Circumnavigating Chiapas
Contact, Conquest, Rebellion and the Filmic Eye

Paul Reade

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Swinburne Institute for Social Research
Faculty of Life and Social Sciences
Swinburne University of Technology
2013
Abstract

This thesis combines field notes from my journey through Chiapas and my interpretation of four documentary films: A Place called Chiapas (1998), Sowing Justice ... From Acteal: Las Abejas before the Supreme Court of the Nation (2009), The Last Zapatistas: Forgotten Heroes (2002), and 10 Years of Impunity: And how Many More? (2008). These films relate directly and indirectly to the Zapatista uprising of 1994 and the Acteal massacre of 1997. Propelled by a sense of uneasiness and failure to make sense of either real life experiences or filmic representations, I move between my notes and other interpretations to explore the themes of contact, conquest, injustice, complicity and tragedy. Beginning with James Clifford’s idea of Traveling Cultures as a way to embrace the disconnected and fragmented nature of contact and the creation of stories, I attempt to complicate the matter by classifying myself as what Dick Pels calls the Privileged Nomad. This privileged nomad risks collapsing self–identification and the identification of the Other in a romantic twist that equates the plight of the self with the plight of the Other. As Roger Bartra suggests, romanticism thought to find the solution to the tragedy of modern man. It is this struggle between romanticism and tragedy that I use to make sense of my field notes and the films.

By investigating the indigenous ‘awakening’ which is seen to have spurned the uprising, as well as the stories of conquest, colonialism and rebellion that still resonate so strongly in Chiapas, the theme of tragedy continues to occur. Focusing on Michael Taussig’s idea of the civilizing dialectic, mimesis and alterity, as well as his work on the aesthetics of terror and beauty as the main drive behind human history, I look at the films’ potential to explore ideas of justice and responsibility through the tension between romanticism and tragedy. As a mimetic machine, the camera perhaps allows us to see ourselves in the images of the Other and to create what Taussig calls a ‘second contact’. Alternatively, it can slip once again into a tool of conquest and colonialism.

Here, film, and particularly the documentary as a genre, finds itself grappling with parallel concerns, its objective and subjective potentialsities, and its own paradox. Just as Chiapas finds itself haunted by its colonial past, by misrecognitions and violence, so too does film find itself haunted by the ghosts of realism and illusion. The combination of the two, as film seeks to represent Chiapas and Chiapas seeks itself in film, leads us to marvellous and dangerous places, where, if deceit and illusion are believed, contact and mimesis can quickly revert into conquest.
Acknowledgements

Firstly, thanks to my supervisors: Lorenzo Veracini for his endless and relentless enthusiasm. His failure to allow me to accept defeat surely verges on the mad and I’ll be forever grateful for it. Many thanks also to Ellie Rennie who showed faith in me when it was most needed, and to Klaus Neumann for his academic rigour and attention to detail.

Secondly, thanks to my mother, father, family and friends in Australia, and especially Annika Lems, whose ability to listen to my self-delusional attempts at justifying “just a little bit more time then I’m finished the thesis” reflects poorly on their judgement, yet I love them all the same.

This thesis was initiated as part of the "Social Memory and Historical Justice" and partly funded by an Australian Research Council grant.

All literary translations from Spanish to English are my own. All translations from the films come from the original subtitles.
Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award to the candidate of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text.

To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Where the work is based on joint research or publications, this thesis discloses the relative contributions of the respective workers or authors.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction  
   - Day ‘0’  
   - Night buses  
   - The privileged nomad  
   - Two road movies and two testimonies  
   - The Aesthetic of Terror  
   - Tragedy in the showing and telling  
   - The civilizing dialectic  
   - Chapter outline

2. Fear  
   - Carnival  
   - The ‘awakening’  
   - The Zapatistas and Las Abejas  
   - Zapatista legacies  
   - The reports on the Acteal massacre  
   - Palenque  
   - Facts, fictions and blame in the memory of Acteal  
   - Labyrinths and cages  
   - Academics and Agency  
   - The tragic condition
3. Contact

- Time of Death p. 77
- Mimesis and intoxication p. 83
- Imitation p. 88
- Mechanical reproduction, aura and genuineness p. 93
- Framing the real (the reel) p. 98
- 1st and 2nd contact p. 101
- The gaze and the mental machines p. 106
- Struggling against the gaze p. 112
- Suturing the eye and the gaze p. 117
- Tactile contact p. 120
- Las Abejas p. 125

4. Conquest

- Circling La Selva p. 129
- Contact, interpretation and narrative p. 131
- The tragic quest p. 138
- The conquest of Chiapas p. 141
- Motives p. 145
- Tropics p. 151
- Black and rose legends p. 155
- The struggle against time: hope and memory p. 160
- The momentous and momentum p. 164
- Traces of conquest p. 167
5. Pity p. 172

- Oventic p. 172
- The last memory p. 173
- Performing conquest p. 178
- Indian identity p. 185
- Rebellion p. 189
- Narrative and revolution p. 193
- Performing revolution p. 200
- Deceit and trickery p. 206
- Fascination p. 212
- Whose illusion? p. 215

6. Resolution / Katharsis p. 219

- Emiliano Zapata and the Laguna Miramar p. 219
- Dissolves p. 220
- La Realidad p. 221
- Reversals and Recognitions p. 222
- Punishment, forgiveness, forgetting p. 225
- Justice through performance p. 228
- Katharsis / conclusion p. 236

Bibliography p. 241

Filmography p. 256
1 – Introduction

Day ‘0’

Winding through the mountains towards San Cristóbal de Las Casas a middle-aged man, in between snoring and farting the night away, told me his story of travels around Mexico. The conclusion of the conversation was that everywhere in Mexico is ‘bonito’. From the north to the south, the east to the west. The diversity of Mexico and its beauty comes up in every conversation. As soon as you leave the north for the centre the north seems like a distant past; as soon as you leave the centre for the south the centre seems like a distant past. In many ways these distinct regions of the republic seem to be connected by night buses.

An uncomfortable twelve hour journey through winding roads seems rather symbolic of the connections between the regions: a journey which consists of broken sleep, weird and marvellous dreams, random stops in nameless towns, and random stops for police and military checks. This surreal journey represents the links within Mexico, nothing quite seems real, it is made up of painful, shameful, and joyous memories which reflect a desire to forget the Other, or an inability to clearly see the Other.

Just as you finally find the most comfortable position and drift off into a deep sleep, you will be rudely woken by someone in uniform shouting at you and demanding papers. This is how Mexican justice works. No matter how much you attempt to forget or ignore the reality, no matter how comfortable you get, the forces of internal security are there to remind you how insignificant and vulnerable you are.

The bus stop is on the Calle Insurgentes. This street leads straight to San Cristóbal’s colonial heart. The insurgents the street name refers to are the insurgents of Independence, the founding moment of the Mexican nation. Almost two hundred years later in the city of San Cristóbal the term insurgent is now indelibly linked to the insurgents of the EZLN (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional). The group, armed with a few guns and sticks, took the city by force on the eve of 1994. It still has a haunting presence in the streets and plazas.

The picture perfect colonial architecture, the cobbled streets, and the brightly coloured indigenous women selling their goods afford the traveller the possibility to travel back in time. In San Cristóbal, the volume seems to be turned down compared to the rest of Mexico. The people quietly go about their business, seeming to almost glide rather than walk through town.
Surrounded by lush mountains and caressed by a chilled breeze, the city offers the perfect retreat for the weary traveller, full of ‘culture’ and ‘colour’.

The town hall that was ransacked by the Zapatista army in 1994 now seems like any other town hall. The cathedral stands towering over the city as it always has. The market sells everything and anything. A closer look, however, reveals a history that is not consigned to the archives, but is rather being lived and created every day. Inside of cultural centres, bookstores, and unsigned buildings, the history of the region, its people, and most importantly the indigenous uprising, is being re-created, re-imagined, and re-presented. The first glance at San Cristóbal is ‘bonito’.

Down at the two alternative cinemas, the size of an average lounge room, they display a rotating schedule of political and cultural documentaries as well as a few classic films. There seems to be a theme, consciously designed or not: topics range from the last Zapatistas to the last indigenous of the Lacandon Jungle and the last traditional healer of Oaxaca. Sometimes it seems the whole world is on its knees and wheezing its last breath ...

Night buses

Looking back at my field notes and my first days in Chiapas it now seems obvious. While I went with dreams of remote places and indigenous revolution, hoping to discover and reside with rebels in mist covered jungles, I was drawn straight away to the cinema and the images that emerged from and around the Zapatista uprising of 1994. And so this thesis started off as a failure. I was drawn on the one hand to the films and on the other to the reality of the people and places, yet an uneasiness about both left me deeply unsatisfied.

While the communities I visited were always hospitable and friendly, past experiences with government, NGOs, journalists and academics left them weary of participating formally in more research. My initial frustration was matched by a level of understanding. Placed in the same situation I would tell the researcher to bugger off without any of the explanations or pleasantries that they showed me. On the other hand, the films that I had hoped to incorporate into the thesis also left me confused. Visiting the places seen on screen always provokes a certain sense of the surreal. In this case, however, the films I saw seemed to do more; to open up, provoke, and illuminate the contradictions and paradoxes that I found around me. It is not that they necessarily set out to do so, but as I moved around and went back and forth to the films and notes, before, during, and long after visiting the places, a
gradual narrative, the core of which has become the framework for this thesis, began to emerge.

What began to reveal itself to me were narratives of conquest, contact, injustice, complicity and repeated tragedy. The films illuminated my field notes and the field notes unravelled the contradictions of the films. First contact sets the patterns for further interpretations and within my first impressions of Chiapas many of the themes of this thesis exist, although I did not see it until long after. Firstly, a romanticism in which distant places and times always seem bonito, yet a dreaminess that is inevitably ruptured by the forces of justice and injustice. Secondly, a nostalgic relation to a picture perfect history that masks a history that is being lived and made in the back alleys and behind the façade of the museums and for gift shops. Thirdly, a sense of imminent loss. As the films on show at the theatre illuminated, there seemed to be apprehension about the penultimate nature of memory and culture, as if at any moment we were about to lose it all.

What I also began to see were the models and methods of conquest and rebellion in both my own work and the films. It is from this unlikely association that the themes of injustice and complicity began to make sense of my uneasiness in Chiapas. Looking back at my field notes, saturated with exotic ideas and boyhood fantasies of penetrating the heart of darkness of Mexico, what stands out is the way that I literally and metaphorically circumnavigated Chiapas. The principle of circumnavigation, in the terms of the Oxford English Dictionary’s explanation of the word, ‘sailing all the way around something, especially the world’, has also found its way into the structure of this thesis. In this case, however, night buses have replaced the boat, and as well as transgressing time and space it also travels through different ideas and disciplines. Thus, while setting off under the guiding framework of a cultural critique as formulated in Cultural Studies, this thesis quickly moves beyond this boundary, penetrating the ‘territorial waters’ of other disciplines, such as philosophy, anthropology, memory, media, film and postcolonial studies. In this sense I would place myself in what Abril Trigo describes as a particularly Latin American form of undisciplinarity, ‘a byproduct of the historical unfolding of colonialism’.¹

The route I took had me starting in San Cristóbal de las Casas, then to Palenque, where I began to circle the Lancandon Jungle, entering at certain points where the dirt tracks allowed, before returning to the highway and looking for the next opening to the last major natural reserve in

the country. It is possible, from one point, to enter and travel some six hours by truck along a horrendous dirt track to the centre of the jungle and to the town of Emiliano Zapata, named after Mexico’s famous revolutionary hero. It is alongside the Laguna Miramar and in the area where the Zapatistas, also named in honour of Emiliano, created their early bases. Now, in the most remote part of Mexico, there is an enormous military base. After leaving the jungle, stopping at both Zapatista and non–Zapatista towns along the way, I went to Acteal.

Acteal is a tiny village to the north of San Cristóbal, and the site of the 1997 massacre in which forty–five mostly women and children were killed by paramilitaries at the height of negotiations between the government and the Zapatistas. In Acteal the community of Las Abejas (the Bees) supported the aims of the Zapatistas, but not their military methods, and from the beginning of the conflict set themselves up as pacifists. Despite this, or more probably because of this, they were targeted by paramilitaries.

On the first of January 1994, the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN), also known as the Zapatistas, commenced their military actions against the national government. The date coincided with the commencement of the free trade deal (NAFTA) between Mexico, the United States and Canada. This deal was seen as a direct threat to indigenous communities in Chiapas due to the amendment of Article 27 of the Mexican constitution, an article dating back to the revolution guaranteeing land rights to peasants. In these first days the rebel army, made up of mainly indigenous soldiers, occupied several towns and cities in Chiapas. The Mexican Army fought back and the indigenous armies quickly retreated against their vast superiority.

On the twelfth of January, president Salinas, due to massive national protest, called a cease–fire.

Negotiations began in 1996 when the San Andres Accords guaranteeing indigenous rights were signed, though not implemented. During these dialogues the Zapatistas worked to cement networks within civil society while the government increased the military presence in the state. In this time paramilitary groups emerged and began to play an increasing role in the violent displacement of communities in the so–called ‘low–intensity war’. This culminated on the twenty–second of December 1997 with the massacre in Acteal. The community were pacifist sympathisers of the Zapatistas and the victims were murdered as they prayed in a small chapel. To this day the case of Acteal remains unresolved – after countless investigations, trials, prosecutions, acquittals, and reductions of sentences.

While many of those accused of the murders have been prosecuted, those accused of being the intellectual authors of the crime, reaching up through local, state and national
governments, have not been tried. The Zapatistas continue to control their own autonomous villages, yet their impact on the national and global stage began to fade away after the march to Mexico City in the year 2001, when they achieved certain reforms from the government. As this thesis is being completed, however, the Zapatistas have emerged once more from the jungle in a silent protest, coinciding with the anniversary of the Acteal massacre. Just like my journey on the night bus, at every moment when it seems that the case of Acteal and the demands of the Zapatistas have faded from centre stage and into oblivion and we can go back to dreaming comfortably, they silently and stealthily re-enter.

The privileged nomad

Arriving back in Melbourne the sense of unease and disappointment about my time in Chiapas remained. Whether through my time there or through the films that accompanied me, I felt that all I was ever doing was circumnavigating these events between 1994 and 2001. Anthropologist James Clifford’s 1992 article, Traveling Cultures, seems to sum up much of the experience I had as I circumnavigated Chiapas. He begins by pondering, at what point does the story begin? Stories, he says, are ‘works entering’ into ‘the diverse, interconnected histories of travel and displacement in the late twentieth century’. The stories from Chiapas seem the perfect manifestation of such an idea, especially after the uprising, as the tales from outsiders, insiders, officials and non–officials, indigenous and non–indigenous become interwoven and heightened to a level of extremes.

Clifford states that for both researcher and subject, the world is open to outside and dynamic contacts, contexts and communication, and thus the need to focus on ‘hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones’. The point he makes, however, is not to proclaim everyone a traveller, but rather see where travel mediates contact, so that ‘the “chronotype” of culture [...] comes to resemble as much a site of travel encounters as of residence [...] more like a hotel lobby, ship, or bus’. If such places can becomes interesting locales of encounter, than cinema as well becomes a crucial place of travel encounter, not only because of its potentially exotic place of production, but also through the filmic viewing experience.

---

This leads to the most recent evocation of travelling cultures with the turn towards transcultural studies and transcultural memory studies. With concepts of the transnational, diasporic, hybrid, syncretistic, postcolonial, translocal, creolized, global, and cosmopolitan, media such as the Internet and film become central in understanding the transmission, movements, practices and forms of memory and culture.\(^5\)

Despite this reassurance of the hybrid and transitory nature of such work, I remained deeply unsatisfied with the progress of my investigations, feeling that such ideas of hybridity and transit did not explain the apparent gulfs between peoples and places. Surveying the crowds of researchers, new age hippies, want-to-be revolutionaries, and filmmakers, (myself included) all of whom wanted a piece of the indigenous aura in Chiapas, the ideas of dwelling and travelling, hybridity and transit all seemed to resonate. Yet for every superficial confirmation of this hypothesis there seemed to be a deeper level of disconnect and unfathomable distance between the various actors.

Sociologist Dick Pels criticises Clifford, postmodernism, cultural studies and the anthropology of the eighties and nineties, for being ‘privileged nomads’. The description of the world in flux in which experimentation, transgression, hybridity, mobility and travel take one to the edge of one’s own identity is evidence of what he sees as an ‘intellectual nomadism’: ‘an unprecedented popularization (and banalization) of the cult of Romantic individualism and its core themes of authenticity, alienation and the aestheticization of the mundane’.\(^6\) The risk comes, according to Pels, when the intellectual begins to identify with these subjects, equating their own plight with those of the truly dispossessed.

Susannah Radstone also rallies against the desire to find universal and cosmopolitan manifestations of memory at the expense of identifying and acknowledging the locatedness of memory. She suggests that the amount of content produced about nostalgia points to, ‘the continuing significance of location, and, particularly, memories of ‘home’, for the meaning-making and affective dimensions of life in the present’.\(^7\) As Cecilia Sosa and Alejandra Serpente point out, this is particularly relevant in Latin America where there is a strong convergence of memory and location.\(^8\) As such, despite the pervasiveness of narratives of dislocation,

---

globalisation, and travel, locatedness and a sense of home remain equally powerful and relevant concepts.

In this sense I assume the position of a ‘privileged nomad’. The nature of my work falls directly into the realm of Clifford’s Traveling Culture and becomes susceptible to all the critiques of Pels. In an attempt to short-circuit this dilemma of individual whims and universal conclusions, I will try and use a trick used by anthropologist Michael Taussig. He uses it in his article, Constructing America, performing a deceitful movement in order to approach his subject – the subject that refuses normalisation. He begins with an archive found in Prague that contains field recordings and notes from Colombia from the late nineteen sixties and early seventies. The unknown researcher is referred to as the ‘Recorder’, while the subject is the very old, black and blind man, Tomás Zapata (no relation to Emiliano or the Zapatistas). The mystery surrounding the Recorder and the traces that remain in the archive raise many questions: who was he and what story was he after in these interviews?

With this in mind he begins the story of the old man, yet the old man immediately disrupts the flow of his history by quoting Greek mythology. The expected oral and local history is replaced by the old man’s musings on European mythology and philosophy. After much imploring the old man focuses on the local history, yet rather than expressing it in a personal and effected manner, he resorts to epic poetry. The Recorder’s notes refer to this strategy of recounting history as ‘flow and mix, flow and swerve’, and Taussig sees this as suggesting ‘an art of interruptions, of cultural and temporal montage’. It turns out that the Recorder is none other than Taussig himself, returning to his field notes decades after they were written.

The imaginary Recorder is used to create the distance that makes possible a self–reflexive analysis and recognise the strangeness of such contact. I will use such a trick in my own thesis; sensing a failure in my own ability to grasp the reality of Chiapas I retreat back to the films I came across during my stay there. By viewing my own experiences through the films and the films through my experiences I hope to explore the distances and proximities as well as the ideas of justice, injustice and complicity that echo through the films and the day–to–day reality of life in Chiapas. For just as the privileged nomad tends to conflate his/her own problems with those of the people they set out to study or aid, the presence of such nomads in Chiapas is the reality and a crucial starting point in exploring it’s tumultuous past and present.

---

This is the sensation I had in Chiapas, and thus my writing reflects this sense, yet the thesis must be prefaced by the idea that all this emerges from misunderstandings, failures, illusion and impotence. As such this thesis finds itself firmly located in the ideas of travelling cultures, yet seeks to illuminate the failures and limitations of such an approach, not by contesting the ideas, but rather by using its tricks and deceits to heighten the effect and search out the contradictions. Taussig and his greatest muse, Walter Benjamin, will become central figures in this thesis. It is precisely because of his ability to upset any easy assumptions and encompass the broader strokes of colonialism and modernity, internal and external interactions, as well as the particular ways in which these moments and movements are consumed and created in particular cases and communities. The cases of Colombia and Mexico have also experienced many of the same broader brushstrokes, from conquest and colonialism, through independence and today’s “drug wars”.

In the introduction to the collection of his essays entitled *Walter Benjamin’s Grave*, Taussig announces the motive behind his writing, a love of ‘muted and even defective storytelling as a form of analysis’. This analysis is shaped by two particular elements: firstly, through the anthropological fieldwork from which ‘misunderstandings that actually open up the world more than do understandings’, and secondly, through his concept of the ‘nervous system’, in which words have a dual function and the writer must ‘pretend they are what they refer to [...] and at the same time recognize the artifice’. The nervous system is thus an organising system, but a skittish one.

My field notes thus serve the function of dragging us back from the precipice and falling into the abyss of the films while the ideas of travelling cultures and the privileged nomad function as an entry point into the films. The films are a place of encounter between the self and the Other (as well as possessing entire histories of production and distribution), yet an unequal encounter, and so concepts of the individual and the universal, appropriation, justice and complicity emerge.

**Two road movies and two testimonies**

---

12 Michael Taussig, ‘Author’s Note’, p. x.
And so to the films: Two of the films could be categorised as road movies – one a presupposition and premonition of death, the other a journey to reclaim the memory of the dead. The other two movies are forms of testimony: one of national struggle and the other of ancestral struggle, linked together by a generational handover. My selection of films, as there are countless documentaries on the topic, was based on a few considerations. They are all films I came across while travelling in Chiapas, either for sale on the street or being shown at local cinemas, making them relevant and accessible for both locals and outsiders. I chose films that represent three different points of view: one is made by a foreigner, another by a Mexican from Cuernavaca, and the other two through an indigenous community organisation in Chiapas. Two actively use the theme of travel and thus migrate into the realm of the nomad, privileged or not, while the other two dwell on testimony in a way that challenges the idea of history as memory and nostalgia or history in the making. Finally, while they are all made in and around the time and context of the rebellion, they all shoot off in varying directions, hauling in peoples, histories and stories that, when put together reveal and illuminate a constellation of realities that to my mind are connected by night buses.

In this way they illustrate elements of what Deborah Poole calls the “visual economy”. Poole uses the concept of visual economy in order to bypass the more common concept of visual culture. “Economy”, as such, allows us to think on broader terms that incorporate diverse factors and actors. The visual economy consists of three levels or organisation, firstly the producers and technology, secondly the circulation of images, and thirdly the critique and appraisal of value.13 The same image can have very different meanings and values to different people and groups. There can also be value in the mere possession of an image, apart from its content or financial tag. Thus the image has to be seen both for its content and its use value in the societies in which it circulates. As such, in their contradictions and similarities, these films further enrich the themes of responsibility, complicity, distance and proximity to the events in the southeast of Mexico.

The first road movie, A Place called Chiapas (1998),14 sees a Canadian filmmaker go in search of the Zapatista uprising. Reflecting the hope and despair of the outside world for a successful indigenous revolution but quickly tiring of the contradictions, the film seeks to capture the dead and the soon to be dead and hurriedly categorises, bags and drags them back to Canada and the Western audience. The film is directed by Nettie Wild and runs for ninety minutes. Its

14 From now on referred to as A Place.
funding and production was aided by the British Columbia Arts Council, British Columbia Film Commission, Canada Council for the Arts, Canada Wild Productions, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), National Film Board of Canada (NFB), Téléfilm Canada, and was distributed by Zeitgeist Films. By far the biggest production of the films I chose, it showed around the world and won the 1999 Genie award for Best Documentary and the 1998 Audience Award for the Best Documentary Film from the American Film Institute.

The film sees the director and narrator arrive in Chiapas, intent on tracking down the Zapatistas charismatic leader, subcomandante Marcos. As he proves more elusive than expected, she moves around the state, interviewing members of the Zapatista communities, Archbishop Samuel Ruiz, members of NGO’s, and landowners dispossessed of their lands by the Zapatistas. The film takes a turn when Wild encounters two victims of the counterinsurgency in the north of the state. She follows them back to their villages and confronts the paramilitary group, Paz y Justicia, who have taken the land of the community. The filmmaker and the villagers are forced to retreat, prompting the revelation of the film: that the Zapatistas, while in negotiations with the government, are neither able to protect nor defend their own people. Finally Wild is able to pin down Marcos. She confronts him with this problem and he, while meditating on life and death in Chiapas, promptly tells her, ‘you have much to learn’. On this note of the ultimate unknowability of the situation the film ends. As a postscript, however, the film reveals the subsequent massacre in Acteal, thus retrospectively categorising the film as a premonition of death.

The second road movie, Sembrando Justicia ... Desde Acteal: Las Abejas ante la Suprema Corte de justicia de la Nación (Sowing Justice ... From Acteal: Las Abejas before the Supreme Court of the Nation) (2009),15 is a nineteen minute film that sees the survivors of the Acteal massacre journey to Mexico City to reclaim their dead back from the government and their enemies. The film follows the community as it travels to Mexico City to present documents to the Supreme Court, arguing against the release of those convicted of perpetrating the massacre. The film is made and distributed by the Sociedad Civil Las Abejas, the community that was the victim of the massacre. No director is acknowledged in the film. Arriving in Mexico City they hold a press conference, where survivors and experts address the issue of responsibility and justice. A march is then made through the city, arriving at the Supreme Court where a ritual alter is set up and documents are handed into the court. The film both addresses history and makes history. Following a brief protest the community acknowledges that their duty is done and

15 From now on referred to as Sowing Justice.
they set off back to Chiapas. As such the two films show different approaches to travel: the first focuses on the dislocations of the filmmaker, the refugees, foreign travellers and Marcos, while the second always retains a constant and unswerving eye on home.

The first of the films of testimony, Los Ultimos Zapatistas: Heroes Olvidados (The Last Zapatistas: Forgotten Heroes) (2002),

\(^{16}\) presents testimonies from the last surviving soldiers of Zapata’s Southern Army of the 1910 Mexican Revolution. As they destroy the myths of the Revolution, they reclaim their dead through humour and contradiction, confusing history to such a degree that no one but the individuals (and perhaps not even them) remain with any authority or claim to possession. This chaotic and unmanageable memory and legacy they then hand over to the contemporary Zapatistas of Chiapas. Meeting on film they hand over the torch of resistance. Directed by Francesco Taboada Tabone and running for seventy minutes, the film was produced and funded by the Fondo Estatal Para la Cultura y las Artes de Morelos and the Universidad Autonoma del Estado de Morelos.

The film edits together the testimony of the surviving veterans of Zapata’s army, starting with the ideals of the revolution: land, liberty, justice and law. They recount, in grand and dramatic stories, the times and conditions in which they grew up and how they were conscripted or sequestered into the army. Each interview is beautifully constructed, placing the veterans in their homes or exteriors, and their testimony is interspersed with archival footage, historical reconstructions in which they re–enact events, as well as songs of the era. Their accounts are often contradictory, yet cleverly edited to portray the overarching dignity and sentiment of these ancient peasants. Authentic memory is shown as something that possesses, in equal parts, remembrance, forgetting, and embellishment. As the film progresses the veterans’ tales are contemporised with interviews of Zapata’s children and grandchildren who explain the betrayal of his ideals by the government until this day.

