lives. The study cases skilfully connect each film to major historical events – some of which may be unfamiliar to global audiences – such as the trial of Guatemalan dictator José Efraín Ríos Montt (1960-1996), or the impact of paramilitary movements on Colombia's unrest in early 1970s. Moments that are essential for grasping the filmmakers' decisions, viewpoints, and how their work contributes to reenacting and portraying key events in the region's cultural history and perception of Latin American indigenous heritage. The presence of self-identified

indigenous filmmakers, such as Óscar Catacora (1987–2021), is acknowledged in *Indigenous Plots*, though perhaps not to the extent the title might suggest. Arguably, the only minor shortcoming in this otherwise substantial scholarly work is the limited focus on lesser-known Indigenous filmmakers, working individually and as a community, that have not yet garnered significant academic attention. However, considering the author's impressive expertise in Peruvian visual culture, what initially seems like an oversight may hint at the potential for future publications exploring Andean Indigenous cinema or Cine regional. Such works would be a welcome addition.

Indigenous Plots is an essential reading for those interested in the topic of indigeneity in the cultural history of Latin America and the social and political life of cinema. It convincingly integrates various theoretical frameworks and presents a wide array of thoughtfully crafted analytical perspectives. D'Argenio's work makes a vital and timely contribution to ongoing debates about the role of historiography, memory, and cultural production in contemporary Latin American public discourse.

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