The frustration of the veterans thus spills over into the struggles of modern Mexico and ultimately to the contemporary Zapatistas in Chiapas. Though not directly linked geographically or temporally, the Zapatista veterans and the Zapatistas of today are symbolically connected in a scene in which they come together. The sentiments and ideals of the Mexican Revolution are explained and handed over to the current generation. In this moment, the Revolution is dealt with not as a specific historical event, but rather as a sentiment of justice and dignity. For this reason I selected the film; it is travelling memory, not as truth, but as sentiment. While it primarily deals with the stories of the veterans, it finishes

\[^{16}\) From now on referred to as The Last Zapatistas.
by making a clear statement about the current political situation, as well as the betrayal of Mexico’s ‘legitimate’ historical memory.

The second film of testimony is *Acteal: 10 años de impunidad ¿y cuántos más?* (Acteal: 10 years of Impunity. How Many More?) (2008). The testimony from the survivors of the Acteal massacre and sympathisers of the contemporary Zapatistas, weaves between ancestral histories of the creation of the world and the events of 1997. Directed by José Alfredo Jiménez Pérez, it is a forty-five minute documentary also produced by the Sociedad Civil Las Abejas with support from Peace and Diversity Australia. The film begins with the ancient wisdom of the community’s ancestors, which tells them that the ways of the government are to deceive and betray. This is followed by archival footage of the president describing the massacre in Acteal as deserving justice before jumping back to the present and the conclusion that ten years after the event justice has not been served.

The film moves back and forth between ancestral stories and myths, testimony from the victims, archival material from the event, expert accounts of the Mexican justice system and the case of Acteal, and images of protest and day-to-day life in the community. As such, the film constructs a narrative of government violence and neglect against the struggle of the community and its supporters. This culminates in the construction of a memorial amphitheatre in Acteal where a gathering then takes place to discuss the impunity of the government. Memory here is grounded very much in a specific location as seen in the memorial, yet the film leaves open the possibility of that memory travelling. The testimony of the victims and supporters leads back to the story of the ancestors, a journey through time, in which the forces of good and peace triumph over the forces of evil and violence.

In the first two films movement becomes an act of memory and history making, an action to reclaim the dead; in the second two films storytelling becomes a strategy of confusing and evading the enemy, guarding memory in defensive and offensive actions. These films take us in and out of, and all around Chiapas and the events of the uprising and massacre, sometimes rubbing up against or brushing past events and at other times quickly penetrating and then retreating, each in their own way documenting, and functioning as a way of retrieving the dead. Juxtaposed, they offer a glimpse of mimicked and mocked pasts, presents, and futures.

Their differing ways of production also reveal much about the visual economy of Mexico. Outsiders make the budgeted films that are destined for major international film festivals,

---

17 From now on referred to as *Acteal: 10 years.*
while an impoverished community makes the locally produced films that are condemned to the circuit of indigenous film festivals. While there has been a proliferation of organisations promoting and producing indigenous film in Chiapas, such as the Chiapas Media Project, Projecto Videastas Indigena, and the Ojo de Agua Comunicación in Oaxaca, the work is generally confined to academic and indigenous film festival circuits. Poole talks of ‘the crucial role that the visual economy in general and photography more specifically have played in the formation of modern racial subjects’. Extending the idea to documentary film, it is clear how the image made by the indigenous, rather than the image made of the indigenous, circulates with different values attached.

Marching soldiers, marching indigenous communities, foreigners trudging around in the mud, the latest technology in military hardware making its way through jungle and dirt roads, the military filming the communities and being filmed by the communities, the documentary makers filming and being filmed. The staged television appearances of the president in the magnificence of the presidential palace, the staged testimonies of the indigenous communities in their humble dirt floored abodes and the staged opinions of the experts in their offices. In each film the same images emerge again and again. Here everyone seems to be imitating everyone else in a slightly different way, taking a position, narrating memory and history and constructing a filmic narrative. The same moon rises over slightly different but similar worlds. Past, present and future, extending from creation through to utopia, as well as place, radiating out from the smallest and remotest of villages, collapse into montage and fragment.

**The aesthetic of terror**

Well–intentioned and not so well–intentioned actions have almost always come to have disastrous results in Chiapas, and as the films seek to show, the fundamentally noble character of the poor and indigenous peoples of Chiapas and Mexico seems to inevitably end in violence and injustice that repeats throughout the ages. As the film by the Canadian Nettie Wild suggests, the good intentions of understanding and highlighting the injustices in Chiapas ultimately end in misunderstanding and quite possibly even exacerbate the tensions through the presence of the film crew.

What emerges from all this is what Michael Taussig calls an ‘aesthetic of terror’. It is what drew me to Chiapas, and what all the films engage in. It is in the stories that emanate from the

---

events and has determined much of this thesis. In this aesthetic there is both beauty and violence accompanied by an uneasy pleasure. Taussig begins his book, *Beauty and the Beast*, by pondering the link between beauty and violence manifested in cosmetic surgery, or ‘cosmic surgery’ as he calls it, in Colombia. He sees here ‘not simply the coexistence of glamor and terror in the world around us today, but their synergism’.\(^\text{19}\) The link to cinema may not seem obvious at first, but remembering Walter Benjamin’s comparison of the cameraman and the surgeon in his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, as well as his emphasis on the filmic face and portrait, the connection begins to take shape.\(^\text{20}\)

In this sense film becomes a tactile medium, and the images of beauty and terror work themselves in and through us. Poole also highlights the central role of pleasure in addressing the visual economy and specifically its use of race. She states:

> By providing a nexus for the mimetic play of sympathy and imitation, images stimulate a potentially anarchic domain of fantasy and imagination. The pleasure that the image gives us, however, is itself molded by aesthetic ideologies whose histories are anything but innocent.\(^\text{21}\)

In this synergism Taussig sees an aesthetic of terror in which the body becomes the ultimate site of transgression and style, where the aesthetic extends ‘to encompass war, torture, mutilation, and the frenzy of the new capitalist economy’.\(^\text{22}\) Like the consumer commodity that perishes or becomes obsolete, in the films beauty takes on a tragic style in which desires and fulfilments seem doomed to fail, yet we enjoy watching it.

If beauty is a gift from the gods, then, according to Taussig, like any gift, it comes with its share of anxiety. Following the work of sociologist Marcel Mauss, he points out how in ‘archaic societies’, economies based on the gift rely as much on the aesthetic as they do on the religious and political. As such, the aesthetic does not fit into any hierarchy of concerns, but rather penetrates and gets to the very core of all human relations. The example of sacrifice makes this clear: not only are gifts given to the gods, but they are also made beautiful before they are killed. The synergism between beauty and terror becomes a force. They could be ‘as


\(^{22}\) Michael Taussig, *Beauty and the Beast*, p. x.
much the motor of history as are the means of production of material life’.23 One has only to think about such products as tobacco, sugar and opium and the role they played in global commerce and colonialism, as well as their ability to provoke pleasure and pain through their (over) consumption, to illustrate the point.

To this we could add the question by Terri Tomsky, as to why some traumatic events get recognised and others not? He alludes to the ‘trauma economy’ in which memory, culture and trauma travel with fluctuating values alongside all the other products of capitalism.24 What this could mean for the subjects and protagonists of the documentaries thus becomes a concern as memory and trauma are ‘aestheticised’ and ‘sacrificed’ on screen.

Whether aesthetics or production is the motor of history, Chiapas manifests many of the most brutal extremes of beauty and terror – a dynamic that also informs Taussig’s work in Colombia – and becomes the perfect stage and market for such an aesthetic. Mexican historian Antonio García de Leon illuminates the specific temporal reality in which the past and present, the beautiful and the terrible, manifest themselves in the memory, history, and reality of contemporary Chiapas. He describes the contemporary situation in which, due to a multiplicity of forces, it is possible to witness centres, towns, or regions of the state that seem to have paused at varying moments in the history of the last five hundred years. As such, one town may seem like it is still living under colonial times, while the next is in the era of Don Porfirio, the next in the times of the Revolution, and the final one in a period of late capitalism.

Added to this, these periods and their particular manners and modes mix in the market places and public spaces to the point at which turning a corner can take you back or forward a few hundred years. ‘Seeing this territory’, he states, ‘we could imagine a long history in which at one time the immediate and remote time coexist; it would go from the uncertain dawn of the Classic Maya until the most naked form of petrol capitalism’.25 In this contemporary space of coexistent and contemporaneous pasts it is not only the ‘living museum’ that stands out but the living dead, the ‘ghosts and lost souls […] that still appear on the edge of stories and in the corridors of the great houses’.26 This, it would seem, suggests that memory and narrative work just as much as a motor of history as aesthetics, and in the case of Chiapas it is the context of

23 Michael Taussig, Beauty and the Beast, p. 3.
26 Antonio García de León, Resistencia y utopía, p. 14.
conquest, colonialism and rebellion that is illuminated and driven by the aesthetic and the narrative.

Here, where the ghosts are more alive than the living, where peace resides while the rest of the nation fights and where war reigns while the others rest, ‘the historical tempo is other’, Chiapas is an ‘exception to the historical rule’ which repeats itself through social ruptures. These ruptures, subversions and resistances generate, according to García de León, the particular form of utopia of Chiapas, ‘the clearest syncretism between the myth and the history’. The interminable waltz of memory and imagination here create the tragedy of utopia: pulling as forward, yet always remaining over the horizon.

This fragmentation and juxtaposition of temporal and spatial relations in Chiapas, where the beauty of one instance is quickly followed by the terror or ugliness of the next, can seem almost filmic. Edits can take us back and forth in time, while a crescendo of beautiful images can suddenly be cut short by a shocking moment of ugliness. This creates links to the documentaries and their potential for engaging with these forces of beauty and terror. Undoubtedly all four films utilise and juxtapose images and discourses of good and evil. The innocence, dignity and humour of the veterans and the indigenous communities create a stark contrast to the horror of the events that have unfolded, but it is through the camera that focuses on the bodies and landscapes, and through the edits in the films, that the synergism of beauty and terror manifests itself.

It is not only in the construction and post–production of the documentary that the aesthetic is applied. As legendary visual anthropologist Jean Rouch points out, the filmmaker imposes himself on every situation no matter how objective and detached they attempt to be. Although he alludes to the very specific and delicate situation of filming ritual trance he explains how ‘in this word [sic] of fragile mirrors, standing beside men and women for whom any clumsy action may provoke or inhibit trance, the observer’s presence can never be neutral’. He also extends this idea to all film, ethnographic, documentary and even fiction to which he says there is ‘almost no boundary’:

The cinema, the art of the double, is already the transition from the real world to the imaginary world, and ethnography, the science of the thought systems of others, is a

27 Antonio García de León, Resistencia y utopía, pp. 18-19.
permanent crossing point from one conceptual universe to another; acrobatic gymnastics, where losing one’s footing is the least of the risks.\textsuperscript{29}

As such the filmmaker, as well as being like a surgeon according to Benjamin, enters into a kind of waltz (or trance) with the subject in which both assume the roles of image–makers. While Rouch may be exploring the extremes of the relationship between subject and filmmaker, what becomes important is the idea of the participatory nature of documentary in which all parties create an image-world together and which carries in it the potential dangers of all trance and transgression.

**Tragedy in the showing and telling**

The four films we are looking at were all made in and around what has been described as the ‘indigenous awakening’ that led to and found its most visible manifestation in the 1994 uprising. The aesthetic of terror, the ghosts of the past, the constant reference to the tragic and traumatic events in Acteal, combined with the idea of awakening to the social and political situations that surround the indigenous communities suggests to me the tragic recognition of Aristotle’s *Poetics*.\textsuperscript{30} For Aristotle tragedy consists of the movement from ignorance to knowledge, and only when a suffering is recognised, due to the unforeseen results of well–intentioned actions, can the event be seen to be tragic.

This opens up the question of documentary film’s ability to engage with tragedy. While I do not wish to claim that any of the films should be classified as tragedies, certain elements of each film engage with tragic circumstances, and perhaps this type of analysis helps to account for the pleasure and appeal of the documentary format. Clifford’s idea of travelling cultures seems to me almost tragic in its homelessness. The violence and haunting past in Chiapas that Garcia de Leon describes, and the aesthetic of terror that the films use, all point towards a desire to see and recount the ways of the world in a tragic way. Perhaps, as well as the pleasure from this, tragedy opens up the possibility of seeing and addressing ideas of justice and complicity, becoming something like a guilty pleasure.

As philosopher Stacie Friend points out, the paradox of tragedy is usually associated with fiction. She argues, however, that documentary film can produce tragic pleasure. To achieve


the classification as tragedy, she argues, the film would have to engage in a certain artistry, aiming for ‘a broader, perhaps moral, insight into human experience’. The idea of tragedy also opens up certain concepts that, I suggest, are crucial for considering the events in Chiapas and their relationship to the wider world. In tragedy, man’s actions are always ultimately subject to the whim of unseen and unknowable agents (gods), and thus the limits of man’s agency and righteousness are put under the microscope. In all the films, outside forces, whether mystical, mythical or historical seem to bear down on the protagonists and filmmakers, and the responses show a variety of heroic, tragic and rational forms of consciousness.

For Aristotle, the pleasure drawn from art comes from the cognitive recognition of mimetic play and, particular to tragedy, the themes of pity and fear. The recognition of pity and fear in tragedy potentially leads to catharsis, a purification of the excess of emotion: ‘Tragedy is an imitation [mimesis] of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable [...] effecting through pity and fear the purification [katharsis] of such emotions’. The tragic form is a mimetic copy of an action or event. Not necessarily a loyal copy, but rather something that is recognisable and pleasurable to the viewer in its narrative form.

Tragedy speaks not only of a narrative formula but also of what might be called the spirit of the age. The suggestion of memory and culture being lost in the films has a resonance with the themes of conquest, colonialism, mimesis and tragedy in ancient Greece. Considering and pondering, as Nietzsche does in his retrospective preface to The Birth of Tragedy, the significance of tragedy in a period of Greek splendour of civilisation and colonialism, it seems that in such moments of extension tragedy ensues and all that was stable becomes fragile. As such, I suggest that these themes of conquest, mimesis, tragedy and justice are inextricably linked. The inevitable misunderstanding between peoples and the striving for empire seem to condemn man in its moment of potential greatness and the tragic form acts as poetic counterbalance to this failed communion with the gods. In Sophocles’ Antigone the chorus underlines this in its repetition of Zeus’ law:

no towering form of greatness

---

32 Aristotle, Poetics, p. 10.
enters into the lives of mortals
free and clear of ruin.34

In such moments of simultaneous greatness and ruin the paradox seems so great that the laws of man become insufficient; therefore, through mimesis, the protagonists summon forth the gods of old in an attempt to transcend reality.

For Aristotle, tragedy must have a beginning, middle, and end in order to be complete and contain ‘magnitude’ and should ‘readily be held in memory’.35 The event or action which is mimicked in the four films, and which becomes the tragic act, begins with the discovery and conquest of the Americas, has its middle in the colonial era, and comes to its climactic and tragic recognition in our times. All four films rely on this structure, tracing a direct line from a ‘beginning’ to the current events while alluding to mythical times of creation and utopia. The current events are tragic because they emerge from this scenario of contact, conquest and colonialism.

However, as Friend points out, ‘because a documentary takes as its subject real persons whose lives begin and end outside the film [...] one could argue that it can never attain the closure that fictional tragedies achieve’.36 She argues that this can be overcome by structural arrangements of the film, but either way this creates a fascinating tension regarding our response to the films. Friend explains how the moral significance of tragedy is traditionally seen ‘not in provoking our natural sympathies, but in confronting us with painful realities in a way that prompts ethical reflection’.37 The four films are all confrontations of painful realities, and thus the gaps or inconsistencies between documentary film and tragedy could be more useful, nuanced and insightful than would be a fictional tragedy. The aesthetic and moral ramifications of fiction and documentary also find their roots in the Poetics. For Aristotle the historian presents ‘what has happened’ while the poet presents ‘the kind of thing that would happen’.38 This seemingly clear distinction, however, becomes problematic when dealt with through filmic documentary.

As film theoretist Damien Sutton points out, photography and cinema have their own paradox to deal with and their own tragic condition.

38 Aristotle, Poetics, p. 16.
Photography is the scientific event of art, since it releases art from the duty of resemblance; it is also the artistic event of science, since scientific observation will, from that time on, always be part of a poetic regime. This is the truth identified in the photographic paradox.39

Although the films are non–fictional, documentary (as indeed all photographic based mediums) finds itself caught within a paradox of science (‘documentary truth’) and visual aesthetics. What this means is that the ‘reality’ of the documented and the orchestration of effects complicates the truthfulness that the films seek to illuminate. As a medium dealing with representations, with its optical ability to capture what the naked eye cannot, photographic images work within the dialectic of the scientific made aesthetic and the aesthetic given scientific validity. NASA images of deep space seem to us beautiful while any mundane home–movie can reveal to us the mechanics of motion and optics.

This paradox also brings us back to travel tales and echoes the same concern that began to emerge with the writing of Alexander Von Humboldt from his journeys to Latin America at the turn of the nineteenth century.40 As the continent began to open up to broader European influences with the decline of the Spanish empire, travel accounts outlined the possibility of a new El Dorado of economic opportunity. The reception of such literature, however, straddled both the literary and scientific, the romantic and the documentary, creating two main dichotomies: ‘the contrast between a 'dark' Spanish America and ‘enlightened’ Europe; and the tensions between literature and science in framing the neo-colonial engagement’.41 As Ricardo Salvatore points out, from gestures of romantic panoramas and scientific observation, such stories converge, ‘as if the demands of objectivity and precision were subsumed by the seduction of a powerful fantasy’.42 Such an example sets a precedent or precursor to the documentary film experience.

The civilizing dialectic

42 Ricardo D. Salvatore, ‘Re-discovering Spanish America’, p. 212.
The tragic event, as outlined in the documentaries, incorporates contact, conquest and colonialism in Mexico. This tragedy, which announces itself in the aesthetic of terror, stems from what Taussig calls the ‘civilizing dialectic’. Walter Benjamin, in an echo of Zeus’ law, says in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, ‘[t]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism’.\(^{43}\) It is this relationship between civilisation and barbarism in colonialism, combined with the terror of the state witnessed firstly in the French revolution in what could be called a patriotic dialectic of ‘us and them’, that illuminates my idea of tragedy in its present day forms. For the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, and especially those who partook in the Zapatista uprising, they find themselves represented as the barbaric and the traitor.

For Aristotle, mimesis is the crucial action that makes tragedy possible, and Taussig begins his study into mimesis by connecting it directly to an impulse towards alterity. For him the mimetic faculty is ‘the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other’.\(^{44}\) Just as cinema is the art of the double, there is an aesthetic relationship between beauty and terror, a dialectical relationship between civilisation and barbarism, and there is a mimetic relationship between the self and the Other. History enters into this mimetic faculty and the mimetic faculty enters into history, and as Taussig argues this history finds itself in the Americas in a ‘two–way street’ where colonialism manifests itself in the ‘felt relation of the civilizing process to savagery, to aping’.\(^{45}\)

As such, mimesis becomes the link between the three main themes of this thesis: film, colonialism, and tragedy. Three moments in time become central to the illumination of the mimetic faculty and how it has shaped and been shaped by colonialism. Firstly there is first contact, the moment when Europeans and indigenous Americans first began to communicate, copy and ape each other; secondly, the beginnings of modernity, ‘the curious and striking recharging of the mimetic faculty’,\(^{46}\) most evidently manifested in the invention and embrace of the mimetic machine, the camera; and thirdly, in our own times, a ‘Reverse Contact now–time’. This ‘Reverse Contact’ time comes about as we in the West are confronted with the representations of ourselves made by those of the so–called Third and Fourth World.

---


This civilizing process, still so evident in Chiapas today, therefore offers up a chance to address this felt relation between ‘us’ and the ‘Other’, between ‘now’ and ‘then’, and to see ourselves as well as the Other in the images that emerge from Chiapas. In this way of seeing the realities of the Americas I take a step beyond Clifford’s idea of travelling cultures. Rather than just acknowledging the interconnectedness of cultures and peoples and the mediated nature of communication, I look at the nature of the mimetic relation between peoples under the umbrella of conquest and colonialism. The production of such things as the documentary films I focus on thus open up new panoramas that enable to see the ways in which ‘we’ are represented by the ‘Other’. As such ‘we’ ultimately become just as much the object of study as the Other, but through the lens of their cultural production. This ‘second encounter’ relies on these emergent images from which we cannot distance ourselves objectively because we form a part of them. When we appear in the images from Chiapas, as members of the outside world, the world that encroaches on Chiapas and its indigenous peoples, new opportunities for this second contact emerge.

The idea of exploring mimesis as a technique for investigation is also appropriate for the analysis of film. Taussig refers to Walter Benjamin and his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, ‘where history figures in memory, in an image that flashes forth unexpectedly in a moment of crisis, that contending political forces engage in battle’.47 Here the image and its use becomes the staging ground for resistance and struggle via surrealist techniques, or, the ‘dialectic image’. Its power lies, he explains:

> the way such images defamiliarized the familiar and shook the sense of reality in the given order of things, redeeming the past in the present in a medley of deconstructive anarchical ploys [...] the intent here was to facilitate the construction of new forms of social life from the glimpses provided of alternative futures when other–wise concealed or forgotten connections with the past were revealed by the juxtaposition of images, as in the technique of montage.48

Susan Rubin Suleiman shows a way to address issues of memory through these dialectical images and ultimately ideas of justice and ethics in documentary film. Following on from the work of Theodor Adorno, she asks what it means to ‘come to terms with’ the past, as opposed to ‘turning the page on the past’. Here the battle between history and memory emerges, as potentially, ‘the sacralization of memory, the “duty to remember” that can all too quickly

---

48 Michael Taussig, ‘History as Sorcery’, p. 89.
degenerate into kitsch, the very opposite of critical self-reflection'. In tragedy, it is Hamlet’s duty to remember and avenge his dead father that paralyses him.

On the other hand the attempt to find ‘objective’ historical truths and to ‘understand’ such events as, in the case of Suleiman, the Holocaust, potentially leads to another set of problems. With the evident explosion of often competing collective memories, Suleiman thus asks:

How is memory enacted or put to public use? This question implies a poetics of memory, rather than a history or a politics. And, I would add, an ethics, too – not only how, but to what good end? The question then becomes, How is memory best enacted or put to public use? But since all poetics and ethics are situated (in the Sartrean sense, located and given meaning in a specific time and place), history and politics come back another way. How is memory best served at a given moment, in a specific place? And who does the judging, to what end?

While answers may not emerge, through the search for these dialectical images uncomfortable questions and the ‘working through’ of memory become possible. Filmmakers, subjects, and viewers can thus begin to question. An ‘intricate dance of closeness and distance, identification and disavowal, may be a more just image on which to conclude than that of a page finally turned’.51

‘Recognition’ and ‘reversal’ are the two keys to Aristotle’s idea of excellent tragedy. They do, however, only point the way to resolution – and films need a resolution. Within the surrounding discourses mentioned above, one word becomes central to resolution, and that is justice. Justice in the films means social, cultural, political, historical and legal justice. As little progress is made in the specific case of Acteal and the Zapatista struggle, it becomes interesting to see how cinema resolves the unresolved.

As Benjamin sets up in his essay, On the Critique of Violence, violence can be critiqued through its relation to law and justice when something intervenes in moral relations. The critique can then follow one of two paths, where the ends justify the means or vice-versa. Either way, law and justice become wholly dependent on violence that is law-establishing or law-upholding.

---

This is evident in the examples of the Zapatista uprising and the massacre in Acteal. While the Zapatistas fight against the Mexican government they also appeal to its laws, as do the victims of the massacre. In both cases a violence has occurred that would ultimately strengthens the rule of law or establish a new law. In this way all law, and therefore justice, is established by violence. This type of law–establishing violence is described by Benjamin as mythic violence.

On the other hand Benjamin also describes divine violence:

Where mythic violence is law–establishing, divine violence destroys law; where the first sets bounds, the second wreaks boundless destruction; where mythic violence apportions blame and calls for expiation simultaneously, divine violence expiates; where the former threatens, the latter strikes; where one is bloody, the other, albeit lethal, kills without bloodshed.  

Slavoj Žižek takes up Benjamin’s idea of divine violence and the angel of history, the witness to injustice and the symbol of hope and memory. As progress blows the angel of history forward, preventing it from administering justice, it is only able to enact ‘wild intervention’ in the form of ‘explosions of resentment’, where ‘resentment has nothing to do with the slave morality. It stands rather for refusal to ‘normalise’ the crime, to make it part of the ordinary/explicable/accountable flow of things, to integrate it into a consistent and meaningful life–narrative’. Such an idea becomes even more complex when we think of the ‘interventions’ of security forces in Chiapas that incorporate their own kind of resentment and refusal to normalise justice.

Some crimes extend to such a point where the usual solutions of ‘punishment (revenge), forgiveness and forgetting’ are not adequate, only an ‘authentic resentment’. What Žižek points out is that this resentment can become intertwined with envy where justice is associated with equality. As Nietzsche and Freud highlight, when the Other has what we want, ‘the demand for justice is thus ultimately the demand that the excessive enjoyment of the Other should be curtailed’. This idea of resentment takes us back to the beginning and the concept of the privileged nomad who perhaps paradoxically desires and is resentful of what he believes the Other has. The Other in this case would be the noble savage and the fantasy of an original Eden.

---

55 Slavoj Žižek, Violence, p. 76.
My reading of Benjamin does not reduce the idea of divine violence to the authentic resentment that Žižek proposes, although it does help to complete the circle and the first circumnavigation back to the privileged nomad. Rather I see divine violence as always beyond definition or simple classification. In this sense it links back to tragedy, where the role of the gods is contradictory and it is only in the enactment and mimesis of these relations through theatre and imagery that moments of catharsis, or illumination as Benjamin would see it, can emerge. What this means for the analysis of the films and my field notes is that it does not seek out examples of violence or justice, the right or wrong of things, but rather by circumnavigating and interrupting it pretends to trip up moments of mythic and poetic justice.

Chapter outline

Chapter Two begins by looking at the indigenous ‘awakening’ in Chiapas, manifested most forcefully in the 1994 uprising. The awakening has come with its own particular way of storytelling and rumour, cures and curiosities that not only apply to the indigenous peoples but also the non–indigenous inhabitants of Chiapas and the outsiders drawn to the region. A neo–colonial staging has developed in which peoples both attempt to steal and cure souls through stories and images, and where authenticity and catharsis find unlikely bedfellows in deceit and illusion.

With the uprising, evidence of community unity and division also became obvious. I outline a brief history of the generation leading up to the uprising that brought together the disparate forces of Liberation Theology, Marxism and traditional Mayan communities to the moment of synthesis in 1994. I particularly look at the two indigenous movements, the Zapatistas (EZLN) and Las Abejas, who represent the two contradictory yet mutually supportive sides of violent and passive resistance. The moment also coincides with the 1992 quincentennial of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas. As we shall see, it is in this commemoration and the subsequent uprising that the tension between ‘thinking history’ and ‘making history’, and what constitutes the indigenous ‘awakening’, arises.

Taussig talks of the colonial legacy of a politics of violence and resistance most obvious in the ‘good/bad savage’ dichotomy and how this continues to remain at the forefront of our interpretations of acts of violence and resistance perpetrated by and against indigenous peoples. In these interpretations and representations he sounds a warning to those that wish to project their own concerns onto the Other. Perhaps due to such a legacy we can see in the
reactions to the Zapatista uprising such passionate and diverse reactions, affirmations and rejections from far and wide.

The stories that emerge from and around these events begin to reveal elements that reflect moments of pessimism and hope as well as a strong mimetic link between text and reality. From the pre–eminence of the political (Marx) and religious (Exodus) texts in fermenting rebellion, the centrality of other texts also become evident. These are, along with the political and religious, the legal, the fictional, and the academic.

The legal side reveals itself in the case of Acteal and the reports from the Attorney General's Office and the human rights agency, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. In these reports that aim towards objectivity and scientific rigour, the slippery slope of language comes to the fore. Terms such as Indian\textsuperscript{56} and mestizo, victim, trauma, and low–intensity warfare begin to reveal the vertiginous depth of ‘objective’ reporting in the hands of agencies with vastly different aims and objectives. This leads me to the exploration of how the real and the fictional blur to create spaces of terror. Through the work of Taussig it becomes clear how the objective quite often becomes a greater tool of terror and provocation than the fictional.

The legal and poetic elements resonate with tragedy and tragic consciousness. Taussig signals our time as a time of permanent penultimateness in which we are always suffering an impending doom. Through the legal, fictional and scientific material produced around the uprising and massacre we can begin to see varying strands of thought, and not only what they may say about a particular event, but also the existential position that they may be coming from. Myth, tragedy and reason, democracy, law, the individual and the communal, these themes are always central and in a tense relationship to each other.

The final discourse of mimetic importance I look at is the academic. In the Mexican context it becomes apparent that the themes manifest themselves most strongly in the ideas of colonialism, modernity, the nation, and identities. The forces emerging from the 1960s onwards, such as globalisation, international finances, and the particularly repressive regimes of Latin America have not only affected indigenous communities, but also the wider national and international communities as well as the academic community that studies these changes. To finish the chapter I thus come back to the movements in academia that potentially participate in the legacy of violence and resistance.

\textsuperscript{56}The term ‘Indian’ is obviously problematic. On the one hand it is the perfect example of colonial fantasy, racism and subjugation, on the other it is an identity that has real meaning and is embraced by many people as a positive. Throughout the thesis the subject and its paradoxes will be explored.
Chapter Three begins by looking at the film Acteal: 10 years of Impunity. The film sets up the interpretation of the massacre through a form of storytelling that utilises myth, tragedy and scientific reason to address the memory and commemoration of the victims. As well as the theme of injustice the film also moves a step further in promoting the idea of the community as martyrs. I therefore look at the ideas of distance and proximity between the communities, the viewer and the gods. Through the films and the idea of mimesis in tragedy, as a way of enacting divine madness and otherness, I will look at the potential for curing and catharsis through the synthesis of illusion and reality. The blurring of fiction and fact, reality and illusion, and concealment and revelation, all lead to a state in which the self can potentially transgress its limitations to become martyrs and healers.

The filmmaker operates as a contemporary storyteller, utilizing the cinematic paradox in regard to its scientific and artistic nature to attract its audience. As I show, cinema, despite its relative newness as a technology, has its own myths surrounding its birth. These myths focus primarily around people’s ability to believe, disbelieve or suspend disbelief in regard to cinema’s illusion. Like all magic this tension between belief and disbelief as well as a necessary scepticism, gives power and curative abilities through the performance of ‘beingness’.

Cinema creates this tension through formalism and realism, and invites transgression through concepts such as the door and window, the mirror, gaze, and touch. A brief overview of some of the main theories in film will illustrate how film and its relation to the viewer has theorised ideas of power, agency, ideology, psychology, voyeurism, taboos and transgressions. It becomes evident that cinema has moved from its early position as a potentially revolutionary tool in the ideas of Eisenstein and Benjamin, through to an apparatus of oppression, power and enslavement, and back again to a technique that opens up new forms of corporal contact.

As we can see in a film such as Acteal: 10 years, skin and touch become crucial themes. The skin can be representative of indigeneity, as a point of contact and resistance to the audience, and as a history with its scars, aging and register of violence. Not only does film show us such skin, but through its ability to evoke corporal response through the use of tempo and duration it can also transmit a real sense of contact. It is this ability to transit memory and sensation that forms its revolutionary potential.

Chapter 4 takes us on a journey around the jungle of Chiapas and the staging of colonialism before landing on the moment of conquest in the Americas. This event has come to represent everything necessary for a good tragedy. It has shifts from good to bad fortune as well as reversals and recognitions. Through the actions of Columbus, Cortés and Montezuma the
chapter looks at how the events of conquest represented the end of the isolated staging of the human drama, the beginning of historical consciousness and a more prominent sense of the self and the Other. As argued by Tzvetan Todorov, information began to take precedent over interpretation, and in the act of conquest a new sense of land and legacy developed creating modern man. In this vein the filmmaker of A Place Called Chiapas is introduced, as well as my own complicity in conquest and colonialism.

Through the work of Inga Clendinnen the chapter then attempts to step back from these essentialist ideas that have marked the conquest. As she argues, neither Cortés nor Montezuma were so beheld to bold rational analysis or paralysing interpretation. Rather opposing sides quickly adapted to the others tactics, yet in the process of the destruction of the city of Tenochtitlan a mimesis of the Other, or rather a mimesis of mimesis based on misrecognition, led to a spiralling decent into violence and cruelty. This is where Taussig sees the birth of the civilizing dialectic where each side, in inevitable misunderstandings, sees a savagery that they then mimic.

The chapter then focuses in on the film A Place Called Chiapas, exploring the idea of the documentary quest manifested here in a storyline that epitomises the foreigner coming in and deciphering events that the locals fail to see. In the approach and intentions of the filmmaker to reveal a historical truth, and in the primitive belief in the power of film to reveal certain truths, it becomes evident how quest can flip over into conquest. Both information and interpretation abound, but they come from one voice, that of the narrator. This prompts a need to look at motives and assumptions of those landing in the New World.

A history of narratives about the Americas is therefore explored, touching on the concepts of discovery and invention, conquest and encounter, and how such ideas developed, firstly in Europe and then in the New World itself. Todorov suggests that religious, financial and sublime motives are the reason for setting out for the Americas and these themes echo down through the colonial period and into contemporary events. Such a breakdown of motives, although mutated, seems to be also present in the motives of the documentary filmmaker. What also begins to reveal itself in the film are the presumptions about Chiapas and its tropical and exotic nature.

The idea of place has a long history as a principle that explains the universe, and as the title suggests, place is central to the film. Through the work of Nicolas Wey Gómez the chapter therefore looks at the powerful nature such ideas have had in the tropics for both place and people. As the opening sequence of the film suggests, the debate over the nature of place and
Indians has been central to the colonial project and from it have sprung the Black and Rose Legends, the violent and cruel side of colonial rule or the selfless humanitarian defence of the Other.

From distant and age old motives the chapter then shifts into modernity and what Benjamin saw as the great struggle of the times: in a world grown poor in communicable experience, the struggle against time. Film, as a medium inextricably bound to time thus becomes the perfect storyteller of the twentieth century. As Taussig explains, the modern condition, in which ritual has been let loose, has caused a split between memory and involuntary memory. This split has often been abused by film, which in its resemblance to memory has deceitfully presented signs of memory as memory itself.

Time, time experience, memory and involuntary memory thus become the field onto which the modern quest unfolds. Mimesis is a presence of an absence, and the modern condition’s struggle against time, of that which is past and that which is passing, lends itself to the resurfacing of mimesis. This resurfacing of mimesis, however, is libel to deceit just as much as it is to truth, and to conquest just as much as to noble quest.

Chapter 5 begins with the film The Last Zapatistas in which aging veterans recount the events of the 1910 revolution. Their testimony and stories are often contradictory and fantastical as they refute the official narrative of the revolution as the most complete manifestation of Mexican destiny. In this sense the veterans disrupt the national narrative, yet the film takes it a step further by highlighting the inconsistencies of the testimony, thus disrupting any potential appropriation of the veteran’s words. In this vein I also chose a film that has only a symbolic link to Chiapas, as the symbolism and sentiment become the very essence of rebellion and disruption of colonialism and colonial narratives. The film and the veterans on the one hand make their disruptions of the official narrative and on the other hand they also disrupt this thesis by utilising an epic and heroic tone that negates a tragic sensibility that I have argued for.

What seems to emerge is the power of diffuse and distant memories that reveals a history of concealment, revelation and performance in the aid of oppression and resistance. This necessitates a search for the narratives that emerged from the conquest of the New World. While the voice of the Spanish crown manifested itself in providential and imperialist tones, the church in mystical tones and the conquistadors in historical realism, the voice of the indigenous peoples remained silent. It was, however, the indigenous people who were the subject of these competing voices. Therefore in the tensions, confusions, and competition for
power amongst these forces of conquest and colonisation an Indian identity emerged of the noble savage from which the seeds of oppression and resistance would sprout. Powerful senses of fear and pity, suffering, trust and deceit manifested in the actions and the dreams of all the protagonists of the colonial drama in which the roles of victim, perpetrator and bystander were picked up and put down by all.

The colony depended on bureaucratic, legal, and military systems and hierarchies to maintain the status quo. It also depended on an intricately elaborated caste system that designated the European, African and indigenous with every possible mutation. This system also related to the idea of witchcraft and magic in the colony that formed a complementary yet contradictory appendage to the other systems of power. This leads to the two great narratives to emerge from America: the Indian and the Negro. The Indian is representative of originary unity with nature and the world, and the Negro becomes the great disruptor of such dreams of purity. These roles play out not only in legal and magical realms, but also in labour roles as well as moments of symbolic unification such as the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Such hierarchies could also be used and turned upside down as modes of resistance. In Chiapas in 1712 in a climate of extreme oppression the Indian communities proclaimed themselves the true followers of the Christian faith and turned the Spanish hierarchies on their head. The mimesis of mimesis was used to appropriate the power of the Spaniard in an attempt to expel them from the lands of Chiapas. The uprising failed, yet it serves as a prime example of indigenous resistance where a messianic leader emerges under conditions of general repression, using the church and state hierarchies and symbols as well as the black magic attributed to the Indian, to turn everything on its head. However, it was not only the Indians with rebellion on their mind, and as the Creole inhabitants of New Spain gradually saw themselves as Mexicans rather than Spaniards, the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Indian tactics of resistance became models of action towards independence.

With the birth of the nation the role of the indigenous communities changed. As one nation difference was abhorred and the Indian represented a prehistoric backwardness that contradicted the brash new positivism of the nation state. From independence to the revolution in 1910 the Indian became more and more powerful symbolically as originator of the Mexican narrative, yet more and more disdained as contemporary symbol of archaic and primitive underdevelopment.

This leads us back to memory, voice and the voice negated since conquest. The debate over voice in documentary is twofold. On the one hand there is the debate over ideology and reality
in documentary and how its voice is crafted stylistically. On the other hand there is the question over the voice of the filmmaker and subject of documentary. This debate becomes particularly relevant in the depiction of minorities and their agency, but also points to the primitive fascination with technology, peoples and mimetic power. When memory and voice become central to questions of authenticity, appropriation, deceit and illusion I suggest that what really is at stake is the poetry and performance of memory that ultimately aims at conveying sense and sensuousness.

The final chapter explores the desire to utilise the mimetic faculty to dissolve into a cathartic space in which the privileged nomad once again imposes his beliefs onto the Other. On the other hand there is also the possibility of accelerating the mimetic relationship with the Other to the scale of the Hadron Collider, in which images and gestures are smashed together in order to reveal a God particle of sorts. Both these options reveal a kind of violence, and in a look at the final film, Sowing Justice, I look at how the community of Las Abejas goes about resolving the issue of injustice in the real world and in the image-world.
Carnival

The colectivo (an old kombi) leaves from the centre of San Cristóbal crammed with indigenous Tzotzil and myself. The first thing to come to mind is the memory of the first time I arrived in Mexico and could not understand a word of Spanish. This time the Spanish is not a problem but no one is speaking it. One gets accustomed to cultural change when taking an aeroplane or crossing a border to arrive in another country, but the sudden change from language and appearance in the simple act of getting on a bus is disconcerting.

The driver of the colectivo speaks to me in Spanish but everyone else speaks Tzotzil. As the colectivo drives through the traffic of San Cristóbal and the cloudy drizzle of a particularly cold day, the stereo plays Reggaeton, the extroverted dance music from Puerto Rico that seems a million miles away from Chiapas and its introverted inhabitants. As the vehicle winds its way into the hills the passengers become livelier as the music on the stereo is changed to traditional Rancheras. We seem to be travelling back in time from the modern city through the steep rural corn plantations as the street names, such as Carranza and Madero, remind me of Mexico’s Revolutionary heroes and their grip on national identity and unity. The street names, from modern industrial Monterrey to rural Chamula are invariably the same: the same dates and names from Mexico’s epic history. To know you are in Mexico one needs only look at the street signs.

The main street that leads to the centre of Chamula seems like any other in Chiapas, the same taco stands and indigenous arts and crafts sold on the side of the road. The town has been an important centre since pre–Hispanic times and was the focal point of the Caste War in 1869 in which the indigenous population rose up against the whites and mestizos. Arriving in the central plaza, however, reveals another Mexico. In front of the imposing church the whole population is out, rugged up in goatskin ponchos and sombreros. Musicians parade around the plaza, stopping to dance around coke bottles, beer bottles, or bottles of mezcal. Here Coca Cola has become an integral part of religious rituals. Doing my best to be the stupid tourist, I start to
take photos of the groups, unaware that it is not allowed, and a baton wielded by a young child promptly hits me.

Later on I find out that they can put you in jail for taking photos. In the evening my landlady, not particularly affectionate towards the Chamulans, tells me they are extremely hostile to outsiders, they are all criminals, and pretend that photography steals their soul just so they can get a few pesos off the tourists. Religion is not, however, something to joke about in Chamula, people can be arrested and fined for changing faith. She also tells me of a story, that she thinks might be true, about a female tourist who was killed by the locals there for jumping over a small wall. She is mightily impressed that I went there on my own and I am mightily impressed by her condemnation of the town and its people.

The colonial church in Chamula, San Juan Batista, is one of the most famous in Mexico. Its catholic facade hides another interior reality. Inside, the church has been appropriated and transformed into the pinnacle of religious syncretism. Pine needles cover the floor of the church from which the pews have been removed. The worshippers sit on the floor in family groups or by themselves, gathered around alters of incense, candles, and bottles of soft drink or alcohol. Around the walls of the church are cases containing mannequins of the catholic saints. The saints present the nature of the syncretism, they are white and common to most Mexican churches yet here they are dressed in indigenous clothing. The saints are seen to be representations of the pre–Hispanic gods, and therefore a continuation of the ancient deities presented in an acceptable manner to the authorities. The church does not function in a traditional Christian way; there are no services, rather the worshippers contract the services of a healer or shaman. The healer performs acts of cleansing or cures the person through a ritual, which involves the sacrifice of a chicken or a cleansing with eggs and candles.

The church does not have the solemn aspect of a Christian church and people gather around to talk, including some who are in the corner sending text messages on their mobile phones. Tour groups pass through, stopping to watch the rituals and get the explanation from their tour guide in French, German, or English. Two young girls see me taking notes and ask me what I am writing. When I tell them it is in English, they ask me to translate a few phrases, ‘buy this from me’ and ‘this is a present’. They race around the church and keep coming back to chat with me. After leaving the church I see the girls, who must be between five and eight years old, selling crafts on the street. Later on at home the landlady tells me they pretend to give bracelets to people and then start screaming that they have been robbed: thus the need to know how to say in English ‘this is a present’.
Leaving Chamula, I notice the usual drunks that accompany any festivity in Mexico, although this one was extremely calm compared to others; I almost get killed by the firework display, and I hear Los Tigres del Norte\textsuperscript{57} blaring out of a stereo, just to remind me I am still in Mexico.

A day later someone (who wasn’t there) tells me seven Americans were robbed of everything during the festivities. And so the facts, fictions, and myth–making continue, spiced up with a bit of fear.

The ‘awakening’

Fear in Chiapas revolves around the uneasy relationships between indigenous and non–indigenous Chiapanecos and the lingering ghosts that date back to the conquest. These ghosts from past atrocities and revolts have surfaced once again with the rebellion of 1994, the most evident manifestation of what is recognised as a larger ‘awakening’.\textsuperscript{58} Stories, rumours, whispers and translations synthesise into every utterance about the way things are, have been and will be.

A short bus trip is enough to ignite tensions. As the indigenous communities speak of the sense of awakening, so too do the non–indigenous peoples of Chiapas speak of rumours and myths. On the one hand there is a flourishing tourism in Chamula where the sacred space of the church is opened to gawking tour groups, on the other hand a photo can steal souls and have you arrested.\textsuperscript{59} Outsiders enter for a cultural experience and to consume the crafts of the Chamulans, yet everyone ‘knows’ of the deceit and trickery of the Chamulans. In the church, famous for its religious syncretism, they carry out cleansings and cures, and for a moment it seems to me that all this is staged: whether stealing souls, transgressing cultural boundaries, deceiving or being tricked, hearing or telling stories, it is as if an elaborate staging is being held to cure and cleanse both local and outsider.

\textsuperscript{57} Los Tigre del Norte is a famous band that sings narco-corridos, a style of music that celebrates the drug traffickers of Mexico.

\textsuperscript{58} ‘[W]hen indigenous people talk about these years they stress not the material changes, but the new political self-consciousness and sense of ethnic identity that have come from confronting the crisis on their own and finding solutions. In fact, lately it has become common to refer to the entire period as the time of ‘awakening’. Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, Shannon L. Mattiace, ‘Introduction’ in Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, Shannon L. Mattiace (Eds), Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 7-8.

\textsuperscript{59} For more on the pros and cons of such ethnic tourism, as well as the strange juxtapositions it creates, see Pierre L. Van Den Berghe, The Quest for the Other: Ethnic Tourism in San Cristobal, Mexico, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994.
As bizarre as the idea of a photo stealing a soul first seems, perhaps it does, and even if it doesn’t it is a pleasurable idea. Just as no one likes to be ripped off, the enjoyment of participating in dodgy deals and bartering always brings a crowd, and the novelty of a syncretised church with its cures and curiosities seems to leave the locals and outsiders equally cleansed.

In this sense there are two awakenings, the indigenous one with its political and social contestation of the dominant neo–liberal ideology with all its economic, military and cultural arms. The other awakening is that of the outsiders, the non–indigenous Mexicans and foreigners who seem to be responding just as much, but in contrary ways, to the dominant global social, political and economic paradigm. The result is a neo–colonial staging, where the assumed primitiveness of the indigenous peoples reignites a desire for the primitive in the coloniser, thus the paradoxical enjoyment of the deceit and trickery of the Indian and the pleasure in thinking that they think that a photo can steal your soul. Just as there is a cathartic pleasure from tragedy, so there is a cleansing pleasure from deceit and illusion. As a political and social consciousness awakens in the indigenous communities, a desire for the primitive awakens in the neo–coloniser. As one group seeks legal and political recognition, the other seeks magic and illusory tricks: both seek cleansing and cures, and the camera takes centre stage as the maker of images.

The indigenous awakening does not however signify a unified and homogenous gathering of souls. Firstly, I will give a brief background to the conditions that brought together disparate actors in a way that created such a historical moment. I will focus on the emergence of two specific groups that have been subject to similar pressures but taken two distinct paths. Firstly the Zapatistas, or EZLN, who initiated the uprising that led to several towns and the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas briefly being overrun. This led to protracted and difficult government negotiations and the signing of the San Andres Accords in 1996, and in 2001 to constitutional reform of indigenous rights and culture. The second group is the pacifist civil society group, Las Abejas, who while supporting the aims of the EZLN suffered the wrath of the paramilitaries in Acteal. They are also the group that produced two of the films I am looking at, Sowing

---

61 For more on these reforms and their significance, see Alan Arias Marín, EZLN: Violencia, derechos culturales y democracia. México: Comisión nacional de los derechos humanos, 2003; Alan Arias Marín (Ed), Multiculturalismo y derechos indígenas. El caso Mexicano. México: Comisión nacional de los derechos humanos, 2008.
Justice... From Acteal: Las Abejas before the Supreme Court of the Nation and Acteal: 10 years of impunity. How many more?

Despite the relative degree of political success for the indigenous peoples of Chiapas that emerged from the ‘awakening’, in many communities divisions were heightened along party and religious lines. Two generations ago nearly everyone was Catholic, now over half are liberationist Catholics; there are over twenty Protestant denominations and even Muslims. As the case of Chamula illustrates, the cultural vibrancy and strength of identity have come at a cost that has led to the expulsion of large sections of the community. The extent of such division is well illustrated in the case of the municipality of San Pedro Chenalhó. There we find the village of Acteal, the autonomous Zapatista town of Pohló, and the organisation Las Abejas.

Since the uprising the municipality has been split into four distinct groups; firstly, supporters of the status quo and the PRI; secondly, Las Abejas; thirdly, the Zapatistas; and lastly, the independents. Within, alongside and against these political associations are religious divisions that can be divided into three main groups: firstly, traditionalist Catholics, secondly; Protestants; and thirdly, those following a more radical strand of liberation theology and ‘Word of God’. Such splits have emerged from a recent, and not so recent, history of economic, social, cultural, and political interference from influences that extend far beyond the secluded and small municipality of Chenalhó and the broader borders of Chiapas.

In many ways Chiapas has always been at the fringes or periphery of events in Mexico and the Americas. As historian Neil Harvey explains, the relatively small amount of autonomy that the Chiapanecos had been able to preserve after the Conquest due to its isolation was shattered at the end of the nineteenth century. Booming world markets for tropical fruit and other products led to the sale of one third of Chiapas’ land to foreign businesses. Labour was needed and taxes were introduced to create indigenous debt and servitude while land was expropriated.

65 Christine Eber, ‘Buscando una nueva vida’, p.49
Traditional organisation did persist however, and was used by local elites in a closed and highly paternalistic society. A colonial mentality continued well into the twentieth century in which coercion and prestige, fear and servility became the basis of power, as Mexican historian Carlos Tello Díaz explains: ‘Both sentiments were complementary. They responded to the conviction – racist and primitive – that the whites were superior to the Indians’. The conviction was so powerful and successful that it was felt on both sides, however, what also survived were the memories of their plundered land and the stories of rebellion.

The 1910 Revolution brought a degree of stability to Chiapas, and in Chenalhó local indigenous elites worked to slowly gain back land lost to haciendas. This was repelled by government attempts to extend its influence through education and health programs and was shattered in the 1970s with the decline of profitability from agriculture. A population explosion as well as refugees from Guatemala put severe strains on communities. With economic instability came social instability. Added into this mix was the introduction of Liberation Theology. From the 1960s, Bishop Samuel Ruiz set up a network of indigenous catechists around the diocese of San Cristóbal.

For those forced to move the Exodus story become central, providing more than a comprisable biblical tale, ‘accompanied by God, they began to live the Exodus’. The Exodus story combined with the more ideological texts of liberation theology would provide the idea of a just war, ‘the thesis of bellum justum inherited from Saint Thomas’. Five hundred years after the birth of Bartolomé de las Casas, on the 13th October 1974, the First Indigenous Congress of Chiapas began.

The themes selected for the congress were: land, commerce, education and health. The theme most privileged during the congress was that of the struggle for the land. The concept of the land, as Elizabeth Ferry points out, has a particular resonance in Mexico, as it extends to the idea of patrimony and collective identity: ‘the loss of such patrimonial possessions poses a

---

67 Carlos Tello Díaz is a controversial figure. His book, *La Rebelión de las Cañadas: Origen y ascenso del EZLN*, México: Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 2005, is viewed with suspicion by scholars due to his unique access to state security files. For more on this see, Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion*, 1998, pp. 9-10. Tello Díaz does, however, provide a sceptical view on the Zapatistas shared by many, and his position is worth noting to give a broader sense of the varying perceptions of the conflict.


70 Christine Eber, ‘Buscando una nueva vida’, p. 48.


direct threat to the collective, and not only to its current members but to past and future members as well. For the first time the disparate indigenous groups of Chiapas came together, and, ‘as it would be remembered, the Indians found their voice’.

The growing link between the church and the radical political movements manifested itself in a particular arrangement. The church provided the discourse of rights while the political movements provided the means of bringing those rights into reality. These newly politicised priests and militants soon began to fill the vacuum in the jungle communities that had been created by government neglect. Bible classes, agriculture and revisionist history classes were given while ‘images of Emiliano Zapata, Che Guevara, and Karl Marx began to replace those of the saints’.

The tension surrounding such displacements of people, within the wider context of increasing political and religious consciousness, albeit from disjointed factions, would be the stage onto which the Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional (FLN) would enter in the early 1980s. The FLN was yet another militant group which had grown out of the 1960’s student movements inspired by the Cuban revolution. The violent state repression of student and worker movements which had marked the later years of the sixties, highlighted by the massacre in Tlatelolco, had radicalised and pushed underground many political movements. According to Barry Carr, it also signalled the ‘massive erosion of ‘bourgeois ideology’, whose clearest expression in Mexico is the ‘Ideology of the Mexican Revolution’.

The arrival of the FLN into Chiapas spawned the EZLN and also coincided with the governorship of General Absalón Castellanos from 1983. As well as his military background he and his family were some of the biggest landowners in the state. His six years in office, ‘one of the blackest in the history of the state’, was marked by corruption and repression of any and all campesino organisations. Some one hundred and fifty three political assassinations were committed during his governorship. His time in office and a growing militarisation of Chiapas was also a response to Central American revolutions and civil wars of the time. The fear of social

---

revolution spreading up and across the border from Guatemala forced the Mexican government into securing the frontier.

The FLN which returned to the Lacandon Jungle in 1983 was also very much influenced by the revolutionary events of Central America in the 1970’s. Links were made with groups in the region and members fought in Nicaragua. A year after the success of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1979 the FLN published their Statutes. In this it was stated that ‘[t]he FLN is a political–military organisation whose aim is to take power in Mexico for the rural and urban workers of the Mexican Republic, to install a popular republic with a socialist system’. At this point the idea of indigenous rights and identity were clearly subordinate to those of the classical concepts of the urban and rural masses.

As well as socialist rhetoric, however, the statutes also alluded to the indigenous cause and the formation of the EZLN. This would operate with another army of students and workers, both under the command of the FLN. The EZLN was formed and made its base beside the Miramar Lagoon, deep inside the Lacandon Jungle. The first party to arrive there and set up base consisted of only five people, two indigenous people and three mestizos. The next year, Rafael Guillén, a professor of philosophy in Mexico City arrived at the camp; he would later be known as Marcos.

With unprecedented state repression and the threat of relocation from their lands, the communities were willing recipients of the military training the EZLN brought to the jungle. The first few years were grounded in the idea of self–defence, but always with the long–term objective of liberation and revolution. In these early years the objectives of the EZLN and the diocese of San Cristóbal, represented in the jungle by the organisation Slop, were almost identical. As well as objectives, they shared common enemies: the Federal Government, the oligarchs of Chiapas, and American imperialism. For the EZLN, American imperialism manifested itself in multinational companies, for the church it manifested itself in proselytising Protestants. The EZLN needed the Church to reach the communities, and the church needed the EZLN to bring about the just war. Together they showed that the ‘struggle for revolution was compatible with the teachings of Christ’.81

While the church and EZLN joint forces on this front, on arrival into the jungle they quickly realised that Marxist theory and dogmatic Catholicism were of little relevance to the Chiapanecos: ‘Just as the catechists could not export Jesus to Chiapas, neither could the

80 Carlos Tello Díaz, La Rebelión, p. 109.
81 Carlos Tello Díaz, La Rebelión, p. 122.
Zapatistas export Marx or Mao. An assimilation of ‘outside’ ideas to the Mayan worldview began in 1986, when the EZLN were invited into local communities. Alongside the other influences of Catholic liberation theology and traditional indigenous resistance, the movement began to take on the hybrid nature of past rebellions. Neil Larson points out that Marxism and modern history in Latin America ‘entered into an internalized and seemingly synthetic historical relation—and this in a way that has few if any parallels in modern societies.’ In this way, both the Marxists and the priests seemed to find themselves in the positions of being taught while under the initial illusion of being the teachers, as the communities began to embrace and propel forward their own history and culture, fusing a ‘Maya–centric history’ with a revisionist national history.

The Zapatistas and Las Abejas

The EZLN struggled to remain on good terms with the diocese, and the prospect of a socialist revolution seemed dimmer by the day. The fading light of socialism elsewhere was also felt in Chiapas. The end of the Soviet Block and the Sandinistas’ electoral loss in Nicaragua did not bode well for the EZLN’s future in Mexico. Despite this the EZLN remained a potent force for mobilisation, and for the diocese of San Cristóbal there seemed to be only one possible conclusion in the view of Tello Díaz, ‘they now took the Indians to the edge of tragedy’. Here Harvey diverges dramatically, suggesting rather that, ‘in the face of continual repression, increasing poverty, and worsening health conditions, the committees informed Marcos in 1992 of their readiness to fight’.

In 1992 the negotiations for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) were under way between Mexico, the United States of America and Canada. As part of the agreement, Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution was to be amended. The article, dating back to the
Revolution, dealt with the re-designation of land and a prohibition on the private sale of ejido lands. Under the new deal no more land would be given out and the prohibition would be lifted. For the indigenous communities of Chiapas this was seen as a direct threat against their communal land holdings and yet another attempt to take their land from them. NAFTA was the final straw: ‘its provisions so clearly imply the destruction of the Indian peasant’s lives, culture, and history’ as Kopkind notes. The economic, religious and political instability had seen Chiapas become in the previous 30 years, ‘one big social experiment’, and as a response the communities organised their first mass mobilisation in Ocosingo. More than four thousand campesinos marched against the free trade deal and the changes to Article 27.

The countdown to the uprising had begun. As Tulio Halperin Donghi points out, five hundred years after ‘what we do not dare call the discovery of the New World’, a pessimistic feeling reigned in Latin America. Despite this, fifteen thousand indigenous inhabitants of Chiapas voted in favour of insurrection in June 1992. Within a context of growing tension between the EZLN and FLN leaders over the future of the movements, the EZLN supported this option. Many in the FLN were seeking a move towards conventional politics and the abandonment of arms, but as Tello Díaz summarises the position of the leadership and militants, ‘they had all gambled their lives – their possessions, their work, their hopes – on the war of liberation: they could not take a step back.’

On the 12th October 1992 the ‘Discovery’ was commemorated in San Cristóbal de las Casas. The EZLN had decided to participate in the protests under the banner of ANCIEZ, a collective of indigenous groups. The march through the city accomplished two objectives: the first was to protest the celebrations; the second was a rehearsal of the taking of the city. Some nine thousand indigenous peoples took part in the protests; the majority were Zapatistas though unbeknownst to anyone. During the march the protesters pulled down a statue of the conquistador Diego de Mazariegos.

As well as providing a rehearsal for the Zapatistas the protest was also crucial in the formation of Las Abejas. As Christine Kovic points out, it was the success of the protest as well as another march from Palenque to Mexico City that illustrated to many the power in numbers and

---

92 Carlos Tello Díaz, La Rebelión, pp. 186-187.
nonviolent protest. Las Abejas was thus formed in 1992, ostensibly around a land dispute, it was very much a product of the times and influenced by the same conditions as the Zapatistas. However, rather than take the path of violence, Las Abejas embraced a struggle for liberation and reconciliation.\footnote{Christine Kovic, ‘The Struggle for Liberation and Reconciliation in Chiapas, Mexico: Las Abejas and the Path of Nonviolent Resistance’, \textit{Latin American Perspectives}, 30:3, 2003, pp. 58–79, p. 62.}

As Thomas Benjamin points out, ‘this small episode by people long scorned and exploited in a remote corner of the world’, at a moment of general pessimism in Latin America, ‘provides an interesting perspective on the blurred boundary between thinking about history and making history, between history as knowledge and history as event’.\footnote{Christine Kovic, ‘The Struggle for Liberation and Reconciliation in Chiapas’, p. 59.} According to Benjamin, the toppling of the statue and the synchronism of histories, represent a moment when the indigenous peoples of Chiapas become protagonists in their own story.

Two things seem particularly striking to me in that moment of commemoration: firstly, a fear of things that may be lost, history culture, power and authority; secondly, there is an acceleration of the mimetic movement between text and reality to the point at which thinking history trips into making history. Biblical stories, stories of conquest, and Marxist theory seem to produce realities either dormant or previously non-existent. The fears and paranoias that exist in the religious, political and oral stories seem to come alive in the form of oppression and rebellion, and at every turn there seems to be an impending tragedy. The very titles of these movies – \textit{Last Zapatistas} and \textit{Acteal: 10 years on impunity. How many more?} – convey this tragic notion of immanent loss and suffering. On the other hand, in the very act of making historical documentaries the protagonists and filmmakers, like those who tore down the statue of Mazariegos, are making history themselves, thus shifting back and forth between text and reality as such.

Addressing the quincentennial, Taussig takes this moment of commemoration – which was first perceived so pessimistically, yet became an incendiary event – to question accepted norms of representation and reception. In the construction of such legacies as that of Columbus or Cortés we can begin to see how a politics of violence or resistance surfaces in the very stories which seek to monumentalise or mystify the confrontation between the European and the indigenous. Like this thesis, the films I am looking at and the historical accounts of the
events surrounding the quincentennial emanate from a knowledge–industry, which, as Taussig says, is ‘inevitably ritualistic and anchored in remembrance, no matter how scientific’.  

The pulling down of the conquistador’s statue and the writing of that history create a politics of violence and resistance stemming from two distinct images of conquest. On the one hand there is the conquistador’s heroic legacy as ‘discoverer’ and ‘creator’ of the New World, and on the other the history of his violence and resistance to it. Taussig suggests that in focussing on violence and resistance ‘we do too easily project onto others unproblematized notions of violence and resistance that rightfully begin with us’. 

In its colonial context alterity tends to take on two tasks: firstly it designates the good Other from the bad Other; and secondly it is an arena onto which the West’s own demons can project themselves. Here we find the ‘powerful modern mythology of good savage/bad savage by which the whites of Europe and North America purify themselves through using the good savage to purge the bad one’. While the good savage represents a purity and nobility, ‘the bad savage is the sign of the permanent wound inflicted by history, the sign of waste, degeneracy, and thwarted narrative’. In the films that feature in this thesis we can see two mirror images of this: firstly, the Canadian filmmaker, who goes to Chiapas and finds ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Indians killing each other; and, secondly, the indigenous people themselves, who travel to Mexico City to get justice for the massacre and come across ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Mexican mestizos who help and/or hinder them.

Taussig concludes by asking what ends his study of violence and resistance aims towards. The wider colonial context and project must be considered, he states, in order to recognise the movements that, innocently or not, continue the colonial legacy. Through this mimetic movement which distances the bad and assimilates the good, whether indigenous or European, where violence is, ‘always elsewhere – and resistance – always by the poor and powerless’, he suggests that colonialism continues, ‘under a liberal guise made all the more deceitful by the rhetoric of Enlightenment science’. 

The Zapatistas, for their part, emerged from the jungle on the first on January 1994, taking over Chanal, Altamirano, Las Margaritas, Ocosingo, and San Cristóbal de las Casas. Their demands were included in their Declaración de la Selva Lacandona, declaring war on the

---

98 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 142.
Mexican Army, the dictatorship of the government and the president. Their demands were for work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace; just as in the 1974 conference. During the uprising public records of land titles were destroyed, while the historical archive was carefully guarded, several individuals belonging to the local elites were kidnapped, while the general populace was left in peace.\textsuperscript{100} The general reaction was one of surprise, but the government was quick to blame the liberation theology of the bishop of San Cristóbal, Samuel Ruiz.\textsuperscript{101} The battles fought were mainly between the indigenous from Chiapas, those recruited by the army and those recruited by the EZLN. The trauma of having to kill their own people had the soldiers ‘walking like shadows’.\textsuperscript{102}

The Zapatistas received massive support from people in Mexico City immediately after the uprising. Some one hundred and fifty thousand marched against government policy in Chiapas. Peace talks were initiated and in August a convention was organised by the Zapatistas with representatives from civil society to discuss a range of issues. The convention took place in the jungle in the newly created Aguascalientes, a symbolic meeting place designed to facilitate a truly democratic, grass-roots dialogue. In December the Zapatistas declared thirty-eight autonomous indigenous municipalities. February 1995 saw the government response.

Tens of thousands of Mexican soldiers entered Chiapas; twenty thousand campesinos were displaced and the Aguascalientes destroyed. A low-intensity war began, targeting civilians and Zapatista aligned communities. The San Andres Accords were signed between the government and Zapatistas in 1996 but peace talks stalled due to government indecision. At the same time the Zapatistas began to harness the power of the Internet and the support of a variety of international movements and organisations.\textsuperscript{103} In July/August an Intercontinental Encuentro for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism took place with thousands of people attending from around the world. Meanwhile Las Abejas, while supporting the aims of the Zapatistas and confronting the same enemies, maintained their pacifism.

**Zapatista legacies**

\textsuperscript{100} Thomas Benjamin. ‘A Time of Reconquest’, p. 448.
\textsuperscript{101} For an analysis of the role of religion in the uprising, see Marie-Odile Marion, ‘Religión, identidad y rebelión en las Cañadas’, Revista Académica para el Estudio de las Religiones, II, n.d., pp. 19-32.
\textsuperscript{102} Carlos Tello Díaz. La Rebellion, p. 30.
With the many forces uniting and dividing the indigenous communities of Chiapas the biggest change was seen to be the overarching ‘awakening’ of political consciousness linked to the ‘rediscovery of their history’. The legacy of conquest re-emerged as a contestable space and the ‘re-discovery’ of history coincided with the celebrations of the ‘discovery’ of the Americas. Amidst this burgeoning ‘politics of recognition’, just as signs of unity emerged, so did divisions. According to Jan Rus and George Collier the economic and political instability of the preceding two decades raised the level of distrust of the state and non-indigenous, leading to ‘a notable tendency on the part of many to view their relationship to the rest of Mexico in ethnic, oppositional terms’.

This leads me to what has been called the ‘post–Zapatista cultural and political context’ in Mexico in which the legacy of conquest finds itself linked inextricably to violence and resistance. The movement very quickly began to mean many things to many people, or, as Tom Hayden sees it, ‘Chiapas raised from the hidden depths of our continental history an issue that our society seeks to forget: The Conquest of the Americas’. Violence and social change marked this post–Zapatista era, but, as Alejos García points out, this violence and change was evident all throughout the twentieth century without bringing about any ‘significant transformations of the social structure or the dominant colonial mentality’. What was occurring on many levels was a form of decolonisation that rejected the Spanish language and forms of organisation that symbolise colonial oppression, ‘producing a social dynamic without precedent’. Gary Gossen also confirms this fundamental change, talking of the, ‘pan–Indian

---


106 On the alliances and ruptures within the indigenous communities that made up the Zapatista base, see Maya Lorena Pérez Ruiz. ¡Todos somos Zapatistas! Alianzas y rupturas en las organizaciones indígenas, PhD, Departamento de Antropología de la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Iztapalapa, 2000.


111 José Alejos García, ‘The Ch’ols Reclaim Palenque, or the War of Eternal Return’, p. 94.
nature of this enterprise’ and the ‘powerful component of postcolonial ethnic affirmation that goes well beyond political action’. \textsuperscript{112}

The interest generated by the movement added another layer to the events in Chiapas: the national and international presence. Federal police and military, Mexican and foreign media, observers, academics and supporters all entered Chiapas with ideas and interventions. In many ways the world was brought to Chiapas and vice-versa. As Xochitl Leyva Solano writes, ‘[t]o a certain degree, the inhabitants of Las Cañadas have indeed turned into ‘global citizens’ even before becoming real Mexican citizens with full constitutional rights’. \textsuperscript{113} Carlos Monsiváis best sums up the positive reaction and sense of change:

Their body language has changed [...] and most unexpected is their gaze. These young people look and accept being looked at [...]. They know they are perceived, and the end of their invisibility makes them happy and reinforces their adherence to the EZLN...The Zapatistas are memory, challenging oblivion and extermination: [...] we are the forgotten heart of our country. We are the first memory. \textsuperscript{114}

Monsiváis continues by explaining the significance of such a change: ‘in a society as racist as Mexico’s, to acquire visibility today means to become the object of commentaries that mix modern prejudice with feelings of guilt’. \textsuperscript{115} This sense of guilt, as well as the acts and comments of prejudice, do not only apply to those outside the communities. The diversity of experience in Chiapas and the resultant reactions to the Zapatista uprising are grounded in many factors. Every region has been impacted differently going back to the Conquest and the subsequent five hundred years of local, regional, national policy and ideology and the economic realities.

These factors have altered on different levels the relationship to place and identity and created various forms of organisation. Some ethnic groups have moved and created new attachments to place, others have been dispersed, some have had more exposure to the national discourse and others less. Christine Eber, referring to the Zapatista rhetoric of removing the ‘mal gobierno’ (bad government), shows how such rhetoric unites the ethnic


\textsuperscript{115} Carlos Monsiváis, ‘From the Subsoil to the Mask that Reveals’, p. 126.
groups under a shared banner of the oppressed, while it at the same time, it ‘contradicts local knowledge about the multifaceted and multidimensional nature of experience’.116

Jan Rus and George Collier write about the Tzeltal and Tzotzil experience of migratory labour. While reliant on this seasonal labour and the subsequent exposure to the ‘outside world’ this community still sees itself as traditional corn farmers. ‘In their eyes, the world beyond their communities was just that: “beyond”, “outside”, “foreign”’.117 Through their experience we can see how exposure to outside forces does not necessarily mean the adoption of outside ways or assimilation. In this case it is quite the opposite, ‘their social and cultural “closure” is not due to their lack of exposure to the ‘other’ but rather, ‘as self–defence –as a way to wall off space free from the subordination and exploitation they suffer outside their communities’.118

Rosalva Aída Hernandez Castillo writes of the Mam experience. This ethnic group stretches across –and is divided by– the Mexican–Guatemalan border. In the middle of the twentieth century –at the height of government attempts to forge ‘the homogenous mestizo national identity considered vital for the modern development of Mexico’ – languages seen as being Guatemalan were banned and people seen to be Guatemalan were discriminated against and refused access to land.119 This, she shows, led to the breakdown of families and the disavowal of ethnic identity.120

The Ch’ols have returned once more to the ancient Mayan ruins of Palenque, and once more their lives revolve around the city. This time to work in the ruins selling what they can to tourists or working as prostitutes for the nearby army barracks. Jose Alejos García writes of the experience of the Ch’ols. The children, at the end of a day selling to tourists, ‘run through the plaza, and skip on the steps of the ancient buildings constructed by their ancestors, under the disapproving gaze of the security guards who protect the temples’.121

Just as these children re–enter Palenque, the indigenous communities seem to re–enter their own history and the visual economy, at times under their own volition, and at other times

116 Christine Eber, ‘Buscando una nueva vida’, p.59
120 Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, ‘Between Civil Disobedience and Silent Rejection’, p. 66.
121 José Alejos García, ‘The Ch’ols Reclaim Palenque, or the War of Eternal Return’, p. 88.
dragged along. As such, a strange game will be played where these communities narrate themselves or become narrated, appearing as representations of themselves for the tourist market and overseas audience, but always under the disapproving eyes of someone. As such a seemingly contradictory spectacle of legacy is created.

Of the media spectacle, which followed the uprising, much was made, as Alma Guillermoprieto points out, despite the failure of the EZLN to overthrow the government and the losses that it suffered: ‘It did, however, capture the Mexicans’ imagination’. Mexican poet and public intellectual Octavio Paz was critical, condemning everything and everyone in his lament for the past and the failed future.

But the civilization of the spectacle is cruel. The spectators have no memory—because of that they also lack remorse and true conscience. They are tied to what is new, and it doesn’t matter what it is so long as it is new.

Of the movement or the Chiapas ‘matter’, as he referred to it, he contended that it was neither a revolution nor postmodern as many had claimed: ‘Nevertheless, the Chiapas rebels are indeed decidedly ultramodern in the most precise sense: through their style.’

So there appears an uprising and movement that despite having no ‘substance’, has captured territory, both literally and of the imagination, and managed to maintain much of it. The fear over its substance, authenticity, and indeed its actual existence seems to touch on something very profound. Linked to the idea of the spectacle is the concern surrounding the movement’s origins and intentions. Is it a genuine indigenous uprising, or an instance of a Marxist guerrilla group manipulating the Indians? According to some, before the 1994 uprising, Indian rights had not been a major part of Marcos’ concerns or rhetoric. Here a recurring theme from colonialism resurfaces, either the Indian is docile and predisposed to the influence of radicals, or he is sly and manipulative.

Tom Hayden confirms such an analysis, suggesting: ‘With honourable exceptions, the Left seemed to concur in the consensus that Indians were primitive, pre–modern, unfortunate people who were bypassed by history’s inexorable machinery of progress. The Left was sorry

for these Indians, but rarely in solidarity with them’.\textsuperscript{126} As Gossen points out, on the other hand, the adaptability and willingness of indigenous communities to assimilate foreign ideas and concepts into their own worldview without sacrificing their fundamental beliefs, ‘by drawing freely from symbolic and ideological forms of other ethnic and political entities [...] in order to situate and centre themselves in the present’.\textsuperscript{127}

So it seems that concerns of authenticity and depth pervade the meeting between the indigenous communities of Chiapas and the outside world. There is also the forgotten side of Mexico’s history, a repressed memory that is painfully resurfacing, and, as Hayden points out, ‘the chance for reparation, for healing, for a new beginning’.\textsuperscript{128} With the uprising and the quincentenary what becomes obvious are the concerns over the loss, or imminent loss, of cultures and peoples, as well as the ongoing need to find extreme polarities of interpretation over the essential goodness or evilness and agency of peoples. Violence and resistance become double–edged swords where action and passivity take on moral significance. In those who act and fight we see either the brave or barbarous, and in those who are passive we see the noble or the cowardly.

The focus returned to Chiapas on the twenty–second of December 1997 due to the Acteal massacre. The event was not an anomaly but was rather preceded by, and the result of, violence between different bands aligned with opposing political organisations. From the moment of the Zapatista uprising in 1994 there had been an increasing level of violence and displacement of peoples from all sides: of those aligned with PRI, the Cardenistas, Zapatistas, and those who declared themselves neutral.\textsuperscript{129} Provocations and recriminations came from all sides; the other was always blamed in an increasing war over (dis)information, and factions consolidated their power by insisting on allegiance from individuals and collecting money from them under the threat of death or eviction. As Christine Eber points out, this was not a normal level of community discord, but rather the ‘direct result of the spread of the low–intensity war’.\textsuperscript{130}

Due to the ceasefire with the Zapatistas the government was keen to avoid direct confrontation. The armament and aiding of paramilitaries, government supporters, and those who felt threatened by the Zapatistas, therefore became the best way to undermine Zapatista

\textsuperscript{126} Tom Hayden, ‘Introduction’, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{127} Gossen, ‘From Olmecs to Zapatistas’, p. 535.
\textsuperscript{128} Tom Hayden, ‘Introduction’, p.4.
\textsuperscript{130} Christine Eber, ‘Buscando una nueva vida’, p. 61.
power as well as any other opposition groups such as Las Abejas. Talks were held at the beginning of December between the various factions, each blaming the other and the outside interference of various supporters, including, Public Security Police, the state governor, the EZLN, the Catholic diocese, and the human rights centre, Fray Bartolomé de las Casas.131

The talks broke down and the paramilitary groups, made up mostly of young landless and unemployed men, continued to threaten, extract taxes, attack, rob and displace peoples.132 It was a group of these displaced, all members of Las Abejas, who found themselves in Acteal praying for protection the day of the massacre. The result of the massacre was forty–five dead, mostly women and children, at the hands of a government sponsored paramilitary group.133

The reports on the Acteal Massacre

What we have here is a mythic violence in Benjamin’s sense. The Zapatistas use violence to change laws while the government and their paramilitaries break the law with a violence that maintains the status quo and thus the particular law and justice of the powerful. One way or another the violence is directly related to the themes of justice and power. As John Docker points out in his exploration of genocide, law has always been directly linked to the justification and execution of colonial rule. It has been, and in some ways still is, he states:

conceived and continuously refined not to protect the colonized from conquest or colonization or empire or war but rather to regulate conquest and colonization and war amongst the powerful nations at any one time.134

As we have seen, a religious and political discourse, as well as stories of dispossession, had become central to life in Chiapas. Now I will look at the legal discourse and how that too entered into a mimetic relationship with the communities in Chiapas. Just as stories of Marx and Che reverberated with political and military action, and stories of the Exodus with the belief in destiny and providence, so too has legal and international human rights discourse found a foothold in Chiapas with the ideas of victim, perpetrator, testimony and objectivity.

133 For testimonies from both victims and perpetrators, see Martín Álvarez Fabela, Acteal de los Mátires: Infamia para no olvidar, México: Plaza y Valdés, 2000; and, Marta Durán de Huerta Patiño and Massimo Boldrini (Eds), Acteal: Navidad en el infierno. México: Times Editores, 1998.
Two reports on the massacre by the government and the human rights centre Fray Bartolomé de las Casas will be discussed here. The Attorney General’s Office published its ‘White Paper’ on the Acteal massacre eleven months after the event. The report was to investigate the events leading up to the day as well as the massacre and deliver findings on those responsible.

The report states:

The Federal Attorney General’s Office is an expert legal and technical agency, which obliges it to base its affirmations on elements of proof gathered in the prosecutors’ investigations. That is the reason this document contains no subjective or political opinions.135

So we supposedly move beyond the poetic, mythical and exaggerated to the ‘objective’ and rational scientific report on the events in Chiapas. Here too, however, the legacy of conquest and colonialism shimmer through in the language, in the choice of subjects of study and in the omissions. In the first sentence of the report it states that on ‘December 22, 1997, a group of Tzotzil Indians [...] were attacked with firearms’.136 Ethnicity becomes the defining element of the event and will later be used to make the events comprehensible. A few sentences later, the report seems to begin wavering on its objectives: it states that the writers of the report have, ‘tried to be objective and impartial, as required by Mexican law’.137

The report then goes on to explain how the historical, social, cultural and political situation of the region is essential in understanding the violent events because:

Chenalhó has a complex history that specifically includes religious, economic, political and other factors that have led to confrontations between members of the various communities and within the communities themselves.138

Before the report has even begun, it has been clearly spelt out that these people are Indians (rather than normal Mexican citizens) and that the place they come from is different and marked by violence. Therefore, the situation is to be understood within another context to that which is normally the case. The place and the people are Other and like in the film A Place Called Chiapas, we should expect the unexpected from a people that are subject to the

137 Procuraduría General de la República, White Paper, p. 5.
inescapable weight of historical and cultural legacies. The violence in Chiapas confirms the law, justice and power of government in Mexico City.

Figures are given on the percentage of indigenous in the municipality, 98%; literacy, 49%; and the interesting percentage of monolingual inhabitants, 33%. Of course the majority of Mexicans are monolingual but in this case it is not only Spanish that they speak, but also a native language. This reference was brought out at the time of the 1994 uprising. It seems an important fact to point out in the eyes of some. They also have, ‘traditional forms of administering justice’.139

Thus the scene is set: a community of poor, unintelligent, backward, religious Indians, who by their refusal to learn Spanish are also traitors to the nation. As Mexican sociologist Roger Bartra tells us, being different in Mexico is just not on.

National culture identifies with the political power in such a way that whoever wants to break with the rules of authoritarianism will be immediately accused of wanting to renounce –or worse: betray– the national culture.140

Under the guise of well–resourced facts and figures about the region the report is systematically reinforcing all the stereotypes of the Indians and prefacing the violence of the massacre in this context. The illusion of objective reporting is used to reinvigorate myth. If that wasn’t enough the report offered the perfect opportunity to create fear and panic in the general public. Not only was the massacre something between Indians, but it also took place in a context of ‘Indianisation’ or ‘re–Indianisation’ of the region.

In Chenahló, just as in some other municipalities of the region, the distribution of land to indigenous people and the ascent of bilingual indigenous people to positions of leadership in the communities and the municipality resulted in the mestizos or ladinos (non–indigenous people) leaving the municipality [...] a process that ‘Indianized’ or ‘re–Indianized’ the population and, of course, also ‘re–Indianized’ the municipal power structure.141

The language and terminology here is interesting. First the term ‘ladino’, indicating a Spanish speaking indigenous person or mestizo. Anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla defines the ladino as someone who ‘structures their life in contrast to the Indian, in their necessity to

permanently mark in everything the “not Indian”’.142 Here it seems the Attorney General is classifying who is and isn’t Indian along supposed cultural lines. What is key here isn’t necessarily the racial characterisation of the people; it is the representation of their cultural practices that is significant. With the exiting of the civilised and nationalised mestizos and ladinos, the community is under the control of ‘primitives’. Without the civilising presence of the ladino, unimaginable acts of violence and barbarity are possible.

The problem of a different culture, other than the national culture, is crucial here. Here we find ourselves in what Bonfil Batalla’s sees as a battle of civilisations, the search for Mexico’s true nature and future direction. The ‘re–Indianisation’ which so scares the elite is the reversal of what Bonfil Batalla sees as five hundred years of colonial thought and government policy; the ‘de–Indianisation’ of Mexico.

De–Indianisation is a process different to mestizaje: the second is a biological phenomenon and the employment of the term to refer to situations of another nature, ‘cultural mestizaje’, for example, contains the risk of introducing an erroneous and inappropriate vision for understanding processes which are not biological […]. De–Indianisation, on the other hand, is an historic process through which populations which originally possessed a particular and distinctive identity, based in their own culture, are forced to renounce this identity, with all the consequent changes in their social and cultural organisation.143

More than just a historic process of domination, he refers to it as ethnocide. In this space of struggle there is an option of transforming into a Mexican or an Indian, being both is not an option, and the charge for choosing Indian is treason. The report both alludes to the stigma of being indigenous as well as playing on the ancient fears of indigenous savagery and uprisings. While superficially investigating the events around Acteal, it is whispering into the ear of everyone who will listen, ‘look at those savage Indians killing each other’, disguising its prejudices as facts and figures.

The human rights centre Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (FrayBa) in San Cristóbal published its report on Acteal one year after the massacre.144 While the Attorney General’s office wishes to

143 Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, México Profundo, p. 42.
144 For further reports on the case of Acteal and the state of human rights in Chiapas, see Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Camino a la massacre. Informe especial sobre Chenalhó, San Cristóbal de las Casas: Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 1997; Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. La situación actual de derechos humanos en
place the massacre in the context of local strife, the human rights centre seeks to place it in the context of the counter insurgency war between the EZLN and the national government. Although we can safely say that the Attorney General and the Centre come to two very different conclusions about context and responsibility, both use quite similar methods of presenting their case. Testimony, stories and reports are used to present a reality of government conspiracy and compliance. While the uniqueness of the indigenous community is used in the Attorney General’s report to show us how they are more prone to violence, in the report by Fray Ba the government is shown as a mythical beast, which is prone to cynicism, deceit and violence. The system it is appealing to in the report is presented as the problem. The following quotes come from their conclusions and recommendations:

Politics and justice have remained subordinated to the logic of war. The civil authorities, below the argument of re-establishing ‘the state of rights’, follow the principles of low-intensity warfare, military strategy described in the manuals of the SDN and in various military schools of the USA. Enemies are identified as any political adversary of the state or federal government, and against these adversaries they direct these actions.

The psychological war, part of the low-intensity war, is instrumented to provoke a level of community division, polarisation, and confrontation. This illness from ‘inside’ is much more potent than an attack from ‘outside’. The consequences are a loss of cultural identity, demobilisation, and social apathy. On the individual level it causes fear, low self-esteem, psychological ailments, loss of identity, distrust, pain from traumatic events such as the loss of life, of possessions, and life projects. [...] the assault that the members of Las Abejas suffered in a place of refuge has a profound impact. Immediately after the Massacre, chaos was the context, the future was unpredictable, the situation in which they lived since fleeing from Acteal shows a growing spiral of violence, creating a constant climate of terror.

Here fear and pity manifest themselves in the most clinical way. Mimicking the government report and feeding on a legally and psychologically framed discourse, they explicitly and minutely describe the tragic events. In this tragedy, however, there is neither awakening nor recognition by the protagonists, just pure terror. Facts and figures regarding trauma and

*Chiapas. Reporte especial para Mary Robinson, Alta Comisionada de derechos humanos de la ONU, San Cristóbal de las Casas: Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 1999; Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. De la memoria a la esperanza, San Cristóbal de las Casas: Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 2000.*
violence replace the statistics of the government: combined, they paint the picture of a hapless and hopeless people:

The process of elaboration of their mourning is complicated because it is a multiple—mourning, since there are so many human and material losses, and the loss of their cultural identity in breaking up of their unity with mother earth, nature.

The official explication of the Massacre follows a line that minimises the problems, just like every peak moment in the conflict in Chiapas. Just like the Zapatista uprising in 1994 was the responsibility of ‘some 200 monolinguals’, Acteal was an ‘interfamily’ or ‘intercommunity’ problem caused by fights over a sandbank. The evident racism in this official discourse in the sense of ‘those Indians kill each other over any insignificant thing’ is part of the strategy of dehumanising the indigenous and therefore minimising the repercussion in the public opinion, which could have the violence generated against them. [...] By leading and covering up the paramilitary groups, the Mexican government makes itself directly responsible for the aggressions and violations of human rights which these groups have committed and can commit in the future.

The conditions in which an objective, transparent and impartial investigation of the crime committed by the paramilitary groups can take place are not present [...]. The system of dispensing justice, as well as being corrupt and discriminatory, is utilised as a tool to attack opposition groups of indigenous and campesinos; its partiality is unconcealed.145

As we can see, justice, law and government are the problems. The question is, whether by explaining the methods of the government they are explaining away the violence or adding to the terror by proving the diabolical lengths they will go to? As Taussig suggests in reference to Roger Casement’s report on the Putumayo, the report, ‘served not so much to puncture the mythic character of the situation as to render its terrific reality’.146 The point is that what we have here are questions of power and legitimacy. As Bartra explains such legitimacy ‘resides in the imaginary networks of political power’.147 Myths are central to these imaginary networks, but more than anything mythic violence.

147 Roger Bartra, La jaula, pp. 213-214.
Here we have a case where the well-founded theories and factual data of the human rights centre help to construct or bolster the mythic nature of political power in Mexico. In resisting and presenting a counter argument to the government they have revealed its mythic power. Imaginary as it may be it inspires fear, ‘the intimate codependence of truth on illusion and myth on reality was what the metabolism of power, let alone ‘truth’, was all about.’

And so we move on from this stage of tragedy. The awakening of the indigenous communities of Chiapas has also awoken the fears of the broader Mexican and international community. The dormant ghosts of conquest and colonialism begin to creep out from their repose in oblivion. The fear that emerges manifests itself in two distinct ways: either as an indigenous community that is on the verge of extinction and thus a loss to the greater humanity, or as an indigenous community that threatens to divide society through their cunning and mischief. Either way they are ephemeral and hard to grasp. Through the films and opinions the extraordinary expectations that people have of these communities become apparent, and how through their liberation the outsiders seem to witness their own liberation. In these seesawing moments of hope and recognition the tragic narratives come to fruition. And so we go back into the magical and mythical jungle of stories and encounters ...

**Palenque**

In Chiapas control is on show around every corner. Police and military checkpoints litter the countryside, patrolling vehicles with men carrying machine guns pass every little while, the streets of the larger towns are guarded by police and security guards with shot guns, and military bases are strategically placed around any zone of suspected resistance. It is hard to go more than five minutes, whether in a town or along a highway, without coming across some form of security outfit. The security in Chiapas inspires fear, but it is a fear that soon becomes normalised. At times the rituals of security and order becomes comical, having papers checked...

and questions asked constantly, but always bellow the smirk there is an uneasy realisation of what could happen if the comedy goes sour.

For those arriving in Chiapas stories abound of rebel Indians in the jungle, police brutality and disappearances, of mystical ruins and Indian magic, of Indian mistrust and occasional violence against outsiders. It is a mystical place that has eluded modernity, where prehistorical forces and utopian dreams still exist and emerge from the jungles or the highlands every now and then. In its danger there is an interpretation and representation that sells: wild landscape and wild people who refuse to bow to capitalist ideology. It is a living museum in which you step behind the glass and participate yourself, where you can try out a bit of magic or a bit of revolution and take home a souvenir at the end. For outsiders the haziness of the place is the reality and that which fascinates them. The truth shouldn’t get in the way of a good story, and that is what everyone wants to take away.

Back in San Cristóbal more and more people are wearing masks because of the pig flu. The last time so many masked people walked around San Cristóbal would have been the 1st January 1994, when the Zapatistas took the city.

In Palenque no one is wearing masks; amongst the ruins of the ancient Mayan city we are now witnessing the ruination of the Mexican tourism industry. Every day there are less and less people. Tour guides drop their prices from six hundred pesos to one hundred pesos in the blink of an eye with the offer of free tequila and magic mushrooms. Restaurant staff sit around all day chatting while the insects swarm around. Decay is evident everywhere, in the jungle, amongst the ruins, and within the people. The animals are the constant witnesses to the passing of time here and the signallers of the seasons. The howler monkeys spy from above and warn against complacency and forgetting. Their roar is like a consciousness, denying one the possibility of falling into oblivion. The beginning of the wet season is greeted by the frogs whose belches echo through the jungle. The birds and the insects join in the chorus. Walking through the jungle is both liberating and claustrophobic. Infinity exists in every leaf and branch, under every foot step there is an entire universe, yet once inside it seems as though there is no escape. Looking from above it seems not to end; yet all that space closes in around you once in. The seasonal burn–off of the maze crop has filled the state with smoke and imposed a hazy filter over everything. Light finds it difficult to travel through the jungle, yet sound seems to thrive. The monkey’s roar, the frog’s belching, and the thunder during a storm roll through unimpeded. In the jungle life becomes ritualistic, day to day activities lose their routine nature bounded in time and space and become greater in their dimensions and force. Finding food,
lighting a fire to cook on, and washing clothes by hand, daily chores become sacred. Yesterday was the same as today and tomorrow will be as well.

Beside the ruins of Palenque it seems the perfect place to forget; family, friends, nationality, language. The solidity of the past seems to melt away here, and the concrete reality of the outside world has no impact: drug wars, indigenous revolution, and pig flu don’t seem to exist here. Conversations of politics and society become abstract and bleed into broader philosophical topics of life and travel. Politics seem a slap in the face and beyond comprehension. Nothing here could possibly be concrete. There are a couple of crazy old gringos here, Argentineans, a couple of young boys from Sydney on their first trip out of the country, another guy from Sydney who travels the world searching for that special place of tranquillity. There are Germans in camper vans and on motorcycles, and a Canadian riding his bike from Quebec to Tierra del Fuego. A Mexican who does massages and makes jewellery has assumed the position of the local mystic type, the bearer of ancient wisdom. His place in the campsite has a blanket with an appalling neo-classical, romanticised depiction of an Indian, a noble savage; everyone thinks he is a fraud. Bearing witness to this menagerie of madmen are the local staff, who waiver between amusement and disbelief. Beside the ruins of the Mayan civilisation the flotsam and jetsam of the Western world seems to filter through this campsite. Some get through some get stuck here. No one seems to know what they are doing here, some are artists, some musicians, some are on a Latin American odyssey, some just have a few weeks off work and ended up here. In this refuge from the past and the future there is a menace that drifts around the site with the smoke from the fires, cigarettes, and marijuana. Every now and then the cracks appear, something from a painful past or some fear of the uncertain future sneaks in. As the girl from Argentina told me, ‘oblivion is full of memory’. The beer truck arrives to collect the empty bottles and stock the fridge again, the traces of a forgotten night are taken away and the possibility to forget once again refilled.

On the way to the waterfalls I noticed a town with a Zapatista sign out the front declaring that you are now in Zapatista territory. I returned to the town the next day. Some of the signs with the town’s name had been erased, but you could make out on others that it was/is called San Miguel. I entered the town through some dirt track, passing the shabby houses with their chickens and turkeys. Heads popped out of windows every now and then to see who was passing, a few on the street said hello. Passing the school the kids stopped their studies to stare and shout out ‘gringo’. An old woman stopped and I asked where I could find someone to talk to about the town. She said there was no one. I asked if this was a Zapatista town, she said no. I asked if there were Zapatista towns around, she said no. In a store I bought some tobacco and
asked again, at first the storekeeper said ‘no’, after a bit of chit chat, he asked where I was from, he told me to look for a man at the entrance to the town. At the house I was sent to a woman who told me everyone was out working. The town both seemed full of people yet eerily quiet whenever I passed through. I left the town of San Miguel and waited for a ride in front of the giant sign, which declared, ‘You are now in Zapatista territory’. The Zapatistas are everywhere but nowhere and seem to have entered the pantheon of Chiapas’ ghosts. They are a bit like the howler monkeys that come out at sunset and sunrise: difficult to see, haunting, but always present.

Walking along the road to the ruins at Palenque I come across a puffing and panting Mexican, he is a bus driver from Oaxaca. Every time he is in Palenque he walks the nine kilometres from the town to the ruins and back. He does it to lose weight. Today he had spent twenty minutes speaking to a snake along the way. He never enters the ruins, just walks there and back. Over the years he had lost some incredible amount of weight, the ruins have changed his life. At the entrance to the ruins there is a banner protesting against the INAH, the government organisation that manages historic sites. It is protesting against the light and laser show they want to build on the ruins of Teotihuacan. It will do irreparable damage to the pyramids but the idea is that it will attract more Americans. Old stones just aren’t enough.

Out the front they sell all the usual Mayan relics that you would expect, plus postcards of Marcos. Guides offer various tours, starting with one hour or the special tour all day, which includes a walk into the jungle, tequila and magic mushrooms – a different type of journey through time and space. Within the ruins there is a Mexican couple, well dressed, obviously from the upper echelons of Mexican society (fresas), on a little trip to the ruins. The man constantly fields calls on his mobile phone and discusses business, possibly with someone in San Cristóbal or maybe in Mexico City or even Los Angeles.

The woman comments that everything is ‘muy bonito’. Walking through the ruins one can find points where the chatter of the tourists and employees doesn’t reach, the only sound is that of the birds and the insects, the only truly objective witnesses to the rise and fall of man’s civilisations. One feels at times that silence, darkness, oblivion, and forgetting, are not only the absence of something, not only a negative, but rather a vacuum, an infinity and totality within themselves.

The ruins are now fenced off and guarded by security; you used to be able to walk into them through the jungle, and still can but will probably be caught by the guards. Now nearly everyone enters along the main road by kombi or bus. The ruins now seem cut off from their
surroundings, almost superimposed onto the jungle. People follow the paths through the site, climb up and down the designated stairs, no one ever seems to walk behind the buildings. It is almost like a Hollywood set of Mayan ruins, just a façade that has no depth or relationship to its surroundings. Apart from the obligatory photos of the family in front of the ruins, everyone tries to get the perfect photo of the buildings with no one on them. The presence of people from the twenty first century in the photo seems to cheapen the experience.

Everyone wants to pretend these ruins have not been discovered, as if they were the first ones to ever find them. When framing photos everyone seems to step backwards, they never move in for a close-up, they always move back, trying to fit everything in. Trying to frame an entire civilisation in one photo seems the only way to comprehend the enormity of it all. The photo can then be taken home to put up on the mantle-piece or in the office. There it can be put back in its proper position, framed and situated within our world. The photo stabilises the past. It distances us from the past but maintains it safely within arm’s reach, ready to be picked up and pondered when necessary and easy to store away and forget.

The tour guides present a compact account of the city. It has a starting date and an end date; it has its long dead rulers, its customs and beliefs. Sitting high above the ruins one thinks what they will say about our civilisation, a civilisation which we are constantly predicting the end of and bemoaning the degradation of. Sitting high above the ruins it seems that it will be a relief when it does come down and we can relax a bit, no more climate change, no more pig flues, and no more apocalypses. I overhear a tour guide enthusiastically telling some tourists that the tomb of Pakal found within the complex is the third biggest tomb in the world and therefore the third most important.

In the middle of the site there is a monument and plaque dedicated to the Mexican archaeologist who discovered the tomb. The museum is also named after him. Walking through the museum it seems that the discovery and understanding of the site is just as important as the site itself. There are two jade death masks recovered from a tomb which we are assured have been reconstructed after years of expert work to their original state. How these objects have changed in meaning, from their original sacred significance, to rediscovered objects, studied and reconstructed for our viewing pleasure: an authentic view into a dark and mysterious past framed in a glass case. They are objects of wonder, not because of their origins, but because of our ability to turn the past into a scientific project of rational discovery and understanding, our ability to organise the past so that it fits nicely into our present. The masks don’t celebrate the ancient Mayan culture, but rather they celebrate our own civilisation
and its ability to catalogue. Out the front of the museum there are a couple of police officers with machine guns. I’m not sure what they are expecting. In Mexico they are everywhere, police and enormous guns, who or what they are protecting no one seems to know: cultural heritage, the people, the state? They are just there, like the rubbish that seems to litter the side of every highway, a stain on the country, a reminder of a dirty past that still hasn’t been cleaned up ...

Facts, fictions, and blame in the memory of Acteal

Having looked at religious, political and legal discourse and how texts enter into a mimetic relationship with reality, I want to know look further into fiction and storytelling and their relationship to reality. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, for those dispossessed of their lands in Chiapas, all that remained were the stories. For the non–indigenous in Chiapas and those visiting from outside, stories, rumour and myth about the indigenous communities also seem to be central in the conception of the Other. In relation to Heart of Darkness and the reports of the Putumayo Taussig suggests that with each story the division between the haziness of fiction and the real grows larger and more terrifying and paradoxically enjoyable.

The real was fictional and the fictional was real and the haziness brought out by the glow could be as powerful a force for terror as it could be for resistance. In such a world of control, clarity itself was deceptive, and attempts to explain the terror could barely be distinguished from the stories contained in those explanations – as if terror provided only inexplicable explanations of itself and thrived by so doing.¹⁵⁰

The struggle, violence and terror, however, are very real. The dead and injured of Acteal bring these musings out of any theoretical or fictional space and confront us with a space of death, ‘where the social imagination has populated its metamorphizing images of evil and the underworld’.¹⁵¹ In this space the victim and aggressor become interdependent on each other. Terror breeds terror, and the savagery of the Other is harnessed to justify one’s own savagery.

B. Traven, in his novel March to the Monteria, exemplifies this experience in the character of Celso, an indigenous Chiapeneco who becomes enslaved in the debt peonage of the loggers of

¹⁵⁰ Michael Taussig, Shamanism, pp. 127-128.
the jungle. In this fragment we can see both the pleasure of tragedy, and its potential to escape into pure terror.

All along the way the people whom he consulted told him the most terrifying stories about the jungle. These people, however, had never been in the jungle themselves; they had not even approached the thicket at the outer edges. All of them recounted merely what others had seen or lived through.

But the various stories related to Celso all contributed, without exception, to inspire in him a terrific fear of the vast jungle. Nobody of course had any definite intention of making Celso desist from his task. Nobody really cared whether Celso perished in the jungle or not. The narratives were made mostly to enjoy the changing expressions of the interested listener, to pass the time away and to get excited over one’s own story. Ghost stories, tales of spooks, are not told at night to make someone desist from crossing the cemetery if that is his road home. They are told to spend a pleasant evening by watching with delight the terror–stricken faces of one’s audience.152

In these spaces of theatre, struggle and death, the fictions created by the actors are reliant on the spaces while at the same time forming the atmosphere of the spaces. Many stories have emerged from Chiapas since the 1994 uprising and the massacre in Acteal. They are often based on other peoples’ stories and once told they re–enter the scene to become part of the myth. Some talk of a space of counter insurgency and low–intensity warfare, others talk of a space of impunity, others of indigenous conflict, some of lawlessness, injustice, rebellion, some talk of the past and others of the future. The language of the stories is of the upmost importance here. Some obviously and unashamedly exaggerate to cause effect, a story like Traven’s to pass the time, while others hide behind a stylistic objectivism, no less to cause effect, but while supposedly revealing a truth which only they can illuminate. This thesis and the films it discusses also fit into this cacophony.

Taussig refers to this objectivist fiction as ‘the contrived manner by which objectivity is created, and its profound dependence on the magic of style to make this trick of truth work’.153 The magic of style most commonly utilised in Chiapas is based around the sacredness of historical, anthropological, psychological and sociological studies from the region, mainly studies made by outsiders. In the many reports about the events there is also an acceptance that the communities are somewhat different from us and that therefore other forms of

153 Michael Taussig, Shamanism, p. 37.
evidence, which we would not usually accept are applicable. Testimony is given a sacred position in Chiapas as well as rumour and ‘difference’. The oral culture and secretiveness, which are so often mentioned when referring to indigenous communities, are turned around against them in supposedly objectivist and legal documents to suggest and suppose when no real evidence exists. The indigenous oral culture is used as an excuse to propagate rumour and supposition.

Whether the rumours are objectivised or the reality is fictionalised, the result is an enlargement of the haziness and the mythification of the conflict and the violence. Even those who do truly attempt to objectively document the conflict end up adding to the mystique via a coldly factual presentation of the horrors. Sometimes an exaggerated story of terror can be less terrifying than a clinically presented report of how, whom, why and when.

Labyrinths and cages

The final discourse that I will look at is the academic. Just like the political, religious, legal, and fictional, academic texts have entered into the mimetic movements in Chiapas. Alicia Ríos outlines five ‘cognitive constellations’ that have run through Latin American Studies since independence and that are especially relevant for Chiapas, they are: neocolonialism, modernity and modernisation, the national question, the popular, and identitites/alterities/ethnicities.154 These constellations are all clearly present in the events and representations in Chiapas.

Octavio Paz was the great poet and thinker of the themes of the Mexican character with his legendary book The Labyrinth of Solitude, first published in 1950. This marks a point from which all subsequent writing on the above mentioned themes respond. In it he characterises the essence of the human condition as that of solitude, pinning man down to ‘nostalgia and the search for communion’.155 This, he asserts, while applying universally, has a special significance and specific direction in Mexico, as, ‘the history of Mexico is that of the man who searches for his connection, his origin’.156 He sees in the Revolution an attempt to re–establish

156 Octavio Paz, El Laberinto de la Soledad, p. 23.
justice or an ancient order ‘violated by the oppressors’, yet the contradictions of the modern world leave mankind, and especially the Mexican, wearing a mask which is both illusion and real, stuck in an inescapable violent world of simulation and solitude. He concludes that for the Mexican, ‘life is a possibility between fucking and being fucked’. Paz paints the picture of a nation deeply scarred by its history of conquest and colonialism and its geographic position alongside the United States of America.

Following Paz, amongst the escalation of globalisation, transnational finance and the rise of repressive regimes in the early nineteen–seventies, as well as the mixing of Liberation Theology, Marxism and traditional Mayan communities– we find the roots of Latin American Cultural Studies. These shifts led to a questioning of the nineteen–sixty’s paradigms of ‘bourgeoisie versus proletariat and imperialism versus nation’, leading to the central question:

If it is no longer possible to think in terms of modern economic and cultural imperialism, how can the peoples of the periphery name these postmodern, apparently decentered, transnational centers of power?

The question of modernity was central. Chilean historian Florencia Mallon elaborated on the dilemmas faced by progressive scholars who recognised the failings, or doubted, European models such as, ‘Marxisms, a belief in progress and modernity, a commitment to revolution as forward–looking, linear, developmentalist transformation’. She also questioned the relevance of postmodernism to Latin America as a continent not yet modern, or as we have seen in Chiapas, consistent of multiple eras and temporalities.

Rowe and Schelling highlighted the peculiar nature of the Latin American experience of modernity, defining it not as necessarily lagging behind or being a corrupt version of the West, but rather as manifesting itself in its own particular way: ‘It is a modernity that does not necessarily entail the elimination of pre–modern traditions and memories but has arisen through them, transforming them in the process’. They also point out the emphasis in Latin America on popular culture consisting of three ideas: firstly as ‘authentic rural culture under

157 Octavio Paz, El Laberinto de la Soledad, p. 156.
160 Octavio Paz, El Laberinto de la Soledad, p. 86.
threat from industrialization and the modern culture industry’, secondly as a ‘variety of mass culture’, and thirdly as a medium for manifesting discontent with the system, ‘whereby the practices of oppressed classes contain within them resources for imagining an alternative future society’.\textsuperscript{164}

Nestor García Canclini addressed the idea of the popular, stating that all culture is, ‘the product of dominant ideologies and the contradictions of oppressed classes’\textsuperscript{165} and suggested that ‘just as there is no culture in general, neither can popular culture be characterized by its essence or by a set of intrinsic qualities. It must be defined in opposition to the dominant culture, as a product of inequality and conflict’.\textsuperscript{166} Jesús Martín–Barbero extended this by looking at the romantic imaginings of the popular and linking the lessons from the historical period of romanticism to the role of mass media. As such, romanticism, while manifesting a discontent and critique with the present, has the potential to be reactionary, ‘kidnapping’ the people it seeks to save.\textsuperscript{167}

Martin–Barbero points out three ways in which the possibilities of the masses are romantically imagined: firstly in a revolutionary exaltation in which a hero will rise and lead the people, secondly in a swelling of nationalism, and thirdly in a reaction both political and aesthetic against the rationalism of the idea of the ‘progress’ of modernity.\textsuperscript{168} Here he makes his warning against the romanticisation of popular cultures by those who wish to recognise it as ‘cultural patrimony’, thus denying it its necessary historical sense of autonomy and resistance, it becomes folkloric, a museum piece that ‘conserves the original purity of a primitive, adolescent people’, and the romantics end up becoming like their enemies, turning the people into objects of the past.\textsuperscript{169}

Globalisation, mass media and consumerism were seen as a threat to the popular and the state, as García Canclini concludes, ‘the symbolic maps modify, although the geopolitical borders are maintained’.\textsuperscript{170} He also looks at identity as a historical, imaginary, hybrid, and transnational, migrating construction and how the effects of relocations of peoples and

\textsuperscript{164} William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, \textit{Memory and Modernity}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{166} Nestor García Canclini, trans., L. Lozano, \textit{Transforming Modernity}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{168} Jesús Martín-Barbero, \textit{De los medios a las mediaciones}, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{169} Jesús Martín-Barbero, \textit{De los medios a las mediaciones}, p. 20.
communities can be explained by the concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. In the move from the traditional environment, peoples and communities must adapt and change their relationship to suit the new environment resulting from, ‘the loss of the “natural” relation of the culture with geographic and social territories, and, at the same time, certain relative and partial territorial re–localisations, of the old and new symbolic productions’. Roger Bartra, in his response to Paz, The Cage of Melancholy, points out, ‘the Mexican national character only has, let’s say, a literary and mythological existence: which does not take away its force of importance’. He shows how the real is dependent on fiction and transformations take on the form of narratives, which must be acted out:

The hegemonic political culture has gone creating its peculiar subjects and has linked them to various archetypes of universal extension [...]. The subjects are converted into actors and subjectivity is converted into theatre.

In the space of the nation one has but one choice, to transform oneself into a Mexican, anything else is treason. Within this narrative the biggest crime is to be Indian, firstly because they were done away with in the prologue of the narrative (the mythical creation), and secondly because they contradict the myth of mestizo Mexico. The indigenous of Mexico are at the wrong theatre; at best they might get a part jumping around in costume at the start, a bit of local colour to get things going. Otherwise they will be backstage, out of sight, cleaning up.

The history of conquest and conflict in Chiapas seems to throw up a mix of age–old battles fought out between mutating and migrating subjects, caught always on the precipice of tragedy in the inescapable legacy of colonialism. Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla would have seen the 1994 uprising as nothing new. Rather, it would merely be another manifestation of a five hundred year old conflict: ‘between those who seek to channel the country into the project of Western civilisation and those who resist rooted in Mesoamerican racial forms of life’. For Bonfil Batalla the conflict is between imaginary Mexico, the ruling elite who have always directed Mexico along Western thinking, and profound Mexico, the majority who still possess traces of pre–Hispanic culture within their lives.

173 Roger Bartra. La Jaula, p. 16.
174 Roger Bartra, La jaula, p. 15.
The space created is literally a battle of civilisations: Western versus Mesoamerican. The possibilities available are the continuation of the current metamorphosis into a Western style nation state, or a step back into the decolonisation of consciousness. It would be a step back in order to take a step forward as Bonfil Batalla explains:

> There is a challenge to the imagination that we can only confront from an authentic recognition of our reality. We will find there, unveiling prejudices, liberating our colonised thinking, recuperating the decision to see ourselves and think of ourselves by ourselves as the central protagonist of our history and the indispensable component of our future: profound Mexico.

For Bonfil Batalla, through resisting Western civilisation, Mexico will find its authentic indigenous heart and become a true historical actor; the other option is to continue down the road that has led to the disaster of modern Mexico. His imaginary Mexico includes the idea of metamorphosis into subjectivity: being born Mexican isn’t enough; one must also adopt an imaginary nationality. The Mexican must transform along with the nation in its march to progress, he must transform from farmer to worker, worker to consumer, from Indian to mestizo. This narrative is both tragic and biological, the nation and her citizens move from creation through infancy, adolescence to adulthood, yet the metamorphosis is negative and seemingly unnatural.

Carlos Monsiváis, one of the more witty commentators on Mexico attributes the pessimism of Mexico to the rhetoric of nationalism:

> To be Mexican is, indeed, an experience progressively untied from politics and social compromise. A person is Mexican (with deliberation) only in determined moments of spare time, especially when faced with movies, radio, and television programs, or the infrequent reading of the newspaper, in reactions to transcendental events (decisions that affect daily life like presidential elections, etc.) For the rest, you are employed or unemployed, without possible national name [...]. It is the nationalism of soccer, the

---

176 For a look at the modern Mexica movement, mostly made up of the urban, mestizo and white middle classes, which looks back to pre-Columbian culture as a way forward, see Aquiles Chihu Amparán, ‘Marcos interpretativos, identidad e imaginario en el mexica movement’, Región y Sociedad, XIX: 38, 2007; Francisco de la Peña, ‘Milenarismo, nativismo y neotradicionalismo en el México actual’, Ciencias Sociales y Religión/ Ciências Sociais e Religião, Porto Alegre, 3:3, 2001, pp. 95-113; and, for perhaps the most important literary manifestation combining pre-Columbian and Tibetan mysticism with the 1968 student movement, see Antonio Velasco Peña, Regina, Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1987.

177 Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, México Profundo, p. lv.

popular music, or regional memories, or anti–imperialism in after–dinner talk, of reflections on dawn, of the empty and circular dissertations on Mexican character, of the conditioned reflexes of a patriotism not too clear on its historic registry.\textsuperscript{179}

In all this we find an academic reflection on what was happening in the period of the Zapatista uprising; the search for new ways of social orientation in a period rapid technological, cultural and social change, as well as mass migration. At the heart of its all is the question of agency and memory.

**Academics and agency**

The extent to which academics would go to resolve such questions of power, memory and agency is best illustrated by the case of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group. In 1993, amongst the debate over the role of postmodernism and the New Cultural History in Latin America, wedged between the celebrations of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas and the uprising of the Zapatistas, the group published their *Founding Statement*. They alluded to the dilemmas faced by academics that wished to participate politically in the writing of history and in the formation of more democratic societies after the crumbling of the Soviet Union and the apparent failures of socialist experiments in Latin America. In this group we can see how the legacy of violence and resistance, and the haziness of fact and fiction began to operate under a climate of penultimateness and pessimism.

A new way of thinking was needed, they proclaimed, that would make possible the representation of those who were unrepresentable – the subaltern or los de abajo. Borrowing from the South Asia Subaltern Studies Group, they put together a collection of essays outlining the aims and methodology that would sustain history writing ‘against the grain’, or ‘in reverse’. The subaltern is not one thing; it is ‘a mutating, migrating subject’,\textsuperscript{180} they claimed. Due to such vagaries of conceptualisation and material, the group proclaimed a new arena in which scholars must find ‘new ways of thinking and acting politically’, in which the methods of resistance performed by the subaltern are mimicked by academics in solidarity and support.\textsuperscript{181}

The movement had its critics; amongst them historian Alan Knight explained his concerns over the paradox of agency being ‘inflated’ and ‘culture’ being turned into a ‘tradable commodity’


\textsuperscript{180} Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, ‘Founding Statement’, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{181} Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, ‘Founding Statement’, p. 110.
where cultural historians echo ‘rational–choice political scientists’. Stephen Haber’s also argued against what he sees as ideological stances, rhetoric, argument by recourse to authority and a lack of proof. In his view, the new cultural historians ‘employ the worst of both worlds’: they discard the idea of objective facts while summoning notions of evidence and proof, and they incorporate social science theory which is ultimately inconsistent. And as Quetzil Castañeda points out, in imagining what may have been said and thought, ‘a certain ‘writing in reverse’ seems to be part and parcel of colonial discourse’.

The Subaltern Studies Group pointed to the problem of conceptualising or reconceptualising the relationship between the nation, the state, and the ‘people’. This problem manifested itself, and has been shaped by, three crucial events: the Mexican, the Cuban, and the Nicaraguan revolutions. While the Mexican Revolution broke from the Eurocentric model of development, the new mestizo upper and middle classes re–subalternised the Indian. The Cuban Revolution, while conceptualising the people as the ‘working masses’, ignored the disparities of race, sex and sexuality. Both these models of revolutions would come into crisis by the massacre of students in Tlatelolco, Mexico, in 1968, and the failure of foco–based guerrilla fronts to spread a Cuban style revolution. It was, however, during this period of the late 1960s and 1970s that new forms of representation, such as testimonial and video documentary, from a diverse sector of subalterns, began to emerge, reasserting the rights of those on the periphery. The development of Latin American Studies and issues of the subaltern, as understood by the Latin American Subaltern Group, is seen to have altered in the 1980s alongside the Nicaraguan Revolution, the emergence of Liberation Theology, and the influence of postmodernist and postcolonial theory.

At this point, in the words of the group, ‘Latin Americanists begin to question deeply the persistence in Latin American modernity of colonial or neocolonial systems of representation’. As the group points out, many of the features of the ‘new’ global economy replicate the sixteenth and seventeenth century processes and procedures of the colonial economy in Latin America. They see that within this continuation from colonial to postcolonial nationhood and the new forces of globalisation, the ‘presence and reality’ of subaltern social

---

subjects has been ‘obscured, from the start’. The postcolonial nation and its ruling elites are seen to have never allowed or permitted what would otherwise be an ‘organic’ development of the nation. As a response the group suggests:

To go backward to consider both pre–Columbian and colonial forms of prenational territorialization, as well as forward to think about newly emerging territorial subdivisions, permeable frontiers, regional logics, and concepts such as Commonwealth or Pan–Americanism.

Mallon complicated this further with the questions of ‘complicity, hierarchy, and surveillance’ within subaltern groups and within the people who study them. For the subaltern can be dominated and can dominate at the same time, raising queries about projects of liberation that at the same time discriminate against those within. In this context, when searching for the ‘ever–shifting lines of alliance and confrontation’, one must be aware of the historical and political context and not assume essentialist subaltern identities, one must ‘mark the heroism and the treachery’. This idea is even extended to the scholar. While the subaltern studies scholars seek to ‘rescue’ the subaltern, Mallon hopes that through this process the subaltern historian ‘may be redeemed by Subaltern Studies’.

Despite these hopes the debate over who can and who does represent the unrepresentable continues to be fiercely contested, and as Brian Gollnick explains, ‘too often, current work in the project of cultural subaltern studies for Latin America fails to move beyond the gesture of delegitimating elite discourses about popular culture’. The Zapatistas present an interesting case in the debates due to their deliberate, prolific and alternating use of communiqués and silence. One of the core texts in the field of subaltern studies is ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. This is an essay that Abraham Acosta contends has been systematically misinterpreted in Latin American studies. The ‘subaltern may indeed be

---

speaking, but no one is bothering to listen’, Acosta concludes.\textsuperscript{193} Academics, even in the Founding Statement, miss the point by trying to answer the question by a yes or no, or by trying to find modes of resistance or interpretation that may make possible a subaltern voice. As Acosta points out:

> when the subaltern is posited as the cause and not the negative constitutive effect of the politico–intellectual relation, the line between ‘can the subaltern speak?’ and ‘[how] can the subaltern [be made to] speak?’ is indistinguishable.\textsuperscript{194}

What therefore becomes crucial is not what or if the subaltern can/do speak, but rather the negative space of failed interpretation, miscommunication and inequality that becomes apparent with the silence of the Zapatistas.\textsuperscript{195}

On the subject of the voice of the poor and oppressed of history, Taussig points out what is ‘painfully obvious’, that ‘the screen onto which these voices are projected is already fixed — and that it is this screen, not the voices, where the greatest resistance lies’.\textsuperscript{196} Whether attempting to compile accounts from the bottom up or from the top down, the local or the global, what is missed, he suggests, is:

> our profound entanglement and indeed selfconstituting implication in that screen of interpretation which in itself is the great arena where world history, in its violence as in its easy harmonies, in its sexualities and National–State formations.\textsuperscript{197}

In the realm of film such a debate is obviously important when dealing with documentaries where the poor, marginalised, indigenous peoples of Mexico are represented and represent themselves. The question thus becomes not how successful in production or box office the films become, but rather what negative spaces they open up and what they reveal about the screen onto which their voices are projected.

\textsuperscript{194} Abraham Acosta, ‘Contingencies of Silence’, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{196} Michael Taussig, ‘Violence and Resistance in the Americas’, p. 223.
\textsuperscript{197} Michael Taussig, ‘Violence and Resistance in the Americas’, p. 223.
Gonzalo Lamana, following very much in the footsteps of Taussig, suggests a way of thinking of the subaltern that ‘is efficient precisely because it works counter the Western discourse of secularization’. Rather it points out the magical aspects of Western thought that emerge in the moment in which magic is attributed to the Other. This approach looks for the magical in the actions, the moments of awe, fascination and imagination, that posit a subaltern Other in relation to the Western self and its dominant position as holder of truth:

It is a kind of critical thinking that, by being aware of the fact that the impossibility of speech from the subaltern implies the impossibility of hearing in the master, opens up an underexplored field of political action: the Western epistemological certainty of truth and the problems that performance poses to it. As such, in stories and jokes, anecdotes and films about the Other, what is truly revealed is the primitive and magic that exists in Western narratives.

Ana Del Sarto explains that ‘[a]gainst what has been repeatedly sustained, Latin American cultural studies are not the product of epistemological ruptures but instead of concrete historical continuities’. As such, the themes and narratives of the nation, (post)modernity, (neo)colonialism, the popular, and identities/ethnicity/alterites are always present. Now the topics of hybridity, the subaltern, transcultural, postcolonial and mass media which all blossomed in the nineties have returned around the topics of identity and location, memory and trauma in the travelling memory debate. The relevance to Mexico and Chiapas of remembrance is of importance to this thesis that finds itself more or less bookended by the 1992 commemoration of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas and the 2010 centenary of the revolution and bicentenary of independence in Mexico.

However, Radstone warns against being carried away with the trends and desire to see interconnectedness and hybridity all around, the want to ‘travel’ with theory and universality, or the disregard of voices, narratives and location. She states:

the specificities of located identities do continue to matter at the levels of political, academic and cultural commitment [...]. For home, as it lives on in memory, as well as

201 For a sense of the continuing fixating on national character in and through film, see; Frederick Luis Aldama, Mex-Ciné: Mexican filmmaking, production, and consumption in the twenty-first century, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013.
through present connection – particularly where it has been the location of loss, violence, and disturbance – clearly continues to matter.\textsuperscript{202}

So we find ourselves entangled in the screen of interpretation. As I have attempted to show, the ‘awakening’ is just as significant for ‘us’ outsiders as it is for the indigenous communities of Chiapas, the isolated yet obviously not insignificant people. The concepts of, and tensions between, thinking history and making history seem so clear yet so murky. The mimetic movement between text and reality seems so strong in Chiapas, whether religious, political, legal, fictional or academic, that it has tripped over into agency and action. The tension between myth and reason thus creates something of a tragic condition.

The tragic condition

If we are left in a space in which fiction and fact lose their boundaries, the question that arises is, where do we stand and where does this leave the history of Acteal, Chiapas and indeed documentary film? On one extreme there is a highly developed legal discourse around national sovereignty and human rights, and on the other extreme there is a mythical violence and conglomeration of stories, facts and fictions. Dirk Moses even suggests that the imperative to know history can be just as dangerous as ignorance when the constant memory of a past atrocity leaves competing groups in a ‘fatal embrace’. He explains how ‘group humiliation is always a transcultural phenomenon, because it entails a lowering of status in relation to an other: ‘colonial humiliation’ involves an experienced asymmetry’.\textsuperscript{203} History thus becomes linked to sentiments of revenge and retaliation and ‘the terror of history locks groups into escalatory mechanisms of post–traumatic reality out of which it is difficult to escape’.\textsuperscript{204} History itself becomes a terror.

As ways of being in the world through work, war, and through community, can now be entirely overturned in the space of a few years; as industry creates redundant villagers, suburbs and even entire cities, according to Taussig the only thing that remains is the body. This constant state of emergency leads to new stories: ‘These are stories bound to penultimateness – the moment that is permanently the moment before the last. There is no last. No end. Or rather, it

\textsuperscript{204} A. Dirk Moses, ‘Genocide and the Terror of History’, p. 96.
is all end all the time’. Global warming, terrorism, and global financial meltdowns: all feed into this sense of penultimateness. As we can see in The Last Zapatistas, stories of the last indigenous communities, the lost and last memories of experience, and the injustice that always remains on the verge of resolution. It seems that in this permanent time of penultimateness tragedy lays the framework of pessimism, yet moments of cheerful scientific logic associated with decline as well as heroic moments of a mythical age also intrude.

Carlos Alberto, Messeder Pereira and Micael Herschmann take on Nietzsche’s distinction between the dramatic and the tragic to look at what they see as the prevalence of ‘an ‘aestheticized’ form of communication’ in media. From the media producing centres they describe a strong reliance on the dramatic, yet, the potential that a ‘Dionysian spectacle would emerge from either the innumerable “peripheral places” of the “postmodern West” itself or from other “cultural” regions’. I would argue that it is not from there that tragedy emerges, but from a realisation of the interrelatedness between centres and peripheries.

As Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet explain, the tragic form emerged at the moment that myth ceased to dominate thought yet remained present in man’s mind. It is the celebration of the values of the democratic state over the past of mythical tyrants and kings. As such, the mythical past becomes the material that is thus treated with, or problematised by, current political, legal, and social thought. If we look at the films, in the opening of Acteal: 10 years, it starts with myth of the twins overcoming an evil lord. A Place Called Chiapas on the other hand, begins with a historically recorded debate over the nature of Indians, which is presented as a myth. The veterans from the Last Zapatistas continually reminisce of their childhood in mythic or epic tones.

The movement from myth and epic to tragedy is thus directly linked to a society that is experimenting with democracy and the new relations that this evokes between the individual and the communal in terms of responsibility and rights (as well as a society that is at its imperial height). Man is no longer at the whims of the gods, yet the world of the gods and heroes remains the mould from which all narratives emerge. The masked hero represents the individual of action, yet not a psychological subject, in contrast to the masses of the chorus,

---
205 Michael Taussig, Beauty and the Beast, p. 65.
206 See; Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. Walter Kaufmann, The Birth of Tragedy.
208 Carlos Alberto, Messeder Pereira and Micael Herschmann ‘The contemporary spectacle’, p. 294.
and his decisions and actions always test the tensions between these forces.\textsuperscript{210} The mask of the tragic actor and the masked Zapatista make an interesting comparison. In \textit{A Place Called Chiapas} and in large amount of the media produced around the uprising there is an evident frustration in the refusal of the soldiers to express their personal stories and experiences. What is often interpreted as a blind adoption of the EZLN’s doctrines and discipline could also be a refusal to accept the individual psychological narrative as the only expression of the ‘truth’.

Docker also turns towards ancient Athens in his search for the origins of violence, pointing out the growth of its colonial power and the beginning of historical writing. In the work of Herodotus and Thucydides he suggests we can find ‘allegorical ‘Gandhian’ moments of profound questioning of the value of war, violence, conquest, empire and colonization’.\textsuperscript{211} Through the tragic works of Aeschylus and Euripides dealing with the events around the sack of Troy, Docker suggests that we are given an insight into a genocidal moment. In the plays we can see the background and conditions that lead to genocide, the methods used, as well as the physical, psychological and moral outcomes of both victim and aggressor. In them the question of man and the gods’ law come into question. As Docker concludes, ‘Classical Athenian culture bequeathed a dual, uncertain and ambivalent legacy in relation to war, conquest, empire, colonization and Orientalism’.\textsuperscript{212} It was to be ‘historically wondered at as an example to humanity, for it was the city of justice and mercy, opposing all forms of tyranny, a civilizer and liberator’, yet through the histories and tragedies we find a challenge or problematisation of the project of empire and colonialism.\textsuperscript{213}

As Vernant explains, the ‘tragic turning point occurs when a gap develops at the heart of the social experience’.\textsuperscript{214} This is the point where the legal (the ancient Greeks were highly litigious), the historical and the political stand in clear opposition to myth and the heroic tradition, yet where ‘it is narrow enough for the conflict in values still to be a painful one and for the clash to continue to take place’.\textsuperscript{215} Responsibility and justice thus span the human and the divine, and the point between agency and fate seems always to elude the actors

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{211} John Docker, \textit{The Origins of Violence}, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{212} John Docker, \textit{The Origins of Violence}, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{213} John Docker, \textit{The Origins of Violence}, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{214} Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Greece’, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{215} Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Greece’, p. 27.
\end{footnotes}
themselves as their good and logical actions seem inevitably to result in a disaster. As such the actions of man always remain a problem and a riddle.216

The tension between past and present, myth and law, plays itself out in every character as Vernant points out. While the mask projects the actor into the distant past of the heroic age, their language places them very much in the present of the democratic city.217 The language used is legal, yet the definitions remain slippery. Opposing characters using and abusing the same language highlight this as I have pointed out in the legal reports on Acteal. Finally, the justice of the gods is called upon and either received or denied, putting into question the very notion of human agency.218

As such, guilt hinges on whether the subject has been subjected to the will of the gods or whether they have acted out their own intention. Vernant explains:

The true domain of tragedy lies in the border zone where human actions are hinged together with the divine powers, where – unknown to the agent – they derive their true meaning by becoming an integral part of an order that is beyond man and eludes him.219

Looking at all the material produced around the uprising in Chiapas, as well as the broader issues around Mexico, it becomes evident how fundamental questions about agency and the human condition remain central. In the period leading up to the uprising and after its consummation we can also see how the nation, the individual and justice also continue to play out.

As I will now show, the ways in which the four documentary films operate within the Mexican and global visual economy reveal much more about our aesthetic and narrative relationship to the world than the concepts of power and subaltern resistance presume. Magic, tragedy and transcendence all become central concerns of both producers and consumers of the image.

217 Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy’, p. 34.
3 – Contact

Time of Death

The documentary, Acteal: 10 years of Impunity. How Many More?, sets out a memory of impunity that, while focussing on the ten years since the Acteal massacre, extends back to the greater legacy of conquest and colonialism, violence and resistance. The film starts with a dedication to the dead, victims of a clearly identified government policy.

In memory of the 45 persons, and the 4 unborn children, that fell on December 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 1997 in the community of Acteal, an outcome of the counterinsurgency war in Chiapas.

From this dedication, which identifies the commemoration of the dead as the intent of the film, a full moon emerges from the darkness on the screen that then fades into a scene of an indigenous family gathered around a fire in their humble wooden shack. A voice–over begins a story that emanates from this timeless scene of the family and the village.

Our forefathers, grandfathers, and grandmothers, say that long time ago the world was not the way it is now. Our grandfathers and grandmothers lived free not needing permission from anybody to do and think as they wanted. In their worldview there was no individualism or competition. They only knew that everything that existed in their territories was for them and for their sons and daughters [...].

This introduction is accompanied by sweeping shots of the surrounding landscape and shots of the villagers working the cornfields, scenes suggestive of unbroken time, repetition and ritual. Memory of the ancestors and the recently dead is linked to the day–to–day and the infinite, working, eating and the land. In this unsullied routine, according to the voice–over, freedom and equality reigned. This utopian past, however, was rent asunder by the birth of the nation.

Here we seem to step through a portal into another world, an a–temporal world that has been shattered by the recognition of their enslavement in their own country. It would seem that with the formation of the nation and its ideology of competition and individualism the greatest torture is the imposition or measurement of time. As suggested in the film’s title, freedom is
a–temporal while injustice and impunity are exacerbated through their measurement. The movement from an age of myth to law and nation is acknowledged as the fundamental rupture and tragedy to have befallen the community.

From the humble duties of the village, we cut to the archive image of the president, Zedillo, upright behind a lectern, addressing the nation on television with the national flag to one side and a massive portrait of Benito Juarez, hero of the nation, standing with dignity and solemnity behind him. Zedillo stands before us and speaks, but his voice has been cut out and the voice over continues. ‘But it wasn’t always like that. Mexico’s government started to sell our motherland. Its wealth and dignity [...]’.

The message here is clear, for those victims of injustice in Mexico, the words and symbols of the nation, the president, the flag and national heroes, as well as the authority of the archive image, speak of impoverishment and loss of dignity. The words of the president are empty and do not deserve to be heard, his voice can be faded out and the message is still clear. In the memory of the victims such calls to the nation mean betrayal and injustice.

The voice over continues as we return to the community dancing and marching in protest and commemoration.

But the wisdom of the native people is so great that it calls them to defend themselves from this oppression and domination. This struggle is incarnated in different organizations and social movements, like the EZLN, and other civil and pacifist movements, amongst them La Sociedad Civil Las Abejas [Civil Society ‘The Bees’] from Chenahló, Chiapas [...].

Footage of the Zapatistas is shown as well as a community gathering of solidarity and resistance. The memory of the struggle is shown to be a memory of unity and strength.

The backwards and forwards movement of the story, from ‘us’ to ‘them’, from ‘inside’ to ‘outside’, from ‘then’ to ‘now’, shifts once more to ‘them’. From the indigenous dialogues it moves to the government representatives and images of the military.

But the government is really clever and plants division within our people making us kill each other, between brother and sister. In its counterinsurgency plans, there is no care about the death of elderly women and men, boys, girls, men or pregnant women all due to the ambition of power and money.
The introduction finishes with a flurry of images of the elderly, pregnant and fragile, cutting finally to the president and politicians, the image of ambition power and money. The world created here is a dichotomy, the timeless and maternal indigenous people and the greedy macho nation of politicians. The struggle against this enemy is also a struggle against time, a time of then, a time of now, and a new time yet to emerge. On film, a time based medium, this sets up a great sense of tension, contradiction and intrigue.

The title of the film appears, *Acteal: Ten years of impunity, and how many more?* From this statement and question a poem follows on the screen:

Our time was of death,

to let life, dignity, justice, peace

and memory flower.

We perished for diversity,

for the recognition

of our rights as native people.

We delivered our lives

to give birth to a better world,

a world

that has a place for everyone.

They killed us, the tiny and defenceless

But we were born again giants and immortals.

Like Hunahpú and Ixbalanké,

we descended to the underworld to defeat

the lords of darkness.

Now we are fragments of the light

that prevents everything from being night.
We are voices that emerge
from silence and death.

We are hope and example.

The present time, the time of the struggle, becomes a time severed from nature, a mythical
time, which must be dealt with and defeated so as to return to the natural state of things.
Another shot of the full moon, this time obscured by the clouds, leads into the next story, the
story of struggle and of victory. Here in the poem we find the themes of awakening and
recognition, mimesis, metamorphoses and transgression, sacrifice, martyrdom, rebirth, voice
and hope.

Over the full moon we hear a voice retelling the heroic story of Hunahpú and Ixbalanké: ‘Once
there were two young men that fought in the time of the ancient Maya. They were twin
brothers [...]’.

As the story progresses the voice is revealed to be of the village catechist, the voice becomes
embodied as he continues, then fades back to the clouded moon.

They were called by the masters of death, the lords of Xibalba because they saw that
the suffering could no longer be bared. And I feel that today’s governments are like
the masters of the underworld.

From the clouded night we jump to a mist covered landscape and the painful strings of the
soundtrack. The testimonies begin here; members of the community, victims and witnesses
begin to retell their accounts, interspersed with shots of shrines and vigils for those departed.
Smoke from the candles and incense fold into the mist of the clouds that hang over the village.
The witnesses are positioned around the village; Antonio, José, Manuel and Mariano sit
outside amongst the plantations and scrub; María sits inside her house, surrounded by a shrine
for the victims from her family.

Archival footage of the aftermath, this time used with dignity and authority, leads us back to
Maria’s house, as she lists the dead from her immediate family. She points to the photo of her
brother and his family, all of who are dead. As she turns back from the photo she comments:
‘what has been said is the truth. It is not a lie’. In this first series of testimony, the witnesses
name their dead, the circumstances of the massacre, and the truthfulness of their claims. The
deaths of their families, the scars on their bodies, and the memories of the event are produced
to prove that what they say is the truth, while the weariness in their voices attests to the many times that they have had to retell their story.

The themes discussed in the previous chapter, of the nation, modernity, identities and alterities, ethnicity, the popular, hybrid and subaltern, all emerge through the film. Firstly, the nation represents oppression and injustice, modernity and progress are ignored in favour of an idyllic indigenous past and utopian future, and community identity resides entirely in an ethnic and indigenous position or opposition, representing both victimhood and hope.

As we have seen, the ‘awakening’ in Chiapas has revealed complex layers of communication and identity formation between the local communities and the outside world. This awakening has brought about an infinite amount of new contacts, and, paradoxically, as Las Abejas have introspectively embraced their own ethnicity and uniqueness they have also become part of a global network of aid and activist support. The more intensely localised their memory has become the more it has travelled. If we accept that the indigenous communities of Chiapas have ‘awoken’, then in this moment of re–making contact with the outside world and their own history, they have simultaneously become the object of other people’s desires. As some of the more disadvantaged communities in Latin America in terms of education, health and services, the communities of Chiapas all of a sudden find themselves, as victims, desired by an outside world that has excluded them in any and all moments in which they could not be exploited.

In this reversal of accepted movement from the periphery to the mainstream, the communities make a global scream to be left alone, while ‘outsiders’ try desperately to get involved. Paradoxically, one group makes contact in order to ask to be left alone while the other group makes contact to tell the other that they should not change and that they should ignore the contact. On the one hand we have Walter Benjamin’s seaman: ‘The seaman knows nothing of a misty remoteness [...]. He is “fed up” with proximity, only the most precise nuances speak to him’.  

For the seaman the romanticism of the world is only for those who don’t know it, and for this he wishes to be left alone. On the other hand, he, like all of us, wishes for the sublime experience of communion with the universe. For the community of Las Abejas, their aim is the recognition of their members as martyrs. This experience is intoxication, explained by Benjamin as:

---

the sole experience in which we grasp the utterly immediate and the utterly remote, and never the one without the other. That means, however, that communicating with the cosmos is something man can only do communally.221

Here we have desire of proximity, while we are simultaneously ‘fed up’ with it. In this dialectic of assimilation and distancing ideas of justice seem to be played out in relation to people, place and time. As we can see in the introduction to the film, and like all great tragedy, the events are simultaneously immediate and mythically distant, poetic and concrete. Justice is thus set out as not merely the legal obligation of the state, but as an aspiration towards communion with the gods and an attempt to transcend the reality of the everyday.

Rather than creating a full stop to violence, the massacre increased the police and military presence in Chenalhó and produced ‘a society under siege’222 that strengthened the sense of Las Abejas as ‘subjects of oppression’.223 Anthropologists, such as Christine Kovic, talk of the position that Las Abejas have taken since the massacre to the point that ‘the dead of Acteal are at once martyrs and saints’.224 Spirituality is at the centre of everything they have and are doing. This would suggest that this film is also made in such a context where ‘actions are spiritual as much as they are political’.225 Such spirituality is formed, according to Christine Eber, from:

an awareness of being an integral part of something beyond themselves that is both ordained by the gods and the ancestors and contingent upon individuals’ daily actions and interactions.226

This sense of being part of something bigger than themselves not only refers to their relationships with the gods, but also to the world at large. As Eber explains, since the massacre they see themselves as following the paths of the early Christians, and like Peter and Paul they are suffering ‘to bring peace and justice to the world’.227

Jaime Schittler Álvarez, who worked on the film while completing his research degree, also highlights the centrality of such a stance in the identity and actions of the community. The belief in the religious significance of the massacre extends to the idea of the dead from Acteal

221 Walter Benjamin, ‘One-way Street’, p. 113.
226 Christine Eber, ‘Buscando una nueva vida’, p. 46.
converts into anjęletik, or angels who serve as ‘intermediaries between human beings and God’. As Schittler points out, the excess of identification as martyrs, while being pushed by sectors of the church and the left, has also upset the official church which does not classify these deaths as martyrdoms.

To my mind this places the case of Acteal and Las Abejas beyond any simple labelling of victim, subaltern, and/or the fight for human rights. They are not struggling for equal recognition on a basic political level; rather they are placing themselves above and beyond everyone else. As the poem reveals, ‘We are hope and example’. This turns the arguments over subaltern voices on its head if one was to understand it as coming from a position of inferiority or being listened to. For Las Abejas the question is not if we are listening, but rather God. This struggle extends to a much deeper level of meaning and relationship with the cosmos. This also sets the film up as being much more than an appeal for justice through the courts. As Faye Ginsburg illustrates with her work on indigenous media in Australia, such productions do much more than create a particular text or film, they create broad social networks and allow communities to ‘reenvision their current realities and possible future’. In this case it becomes a means for creating liberation and reconciliation on a global and spiritual scale as well as engaging with profound questions of existence and temporality.

Mimesis and intoxication

At this point I would like to take a side step. As is clear from the above analysis, the indigenous awakening, the actions of violent and non–violent resistance and uprising, and the response of assuming an identity of martyrdom, transcends any simple reduction to actions of oppression and resistance, of the subaltern and hegemony, or a simple explanation of the mimetic relationship between text and reality. While such a relationship is clear, and the discourses of politics, religion, law, fiction and academia have entered into the words and actions of Las Abejas, such elements merely stoke the fire of what is a desire to transcend the worldly and mundane and reach the gods. Such an assumption of the martyr identity speaks of healing and catharsis.

228 Jaime Schlittler Álvarez, Etnogénesis y Martirio. La masacre de Acteal y su relación con la construcción de la identidad de la Sociedad Civil Las Abejas, Research Thesis submitted for the title of, Licenciado en Ciencias de la Comunicación en la Universidad Iberoamericana, 2008, p. 46.
Here I take the side step, although imposing a Western narrative on to indigenous stories is problematic. I will do it nonetheless as a disruptive manoeuvre, so as to avoid the reduction to ‘a case of Indians doing Indian things’ as suggested in such texts as the White Paper. So I return to the idea of Greek tragedy. I do this for heuristic purposes and because of a resonance I observe in the identity of the martyr and the catharsis obtained through tragedy. Above all, the use of tragedy helps to link together and problematise the ideas of performance, representation and aesthetics.

The first thing the film does is to pay homage to the memory of the dead. It then invokes the memory and wisdom on the ancients. In the Greek tradition, the supplicant who requests justice to be served must be listened to and accommodated, and while they appeal directly to the realm of earthly justice they simultaneously appeal to the gods. This functions through a temporal rupture, which conflates a secular now time with a mythical past where the gods moved amongst the people. As such, a lamenting of the unjust and tragic condition of man transcends the immediacy of the particular injustice. Through this ritualistic lamentation and the movement from the earthly to the heavenly the victim seeks to find communion with the gods, thus catharsis and resolution.

In Acteal: 10 years the community appeals to the justice system of the very government it accuses of the crime, in A Place Called Chiapas the filmmaker seeks out contact and intoxication but ultimately becomes frustrated and returns to Canada. In Sowing Justice the community makes the long journey to Mexico City, one of the great metropolises of the world, but after they finish their immediate work they return home. In The Last Zapatistas the old veterans make contact with the world after nearly a century of oblivion. What we have is a kind of feeling–out of the Other both literally and metaphorically, spatially and temporally, and often it seems that it is the action of lamenting and appealing for justice that is just as important, if not more so, than the immediate specificities of the case.

These moments of reaching out, and indeed the making and showing of a film can be seen the same way, point to a fascinating aspect of tragedy that seems at odds with the legal and democratic nature of the performances. Greek tragedies were performed as part of the festivities for the divinity Dionysus, the god of harvest, wine and ritual madness and ecstasy. As Vernant explains:

Dionysus embodies not self–control, moderation, the recognition of one’s limits, but the quest for divine madness and ecstatic possession, nostalgia for a fulfilment from elsewhere; not stability and order, but the exceptional benefits of a kind of magic,
escape toward a different horizon. He is a god whose elusive countenance, though close at hand, leads his devotees along the path of otherness, opening up the way to a type of religious experience that is virtually unique in paganism, radical self–disorientation.231

Through their sacrifice and martyrdom to God, in their movements from the local and mundane to the worldly and otherworldly, Las Abejas are also seeking some divine madness and Othering that is projected and magnified through the film.

Rather than ecstatic orgy and excess, however, tragic theatre was performed with clear and organised distinctions between actors and audience in an orderly way. The importance of Dionysus manifests itself in a more subtle way. The boundary between the real actors and the ancient and mythical characters was to be transgressed, ‘thus the “presence” embodied by the actor in the theatre was always the sign, or mask, of an absence, in the day–to–day reality of the public’.232 As such, the role of Dionysus was to ‘constantly confuse the boundaries between illusion and reality’.233

Documentary film, including Acteal: 10 years of Impunity, does not tend to lead the viewer to ecstatic and orgiastic heights, yet this more subtle transgression between worlds of reality and illusion are relevant as documentary constantly tests our sense of what is/was real or not, and how reliable film is as a transmitter of reality. For Vernant, the tragic moment represents the crucial moment in man’s apprehension of fiction where he first saw himself ‘purely as an imitator, the creator of a world of reflections, illusions, pretences, and fables,’ that contrasted with, and ran alongside reality.234 With the theory and description of mimesis by Plato and Aristotle a step was taken from the idea of the poet who unveils reality to the idea of the artist who imitates through imagination and illusion.235 The act of people being on stage, representing people who are not there, leads to the exact meaning of mimeisthai: ‘to imitate, is to simulate the presence of one who is absent’.236

Michael Taussig also takes these ideas of distance and proximity, the Other and reproduction, and puts them into the colonial context with the idea of the mimetic faculty. From the moment of contact between Europe and the Americas the mimetic faculty kicks in, as people feel each other out, ape, mock and copy one another. As such mimesis corresponds to someone very much present and visible in the here and now, the colonial Other, yet mimetic play occurs as if they were not. So we see how mimesis does not merely reflect, but is charged with imagination and desire and burdened with preconceptions.

The tragic events of Chiapas are thus inextricably tied together with not only the conquest and colonialism of the Americas, but also the history of mimetic faculty in these endeavours. In the film we see this as a distance set up between the concerns of the village and the concerns of the nation and its president. As Zedillo speaks from his position of authority, archival footage is used to mock and accuse him. His voice is replaced as if he were not there. Not only does his image become a presence of an absence, but by replacing his voice he is mocked and aped. The figure of the president is being used here as symbolic of the Other, and so too is archive footage. Juxtaposed with the non–archival footage, there is a feeling of their respective pastness and presentness as well as a critique of the authority of the archive as a repository of fact and history ‘as it was’.

Walter Benjamin signalled the recharging of the mimetic faculty once again in modernity, exacerbated by mimetic machinery such as the camera and subject to the particular experience of a capitalist and consumerist society. As such it would seem to signal another form of conquest and colonialism and brings with it its own particular tragic elements. So we have three particular mimetic movements: firstly between man and the gods, secondly between man and his Other, and thirdly between man and the objects and commodities of this world.

Rather than a woeful attempt to fill a vacancy or vacuum, however, Taussig sees these movements as creating the possibility for a ‘Reverse Contact now–time’ in which the West begins to see itself in the images created by the Other. As the community has adopted a Western technology and documentary format, the techniques must express as much about the outside world as it does about their particular part of Chiapas. As such, the question becomes, how do we participate in such representations as part of the visual economy, and what do we wish to find in such films and to what degree do we appropriate the suffering, identity, families and traditions of the protagonists?
The mimetic faculty is both the cause and the cure. In our ‘active forgetting’, Taussig tells us, the mimetic faculty conducts its ‘honest labor’ of ‘suturing nature to artifice’:

bringing sensuousness to sense by means of what was once called sympathetic magic, granting the copy the character and power of the original, the representation the power of the represented.\(^{237}\)

The faculty lulls us into the sense that things are as they seem, yet by its very nature of confusing the original with the copy, a space for magic and transfers of powers is opened up. The point being that in this space of differentialisation and assimilation the possibility exists for metamorphosis and Othering.

The important thing is to see the history of the mimetic faculty and how the mimetic faculty has made history. Mimesis hovers over the minefield of taboos and thus opens up the possibility of transgression. What gives such power to the transgressive act is not merely the possibility of becoming Other, but more so the possibility of becoming, communicating with the spirits and enacting healing.

With the advent of mimetic machines, according to Benjamin, a new subject–object relation would develop; the aura of the cult of the object would vanish, changing the man as well. As habit becomes crucial in changing the man and habit functions very much in a tactile way, surreal images operate as a way of influencing habit through the optical unconscious, through the, ‘interdependence of montage with physiognomic aspects of visual worlds’.\(^{238}\) The transmission of experience will also be reignited as we embody the Other through the new storyteller of the twentieth century, the filmmaker. The filmmaker is the one who now goes to collect stories and bring them back to us, much in the same way as the ancient storytellers.

For the storyteller embodied that situation of stasis and movement in which the far–away was brought to the here–and–now, archetypically that place where the returned traveller finally rejoined those who had stayed at home. It was from this encounter that the story gathered its existence and power, just as it is in this encounter that we discern the splitting of the self, of being self and Other, as achieved by sentience taking one out of oneself —to become something else as well.\(^{239}\)

---


\(^{238}\) Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 28.

At this point of mimetic power and intoxication, the ability to transgress or metamorphose becomes possible, as well as the associated risks. Just as it was for the ancient Greeks, the story has more power when it comes from afar or from long ago. Film stands out as an outstanding inheritor of the mimetic tradition, able to obtain a distance through its reproducibility, a proximity through the close up, a hyper proximity to reality and a distance in which fiction and fantasy seem to blossom. Standing on the edge of so many potentially transgressive junctures, film seems the most dangerously perfect medium for mimetic play.

**Imitation**

If the filmmaker is the new storyteller, then *Acteal: 10 years* begins with a story within a story within a story, as a voiceover tells us about the ancestors and their wisdom. This poetic narration is combined with sweeping shots of the landscape and the day-to-day activities of the village. While these scenes are evidently contemporary the narration suggests otherwise: we could, in fact, be witnessing the ancestors. Imagining these villagers repeating age-old activities, unchanged and undiluted, seems pleasing. For some reason the idea of continuity and tradition reassures us of the world as normal. Aristotle states in his *Poetics*: ‘Imitation [mimesis] comes naturally to human beings from childhood [...] so does the universal pleasure in imitations’. As this opening sequence illustrates, these present day villagers, although not actors and even if the film is not fictional, present a presence of an absence just as strong as any actor.

The pleasure from cinema, the recognition of images, forms and patterns, has from its very inception raised the paradox question ‘was it science or was it art?’ As Laura Mulvey elaborates, this uncertainty will re-emerge throughout the history of film and govern the supposed relation between screen and viewer. The confusion comes from film’s two ‘contradictory ancestral lines’: scientific desire to understand the eye, optics and light, and the popular entertainment of illusion and magic. A return to early cinema studies in the 1980s saw a re-evaluation of the relation between screen and viewer which had hitherto been established around myth and speculation, outlining an evolutionary idea of the development of cinema from primitive, through its golden age, and finally to its unstable present.

---

Tom Gunning refers to the myth of the first screenings of cinema from which the crowd went screaming from the salon at the sight of an approaching train. This myth, he argues, has gone on to illustrate cinema’s frightening realism. Tracing a history from the magic and illusion of nineteenth century carnival and stage shows, Gunning reveals the playful nature between illusion and reality: ‘As in the magic theatre the apparent realism of the image makes it a successful illusion, but one understood as an illusion nonetheless’.243 This early cinema he has called a ‘Cinema of Attractions’,244 where the crowds went expecting to be fooled.

The audience’s reaction was the antipode to the primitive one: it was the encounter with modernity. From the start, the terror of that image uncovered a lack, and promised only a phantom embrace. The train collided with no one.245

We can see here how the question of whether it either was science or art almost becomes redundant. It was a science used as an aid to the arts, and all in the name of illusion. Its role in addressing the nature of modernity with all its shocks and velocity was both entertaining and educational. Mimesis was magical and delightful; it was deceitful but all the more enjoyable for it. However, just as first contact between European and Mesoamericans has been haunted by myth and a desire to encounter the primitive, so too has cinema.

In his exploration of film as archive in Mexico, David Wood points to the ‘eerie defiance of death’ in early cinema, where the archiving of time and movement suggested a new ‘visceral immediacy in the relationship between the modern subject and history’.246 From the earliest days film was seen as offering new ways of recording histories that would break down the old hierarchies of written historical representation. Film and its archiving would gradually become a site for the construction of national heritage and nationalism, and, as we can see in Acteal: 10 years, a way of resistance.

This early cinema of attraction consisted of curiosity and spectacle in a series of tableaux frontally framed and static. Physical action predominated over character as the abilities of the camera were experimented with and combined with existing forms of entertainment. In this sense, cinema was much more interactive and multipurpose. Cook and Bernink, in their history

of film, note the subsequent movement from this tableau framing to the gradual incorporation of narrative that involved spatial change as well as a change in temporality ‘with greater attention given to issues of succession, simultaneity and internally generated causality’. This movement towards a narrative structure therefore signalled a movement from a spatial arrangement, in which the screen took its place amongst the myriad of other attractions, to a spatial arrangement on screen.

It was a move from the screen in the world to the world in the screen. These early days of cinema, however, would not disappear without a trace. As Laura Mulvey suggests, ‘the image of life was necessarily haunted by deception’. This also creates a major distinction to be made in film theory: between formalist and realist. The former concerned with film’s constructed nature and the later with film’s apparent transparency and ability to become witness. The early cinema and its spatial arrangement also points to what Elsaesser and Hagener see as a crucial field of enquiry in film theory. Their preoccupation with the body derives from cinema’s presupposed spatial structure, ‘a cinematic space that is both physical and discursive, one where the film and spectator, cinema and body encounter one another’.

These distant days of film, beyond merely leaving a trace, seem to be returning. Miriam Hansen draws a line between preclassical and postclassical cinema and spectatorship to illustrate the diversity and difference in performance and reception of cinema in order to accommodate diverse audiences. She shows how early cinema has much to teach contemporary cinema, while in his analysis of the 2010 independence and revolution commemorations in the Zócalo in Mexico City Wood shows the ‘recycling of now–auratic film images into public spectacle’. Moving from Pancho Villa’s staged reenactments of battles filmed during the revolution for an American audience, through fiction and archive material to the 2010 light show in the Zócalo, Wood points out how ‘one might be tempted to argue that the entire edifice of the celluloid revolution is a simulacrum mobilised by so many ideological

\[248\] Laura Mulvey, Death 24x a Second, p. 52.
\[250\] Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, Film Theory, p. 4.
state apparatuses and, in some cases, by mercantile interests’. In this way, the reenactments of the old soldiers and the faking of archival material in The Last Zapatistas, or the images of the president with flame effects put over it in Acteal: 10 years, rather than being simply a parody, fit into long tradition of conscious manipulation and illusion.

In his essay, Visceralty, Faith, Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic, Taussig lingers on corporeal techniques of communicating with God, the covering and uncovering of the flesh, and in the case of shamans, witch–doctors, and sorcerers, ‘conjuring based on sleight of hand, [...] the skilled revelation of skilled concealment, [...] an art form dedicated to cheating’. Cinema here seems to have an ally, as the filmmaker and editor hope to reveal and hide the subject through carefully crafted edits designed to move the narrative along through intrigue. Through the work of founding anthropologist, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, Taussig draws our attention to the paradoxical foundation on which sorcery and faith seem to stand in so called ‘primitive’ societies where faith requires that someone opposes the belief to such a degree that, ‘faith seems to not only happily coexist with scepticism but demands it’. In this sense film has its own inbuilt scepticism inherent in the photographic paradox of science or art. So we watch the villagers and allow the narrator to lure us into the pleasure of believing these people could be the ancients about to jump through the screen, just like the train, and restore mythic time.

Taussig summarises Nietzsche’s advice that we should not ‘labor under the illusion of eliminating trickery’, but should rather, ‘practice our own form of shamanism’ along the lines of his concept of the nervous system. And this is exactly what Taussig does with his own work, carefully revealing and concealing in order to affect while telling us the whole time what he is doing. As a result, the reader cannot claim ignorance or deceit, and the power and/or magic of his writing is stronger for it. This raises issues for both researchers and filmmakers, especially when they attempt self–reflexivity in their work. The revelation of their methods could be seen in this light as a technique used to strengthen the illusion of their work, rather than enlighten a deeper reality. For those who hide behind the camera or the pen, insisting that they have nothing up their sleeve, perhaps the power of the illusion and/or the attempt at representing reality will suffer. The moment people begin to doubt or attempt to expose fraud or forgery, the trick gains power.

Magic thus offers itself up as a cure of illness through mimesis. This, he posits, is trick as technique. In the mimicking of animals or spirits, what is at the core of things is not imitation or appeasement but rather the magic of contagion as expressed by James Fraser. Fraser makes a distinction between two types of sympathetic magic, one is through imitation, ‘like produces like’, and the other through contact, or ‘contagion’. As such, no contract or promise of reciprocity is entered into between the human and the spirit, but rather, through the ‘fluidity of the mimesis’, there is a ‘gearing into their world through the perfection of the performance of beingness’. Rather than becoming something specifically Other, it is ‘becoming itself’ where, ‘the crucial thing is the repetition of concealment and revelation, for which moving in and out of the human body is the quintessential staging’.

Perhaps this sheds another light on the ‘awakening’ of indigenous peoples, who seem to be either acting out or caught in a pattern of revelation and concealment since the conquest. The constant movement from relative obscurity and marginality to revolt, rebellion, awakening and historical consciousness on the national stage, to the gradual fading back to oblivion, could perhaps be a performance of becoming. Mimesis plays a central role in these movements, caught in the civilising dialectic, the question becomes then, on whose behalf is this staging taking place and to who’s benefit? Does it cure us, or them?

What’s more, through statements, manifestoes, and declarations, the uprisings and their methods have never been hidden. As ‘tricks’ they have been openly disclosed, and the responses can be divided into two categories. On the one hand there are the Octavio Paz’s of the world who attempt to reveal the fraudulent nature of the uprising, and on the other, the Subaltern Studies Group who attempts to imitate the methods and techniques of the rebels. Here we have the two elements that give, according to Taussig, power to the magic, the sceptic, ‘driven by the quest for the catharsis of the triumphant revelation of the secret’, and the faithful believer.

What then stands behind all this and gives power to what evidently is pure illusion, is what Žižek also has referred to as ‘deferred belief’, where ‘there has to be some ultimate guarantor of it, yet this guarantor is always deferred, displaced, never present in persona’. In the case of documentary, and especially in a film like Acteal: 10 years where we never see the

---

261 Slavoj Žižek, Violence, p. 83.
filmmaker, yet we believe him to be there and he acts as a guarantor of fidelity and truth. While we may not always believe, the belief that someone else believes and that there is an ‘authenticity’ remains comforting.

Documentary film, as a visual medium, operates within this paradox of formalist and realist concerns, striving for veracity, illuminating re-presentation, dependent on narrative, and despite or because of the illusion, extremely powerful. Returning to the spectacle in the Zócalo for one last time, Wood wonders if underneath ‘the multiple levels of intertextuality and mediation’ that inevitably surrounds representations of the revolution, ‘some form of affective and even political engagement with the present might be found’. He continues:

Herein lays the ethical dimension of film spectatorship: the will to transcend dissemblance and simulation, not with a view to finding a utopian authenticity, but in order to seek out meaning that might serve as a conduit between the social, the narrative and the aesthetic.262

So we are left with the sense of the immense power of cinema, a power that is and has been used successfully to lull the masses into a spectacular stupor, but a power that can be harnessed for resistance and that importantly throws light onto the ethical dimensions of filmmaking and spectatorship.

**Mechanical reproduction, aura and genuineness**

Octavio Paz and Walter Benjamin present another interesting sidestep and position from which to address the idea of the viewer, the subject, and the authentic experience. Paz is important as the most well recognised commentator on the Mexican character, while Benjamin, in his essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, focuses on aura and authenticity, which to me resonates with the aura that surrounds indigenous media.

Paz criticises the spectacle of the Zapatista uprising as shallow and meaningless, while the concept of voyeurism places us, the viewers, in the position of the pervert. Perhaps, however, there is another way to view this contact between spectator, filmmaker, and actor/protagonist. Maybe the images, the copy and the mimetic play are like the Surrealist’s

---

antiquated objects from which, for Walter Benjamin, revolutionary energies emerge. Like his red electric advertising lights that gain their power not in themselves but in ‘the pool of fire that mirrors it on the asphalt’, perhaps the testimony of subjects, which are seemingly present yet absent, holds some power that transcends the mire of voyeur.

Of the Surrealist use of the antiquated, Benjamin celebrates ‘the shabbiness of interiors, the enslaved and enslaving things – the way these flip suddenly into revolutionary nihilism’. Perhaps the act of Revolution, the protest and marches, tired as they may seem at the end of a turbulent twentieth century, still have the power of antiquated objects. In the films we see the indigenous communities of Chiapas enslaved in their poverty, ancient in their ways and deprived of health and prosperity. Yet for the indigenous filmmaker these very contemporary signs of exclusion become the potentialities.

In the uprising and the films these ‘antiquated’ objects move out from poverty and reclaim their culture from its condemnation to the museum and are juxtaposed with all the icons and images of the twenty first century. All of a sudden families that have never even had electricity in their villages become heroes of the digital Internet age. Men and women who have never finished primary school become role models to Western intellectuals and academics. Women who would never have been allowed to enter the luxury shops in the main towns of Chiapas all of a sudden become fashion and style gurus for the European magazines. On top of these surrealist juxtapositions is the added element of repetition. On the Internet, TV, on t-shirts, and in films, the same images and juxtapositions, the same enthusiasm for these antiquated objects that emerged from the jungle.

For Benjamin, such images or reproductions, ‘[h]arnessing the forces of intoxication for the revolution’, were to offer a way of overcoming ‘religious illumination’ into a ‘secular illumination’ of the material and anthropological world, the ‘dialectical images’ which would penetrate the viewer, touching the ‘optical unconscious’ and opening up the ‘image and body sphere’. This revolutionary process would be best fulfilled by the camera according to Benjamin. The ‘Here and Now’ which it presents opens up the possibility of a different nature

263 Walter Benjamin, ‘One-Way Street’, p. 98.
265 Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism’, p. 156.
to that is experienced by the naked eye, ‘rather than a space permeated with human consciousness, here is one permeated with unconsciousness’; the optical unconsciousness. 266 Such images would work by reducing the ‘aura’, the ‘gossamer fabric woven of space and time: a unique manifestation of a remoteness, however close at hand’. 267 This, Benjamin stressed, would be done through mechanical reproduction. Part of the aura of the object or image is its ‘genuineness’, ‘the genuineness of a thing is the quintessence of everything about it since its creation’, its material qualities and its particular history, the copy or reproduction eliminates such a concept as there is no longer an original and the particular history of the object becomes irrelevant, it is just a copy. Therefore, ‘what starts to wobble thus is the authority of the thing’. 268 What starts to happen then, as the remoteness is overcome, is the desire to bring things closer.

As such, the criticism of Paz would be the very thing to celebrate for Benjamin. The Zapatistas, unidentifiable in their balaclavas, become multiplied repetitions of an idea. Indigenous peoples making films becomes revolutionary. In the colonial dialectic the indigenous person is the symbol of origins, purity and authenticity. When this symbol of origins starts utilising a technology and form that undermines the very idea of authenticity, then the colonial dialectic loses its foundation stone and a crisis of representation emerges.

For Benjamin the work of art has both a cultic value and a display value where in ‘primeval times’ the weight was placed on cultic value and the objects were brought out once a year or never at all. Their value was in their existence, or imagined existence as ‘instruments of magic’, and their artistic value was secondary. Now things have swung around, the value resides in their displayability, and once again the artistic value is secondary. The image brought closer, within our grasp, obtains a new form of magical fascination. 269 As Faye Ginsburg has pointed out, the digital era, with its Internet and films, which can be copied infinitely and displayed simultaneously around the world to a potentially global audience becomes the ultimate example of this idea. 270 In this way the preponderance of one thing can be just as appealing as the scarcity or exclusivity of another. In this case we have the paradox of the originary and

---

270 For more on the digital age, the problems of unequal access and its ramifications for indigenous filmmakers, see Faye Ginsburg, ‘Rethinking Documentary in the Digital Age’, Cinema Journal, 46: 1, 2006, pp. 128-133.
authentic, noble and fragile Indian being reproduced to infinity in the most crass mediums of the Internet and DVDs.

Not only does Benjamin see a process here, born out of modernity, to which we have adapted, but also an obsession and inclination to reproduce things, to overcome ‘the uniqueness in every situation’. This attempt to bring them closer signals a new kind of perception; ‘a kind of perception where a sense of all things similar in the world is so highly developed that, through reproduction, it even mines similarity from what happens only once’. People are not being duped by cheap imitations here, reproduction and the allure of the copy or simulacrums are of the highest order.

But what happens to the aura that resists its end? Benjamin spots the attempts to restore aura to photography and cinema in the form of the subject where it has been taken from the image. Hollywood has done so through the invention of the ‘Film Star’ and the ‘Cult Film’. Perhaps documentary film, which cannot afford the ‘Star’, has done so in the most mysterious and auratic of things: memory. It is not merely memory it is employing, but it’s cheap ‘external signs’. This is where we find the aura around the subject matter and the context of filming. The idea of the moment of the event that is recorded and thus saved from oblivion promises that every experience is archived and safely stored. Here the Indian adds another dimension of aura; the peoples who resist modernity and media are the ultimate sign of purity and nobility.

Benjamin, in his Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, points to the desire to ‘get hold of’ objects, through ‘likeness’ and ‘reproduction’. Taussig makes the link to Frazer and his, The Golden Bough, where, through sympathetic magic, the themes are echoed in the ideas of laying on hands, contact, likeness, and reproduction in order to communicate with the spirits and affect the everyday world. This is where the conditions of modernity find their echo in the perceived primitiveness of Other, non–European cultures, and thus the revival of the ‘primitive’ in modernity. The ideas of contact and copy seem to blur and become one – as if to make contact was to copy – yet Taussig warns against this and highlights how ‘the nature of their interrelationship remains obscure and fertile ground for wild imagining’.

Taussig summarises Benjamin as wanting us ‘to acknowledge a barely conscious mode of apperception and a type of “physiological knowledge” built from habit’. Mimetic technique, just like film, is always dependent on the embodied mind and tactile reception. Even in

---

272 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 21.
advertising, Taussig reflects on how there is a ‘cathartic, even curative, function in this copy–and–contact visual tactility’. As Benjamin suggests with film, it is the ability to make those who no longer cry, cry again. Something in these images, or in their reflection on asphalt, touches us in a way that transcends the act of seeing and approaches a tactile gaze.

As cinema may have this ability to overcome the aura of authenticity and genuineness through its reproducibility, it is also assumed to operate on the viewer in a distinct manner to other art. While the viewer of a painting contemplates and immerses himself in the picture, entering it, the ‘distracted mass’ watching a film ‘absorbs the work of art into itself’. The contact between subject and object has changed bringing about new possibility of change: rather than contemplation and action, the revolutionary spirit will be absorbed by the masses through tactile engagement and a reworking of habit.

Magician and surgeon act like painter and cameraman. The painter, while working, observes a natural distance from the subject; the cameraman, on the other hand, penetrates deep into the subject’s tissue. The images they both come up with are enormously different. The painter’s is an entity, the cameraman’s chopped up into a large number of pieces, which find their way back together by following a new law.

The contact here is not merely physical and tactile but verging on the violent. Benjamin continues: the work of the cameraman is ‘based on changes of setting and camera angle that stab the viewer with repeated thrusts’. This contact does not only become physical, it transgresses the skin to the very core. If violence creates law, justice and power, then film must be seen to creating its own new and unique laws and systems.

Here the revolutionary picture will emerge not through convincing argument and rational discourse, but rather by learning habitually. The viewer is being guided by the director, as he tries to reach the optical unconscious which will unleash the revolutionary potential within.

*The tasks that at times of great historical upheaval the human perceptual apparatus is asked to perform are simply not solvable by visual means alone – that is to say,*

---

278 The comparison between cameraman and painter has also been used to make the useful distinction between trace and testimony as a way to define documentary film by Gregory Currie. Film, by its very nature always creates traces, while painting; no matter how realistic can never be more than a testimony. See Gregory Currie, ‘Visible Traces: Documentary and the Contents of Photographs’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57:3, 1999, pp. 285-297.
through contemplation. They are gradually mastered, on the instructions of tactile reception, by man’s getting used to them [...]. The audience is an examiner, but a distracted one.279

While the painter creates work to meditate on, the filmmaker creates work that penetrates us.

**Framing the real (the reel)**

This leads us to the necessity of understanding how film is understood to operate. Thomas Elsaessar and Malte Hagener follow on nicely from Benjamin by acknowledging the physicality of the filmic experience and tracing the history and ideas of film theory through the senses. They outline seven concepts of cinema and its relationship to the viewer from the early days of the spectacle and revolutionary potential through to ideas and influence of psychoanalysis and ideological control, and back to ideas of cinemas contemporary state. Their seven concepts are cinema as: Window and Frame; Door, Screen and Threshold; Mirror and Face; Eye, Look and Gaze; Skin and Touch; Ear; Brain and Mind. As those first ‘primitive’ viewers of cinema exemplified, the act of cinema going is just as much physical as psychological, and these themes offer multiple ways to make contact. In these theories we find the central question surrounding viewer agency.

Their first port of call in the contact between cinema viewer and the screen, of the self and the Other, is through the window and frame. The idea seems simple enough as the screen takes on the dimensions of both window and frame and offers similar *ocular access* to an event,280 creating the impression of opening up into a three dimensional space while leaving the viewer safely distanced from the depicted events.

The window is there to see through and open up vistas while the frame contains and restrains. In this sense the frame pertains to formalist theory in which everything within the frame is carefully and deliberately constructed, while the window pertains to realist theory where we are given access to theoretically unmediated events. While seemingly at odds over the nature of the screen, whether it is to be projected onto or seen through, Elsaessar and Hagener explain that both schools of thought work on the premise of the rational disembodied viewer

who relies solely on what his or her eyes witness, ‘where the primary goal is to consciously work through what is being perceived’. 281

For documentary film these two ideas of the cinema play a central role. While inclined to adopt the window concept or at least feign transparency, documentary has always utilised formalist techniques. In the films I discuss in this thesis, several approaches are evident. In The Last Zapatistas the subjects are deliberately framed within the frame, in Acteal: 10 years, a closed structure is utilised with a clear stated beginning, middle and end, while in A Place Called Chiapas, as the final credits roll, the subjects are shown with the clapper board in hand, revealing the staged nature of interviews. While adopting these formalist techniques and toying with ideas of self–reflexivity, the films unanimously declare their realist desires to reveal the true state of things. In A Place the director claims to film ‘the gap between the rhetoric and the reality’, in The Last Zapatistas the veterans swear on the truth of their story and in both Acteal: 10 years and Sowing Justice the victims proclaim the reality and truth of their situation.

After the opening credits in Acteal: 10 years, we enter the house of Maria, a survivor of the massacre. In this most intimate of places, a humble shack, we see her and the photo of her dead brother and family. She addresses the interviewee off–camera. Not only do we enter through the window of the house, but also through the frame of a photo, and yet she does not address us but takes on an unseen presence over our shoulder. Anyone who has ever done an introductory course to art will know the compositional strength of the frame within the frame and we are drawn to her as an intimate (and thus trustworthy?) witness.

As Elsaessar and Hagener tell of the window and frame and their relation to the viewer, there is ‘an inherent split between passive and active, between manipulation and agency, between witnessing and voyeurism, between irresponsibility and moral response’. 282 The films both encourage us to enter them while allowing us to retain a safe distance; we are allowed to look in and judge the events for ourselves while always wary of being manipulated; we are free to listen with little threat to ourselves, but we can never be completely sure of what we hear. It is at this point of crossing the threshold that we can begin to participate in the mimetic play, depending on how much we are willing to give ourselves up to the film’s manipulation and illusion.

281 Thomas Elsaessar, Malte Hagener, Film Theory, p. 16.
282 Thomas Elsaessar, Malte Hagener, Film Theory, p. 20.
Although the films may promote or attempt to manipulate a particular moral response, we are under no obligation. The pleasure of being ‘tested’ morally and probing the margins between witnessing and voyeurism are at the heart of the appeal of such films. Adding to these paradoxes is the very nature of film perception. The screen is quite obviously not a window or frame – what permits the recognition of formalism’s constructed nature or realism’s natural appearance is, the authors stress: ‘The cognitive act of combining disparate data and sensations from within a shared frame’. Much in the same way that Aristotle explained the pleasure in assimilating the event of a tragedy, it is the obvious imperfection of the copy (the film which is a film, not reality) that encourages interaction. In this sense we are never passive, but rather actively making sense of what we see, something the formalist directors wished to utilise in order to teach, or aimed to manipulate for propagandistic aims. However, techniques such as Sergei Eisenstein’s montage and the theoretical ideas of Brecht and Benjamin regarding film’s revolutionary potential lost favour after the Nazi and Soviet propaganda films. This lead to the Neorealism of the 1940s and onwards.

Referring back to Aristotle’s Poetics, and following the division between diegetic (telling) and mimetic (showing) theories, David Bordwell explores narrative in fiction films by linking the performance and viewer together. He states: ‘Narrative significance is conveyed through an idealized spectacle and an idealized perception’, but ‘traditional film theory goes beyond this general adherence to the mimetic tradition; it creates a perspectival eye for the cinema, one we can call the invisible observer’. This equates the viewer to the camera and thus the narrator, leading Bordwell to suggest that, ‘all film techniques even those involving the “profilmic event”, function narrationally’. As such, an overreliance on the invisible observer has led to the dangerous conclusions of ‘camera as ideal witness’. With Eisenstein and Benjamin the idea of mimesis was pushed, providing ground for revolutionary change through gesture on screen, and transmitted to the audience. However, the limitations of the mimetic position according to Bordwell are, ‘an emphasis on vision and neglect of thinking, a tendency to atomism in the explanation of effects’.

---

283 Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, *Film Theory*, p. 22.
284 ‘A conventional film creates things and facts’, the two authors write, ‘while a neorealist film subordinates itself to these’. Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, *Film Theory*, p. 31.
289 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 15.
The desire to transport us as some kind of ideal witness is evident in the titles of the films. *A Place Called Chiapas*, straight away claims to transport us to somewhere else, somewhere exotic; *Sowing Justice*, tells us of a journey and a confrontation; *The Last Zapatistas*, suggests that we are in some time of urgency in which the ‘last’ of something valuable is being lost; and finally *Acteal: 10 years*, once again suggests a temporal unfolding. Space and time begin to unfold in the very titling of, and our first contact with, the films. As I have spelled out, all four films make high claims to truth and veracity, while vision and dialogue seem sometimes to be used to discourage thinking. However, while film will quite obviously tilts towards an emphasis on vision, if we are to believe Aristotle, the suturing of the parallel realities will always be both physical and mental – like puzzles to be resolved.

The window and frame are highly suggestive symbolically and manifest multiple interpretations on many other levels. Take the window for example, and cinemas growth alongside, and regular collusion with, consumer culture. In this sense the window could be the ‘imaginary curiosity cabinet or urban shop window’ displaying images as commodity, where the window metaphor ‘morphs into that of the mirror, as the display of imaginary objects reflects back to a desiring subject, enticing him/her into phantasmagoric projection and illusory acquisition/appropriation’. 290

Here we begin to see the inherent paradoxes and contradictions of cinema and its conceptualisation, where apparent transparency may in fact be projection and reflection, and where framed and contained content opens up to endless possibilities. When we drop-in on María, are we witnessing, spying, or being sold someone’s trauma?

1st and 2nd contact

The mimetic nature of film, and film’s engagement with mimesis, thus becomes central in understanding film’s power and impact. Taussig’s concern for mimesis, as he states, ‘is with the prospects for a sensuous knowledge of our time, a knowledge that in adhering to the skin of things through realist copying disconcerts and entrances by spinning off into fantastic formations’. 291 Mimesis is moved beyond the eye and the mind and onto the skin. Experience is reenlisted and the possibility of intoxication and delight re–emerge; the possibility of being intoxicated by the Other and sheer joy and wonder in imitation, parody and copying.

---

290 Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, *Film Theory*, p. 33.
291 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 44.
Here the surface and skin of things, the illusion of realism, are not superficial but the most profound and real. As such this acting out the desire to copy and transgress contains the possibility of metamorphosis and healing.

It is the precariously contained explosion of the transgressive moment that allows for and indeed creates the ‘mimetic slippage’ whereby reproduction jumps into metamorphosis, whereby the duplicating power of spirit (image) is also a self–transforming power – and hence a power for healing and for evil, transforming Being itself.292

Like the metamorphosis proposed by Bartra in the case of Mexico, the transgressive movement is a powerful force that has curative potentialities but also the possibility of being used for ill. The search for contact and intoxication can lead to conquest just as easily as it can lead to catharsis. Film has a particular ability to relate to both mind and body, and as is evident in the censorship of certain films, its power is acknowledged as transformative. In many ways we have projected ourselves onto film and projected film onto ourselves.

It is film’s pre–eminence in the twentieth century that Taussig argues has revealed the true character of modernity. Referring to a film by anthropological filmmaker Jean Rouch, where the Western camera films a ritual of spirit possession in colonial West Africa, he states: ‘The primitivism within modernism is allowed to flower’.293 Our desires to copy and re–present, and then invest power in these copies becomes a defining characteristic of recent times, as can be witnessed in any aspect of consumerism and mass culture. The link to film is obvious in the very act of filming and the countless copies of DVD’s and videos that abound (indeed two of the copies of the films I have are pirated). The link to film also extends back to its very birth and its early projects of anthropological interest.

Poole points to the parallel histories of photography (and by extension film) and the anthropological study of race to see how they both aided and contradicted each other. In their infancy, film and photography recorded everything from the most mundane of events to the most exotic of places. From train stations in Paris to the most remote regions of Papua New Guinea – with the theories of evolitional biology in mind – people were filmed under the assumption of their inevitable demise.294 In this ‘primitive’ stage of cinema the camera was

292 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 126.
293 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 242.
pointed at what were considered ‘primitive’ people on the verge of extinction. However, while photography was ideal for ordering, cataloguing and categorising surface details of other peoples, it also revealed a rarely acknowledged aspect of both photography and the Other. As Poole explains:

[T]he same machine that had made it possible to imagine a utopia of complete transparency also introduced the twin menace of intimacy and contingency—and with them, the possibility (however remote) of acknowledging the coevalness and, thus, the humanity of their racial subjects.  

People were copying others to show back to the very people they filmed and to audiences far away. The novelty of people on film was more than enough to entertain. The ‘magic’ was in the copy and the technical achievement, but it also revealed something deeply affective and profound about time and existence: it showed that which will or has already disappeared.

This enthusiasm and sublime delight is what Poole and Taussig wish to reencounter and reinvent, released from the essentialist ideas of race. It is here that the rebirth of the mimetic faculty lays open the possibility of the ‘second contact’ time between ‘us’ and ‘them’:

To become aware of the West in the eyes and handiwork of its Others, to wonder at the fascination with their fascination, is to abandon border logistics and enter into the ‘second contact’ era of the borderland where ‘us’ and ‘them’ lose their polarity and swim in and out of focus.

Take for example the moments of testimony in Acteal: 10 years. As the individuals present themselves to the camera, one by one, at times seeming nervous, others confident and secure, I can’t help but think back to the legal reports on Acteal. This testimony in front of the camera, a most unnatural thing, seems something like an interrogation or confession to a witness/filmmaker who we believe to exist off–camera. With the discourse of law, human rights and the NGO’s, they could be in the dock defending themselves. On the one hand, it is an imitation of Western legal process, yet what they are evidently after is transcendence and catharsis from earthly and legal matters. They have assumed the identity of martyrs.

What then do we think about our concepts of law and justice? Are they the mundane and necessary bureaucratic processes required for a smooth society or rather concepts through which we too find pleasure, catharsis and divine madness? And if not why such interest in the

296 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 246.
actions of these others? As I will elaborate on at a later point, the profound quest of documentary, that of revelation and conclusion, balances and wobbles between the catharsis of healing and the catharsis of resolution, trying to avoid tragedy while wholly dependent on its design. Here lies the point between naïve mimicry, appropriation, conquest and second contact.

The opening scene of Acteal: 10 years reveals another example of this backwarding and forwarding. Alongside the story of the wisdom of the elders we see the village children playing, as if that wisdom enters into their bodies through youthful play, we then cut to president Zedillo, as the narrator reveals the betrayal by the Mexican government. Zedillo stands in front of the symbols of the nation, the flag and a giant portrait of Benito Juarez, as if the painting conveys some mimetic power by his standing in front of it, aping its stance. The film cuts back again to the hands of an elder and the narrator returns to the theme of ancient wisdom. The editing and narration work to extract the mimetic power of the president and nation and transfer it to the youth and elders of the village.

This is the point of transgression from which ‘mimetic slippage’ and the potential for metamorphosis can occur. The presupposition of distinct worlds, Elsaessar and Hagener explain, depends on both separation and connection and operates on the three levels of the viewer, film and actor:

For the spectator, it is the threshold between his/her world and that of the film; for the film it is the threshold between myth and reality, and for the actor, it is the threshold between role and image.\(^{297}\)

In all of the films I am looking at in this thesis the motif of another world is clear. The now and then of memory, the here and there of a ‘mystical’ Chiapas, the ‘us’ and ‘them’ of the indigenous peoples and outside world, and the present revolutionary event pitted against utopian pasts and futures. Under this concept we can see the setting up of binary oppositions and other worlds. In a ‘not–quite–here but also not–quite–there’\(^{298}\) space, the viewer is left free to wonder in between worlds or potentially be sucked into worlds they do not wish to, or should not, visit. The censorship of film points to the supposed dangers of such trips.

Film uses tricks to draw the viewer in, from the traditional cinematic experience of entering the actual building and passing through the foyer, to the use of titles, opening credits, and all

\(^{297}\) Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, *Film Theory*, p. 36.

\(^{298}\) Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, *Film Theory*, p. 38.
sorts of paratexts which invite the viewer into the filmic universe. Indeed, the downloading or pirating of films and even classification could be seen to invite the viewer into cinema through the idea of the forbidden. The point being that even before the narrative has begun, the viewer has commenced a journey into the filmic universe and image economy with all its possible and potential hopes, desires, memories, moments of transgression and potential metamorphosis: and surely in documentary the most teasing promise is contact with real people.

Furthermore, Malin Wahlberg highlights how home movies, documentaries, and feature films are impregnated with our existential relation to them. Thus, home movies and documentaries are ‘legitimated by the trace status of nonfiction footage’, which assigns to them a particular relationship to time and memory, past and present. In this case indigenous film comes with its own existential qualities of the ‘noble savage’, originality and authenticity.

Taboo shares something here with magic and its backward and forward movements of revelation and concealment. The key here is secrecy, yet a public secrecy, which is used ‘to create a powerful yet invisible presence’. There is a dependence on anxiety, the ‘fearsome expectation of its transgression’, and as is evident in initiation rites, ‘it is the act of uncontrolled seeing that is prohibited’. As such, to one part of the group the secret will be revealed, but the group which is prohibited, while not knowing the secret, knows that secrets are being revealed as the initiated group will make it clear when and where secrets are being transferred. The revelation to the one group will insure the concealment of the secret, insured by the presence of the absence of the prohibited group.

Here we see how revelation always engenders concealment. Indeed in cinema we can see such a process of attraction and repulsion, where intrigue leads to revelation and each revelation leads to another intrigue. If we see storytelling and film as excess products of society, they seem to inhabit these zones of taboo and transgression. The marketing and release of blockbuster films certainly work along such lines, while documentary inherently promises the revelation of some kind of secret or truth. It seems that the creation of a space of secrecy has a charge that is at the very heart of religious and mystical experience.

As Taussig points out, the body is more often than not the staging ground for such rituals of revelation and concealment, of taboo and transgression, and in the idea of physiognomy, ‘the use of the body to mark the drama and mystery of concealment’, we find the ‘basis for theorizing the (magical) power of film, especially the close–up of the face’. However, the point here, he reminds us, is not ‘the triumph of catharsis with the eventual bringing to light of hiddenness, but rather the performance of hiddenness itself’.

If we return to the face of María in her humble house, recounting her version of the massacre, revealing the most intimate and personal details in front of a camera with a potentially infinite audience what are we then seeing? The focus is on her face – as is the norm in the filming of testimony – showing us that she has nothing to hide and that her gestures do not contradict her words. Yet Vernant would have us believe that we are witnessing the presence of an absence, and Taussig would describe it as the performance of hiddenness. Despite the outward signs of revelation, we are therefore dealing with concealment. Such a laying bare on film confronts the viewer with a vertiginous depth of truth and testimony. While nothing indicates that María is lying, quite the opposite, the superficiality of the contact between camera, viewer, and her testimony plunges down into the very depths of truth and knowledge.

The gaze and the mental machines

Moving beyond the anthropological aspects of cinema, the ideas of the window onto the soul, the transgression of taboos, and the projection of the self also makes cinema the ideal medium for expressing and exploring issues of the psyche and ideological influence. Richard Allen, summarizing the work of Jean–Louis Baudry and his important essay of the late 60s, ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus’, points out three aspects of ‘apparatus theory’. Firstly is the idea of vision as knowledge in which the viewer is placed in the centre of such a vision; secondly, the identification and assimilation of the viewer with the camera; and thirdly, the relationship of the viewer to the screen as a child to a mirror in the Lacanian sense.

This concept points to cinema as an ideological technology, and addressing the impact of cinematic ideology in his landmark essay, The Voice of Documentary, film critic Bill Nichols

---

traces the history and development of style and strategies in documentary film. Changes in the conception of voice are due to shifting formal and ideological concerns, he states:

The comfortably accepted realism of one generation seems like artifice to the next. New strategies must constantly be fabricated to re-present ‘things as they are’ and still others to contest this very representation. 305

Like the academic who presents us with the voices of history, the filmmaker struggles with form and content in their quest to approximate a ‘true’ voice. 306 Nichols suggests four major styles within documentary making which attempt to represent things ‘as they are’. The first he titles the Griersonian tradition, characterised by the ‘authoritative yet often presumptuous off-screen narration’ often referred to as ‘the voice of God’. The second style is cinéma vérité, a style that, due to portable cameras and sound, offered or presumed a greater representation of reality due to its agility and versatility in a style that ‘seeks to become ‘transparent’. 307

A lack of presumed history or context in this style leads to the third style, that of direct address, in which the viewer is implicitly acknowledged, usually in interview setups, by either the narrator or characters. The fourth style to emerge is that of more self–reflexive documentaries. This is the use of observation with interviews and narration in a way that reveals or makes more visible the machinations of the documentary. This, Nichols contends, makes obvious what has always been:

Documentaries always were forms of re–presentation, never clear windows onto ‘reality’; the film–maker was always a participant–witness and an active fabricator of meaning, a producer of cinematic discourse rather than a neutral or all–knowing reporter of the way things truly are. 308

For Nichols voice is much more than the information or style of a given documentary, it is, ‘[t]hat which conveys to us a sense of a text’s social point of view’. 309 Voice in the context of cinéma vérité or observational film is generally considered that of the personal rather than the political. Without the narrator or characters directing us as to how we should interpret, we are left to decide ourselves. As the personal drama and actions of the characters become subsumed by the film’s style, ‘that re–writes historical process as the expression of an

indomitable human essence whatever the circumstance’, yet which tends to ‘ascribe to the historical material itself meanings that in fact are an effect of the film’s style or voice’.  

Nichols explains the ‘peculiar fascination’ of film in which evidence and argument conflate. While documentary film may appear to make general statements about life, the capturing of sound and images has traces of particular historical roots and meanings which are created in the production and viewing of the film. Even those elements of film which make obvious their machinations – fuzzy focus, wobbly handheld shots, over or underexposure – can produce a sense of ‘history in the making’. We are led to believe that we have a privileged and objective view Nichols explains, and ‘this shift from artistic expression to historical revelation contributes mightily to the phenomenological effect of the observational film’.  

Beginning with *Sowing Justice*, we find a film that operates between *cinema vérité* and direct address. While the camera follows the community to Mexico City, we have moments of interruption when the protagonists turn to the camera to explain what is happening. These function as chapter breaks in a seemingly more natural way than a voice–of–god or subtitles. What we get is the personal experience of the journey, unmediated by voice–overs with subtle reminders that this fits into a broader political event. In *A Place Called Chiapas* we have something quite different. Here the voice–over or voice–of–god accompanies us the entire way. The filmmaker guides us through every moment, her authority, her questions, and her conclusions prompt the viewer at every turn. While moments of observation and interview are weaved throughout, it is the voice of the narrator that leads us in and out of every situation. As such, the ‘place’ called Chiapas comes across as so highly mediated as to almost become a fantasy or imagining of the narrator/filmmaker.  

In *The Last Zapatistas* we see another dramatically different approach. Here we have direct address, where the filmmaker/interviewer does not appear, although through the staging of the interviews we assume he is just off–camera. As such, the voice and stories of the veterans are given the floor, and their authority stands alone. The use of interview is seen as a response to the authoritative omniscience of voice–over narration and its all–knowing character. At the same time the use of uncritical interviews, where the witnesses and their testimony drive the film, can leave the voice of the film subservient to the testimony. In this case, however, through editing and juxtaposition, the veracity of testimony is portrayed for what it is; subject to vagaries, failures and elaboration. Rather than illustrate the facticity of the veterans

memory, the film deliberately undermines them to paradoxically reveal a deeper level of meaning and sentiment.

The problem of subjectivity and the place of the text provoked the response of self–reflective documentary and the idea that the socially and culturally constructed relationship between knowledge, self, and the text needed to be acknowledged. This, Nichols suggests, ‘restores the dialectic between self and other: neither the ‘out there’ nor the ‘in here’ contains its own inherent meaning. The process of constructing meaning overshadows constructed meanings’.\(^{312}\) This self–reflexivity is used in \textit{The Last Zapatistas} to show the failings of memory without negating the inherent ‘truth’ of what they say. In \textit{A Place Called Chiapas} the interviewees reveal the staged nature of the interviews, however, in this case they do it during the credits as an appendage, undermining the authority of the narrator and the case she tries to put forward of the ‘place’ she has ‘found’. In this case, self–reflexivity becomes a clever little illusion of postmodernity to show an awareness of theory without actually revealing anything profound about its production.

Noel Carroll is critical of Nichols and his laments towards the un–reflexive nature of much nonfiction. Carroll contends that just because a film does not actively reveal its own constructed nature does not mean that it fails on the task of objectivity.\(^{313}\) Carroll argues that the argument between objectivity and selectivity has been particularly harsh towards nonfiction film: as all fields of inquiry are selective, this does not necessarily denote bias on the part of the researcher/filmmaker. A basis for distinction or parity between fiction and non–fiction cannot be grounded on technique, he claims, as both share and imitate technique for effect, just like literature. ‘The distinction between fiction and nonfiction is a distinction between the commitments of the text, not between the surface structures of the text’, he notes.\(^{314}\) Regarding the imposition of narrative onto nonfiction events and history as proof of the unreliability of the text, Carroll contends that while the narrative structure may not exist in the real world it may still be used to illustrate real events.\(^{315}\)

Carl Platinga also argues against the postmodern theories which deny a knowable and visible reality, ‘stemming from a familiar hermeneutics of suspicion’, which, ‘cast nonfiction films in

\(^{312}\) Bill Nichols, ‘The Voice of Documentary’, p. 27.


\(^{315}\) Noel Carroll, ‘Nonfiction Film and Postmodernist Skepticism’, p. 290.
the single role, that of deceptive representations’.\textsuperscript{316} This trend he sees as stemming from 1970s cinesemiotics theory, where ‘apparatus theory […] empowers the critic and theorist as one who ‘sees through’ the duplicity of the representation’.\textsuperscript{317} He continues:

Any rhetoric that denies the legitimacy and importance of informative and evidential uses of motion pictures, and finds only deceptions and manipulations, presents a one-sided, indeed, paranoid picture of the nonfiction film and its cultural and psychological effects.\textsuperscript{318}

Nichols, however, sees the ‘ideologically complicit argument that documentary–equals–reality, and that the screen is a window rather than a reflecting surface’.\textsuperscript{319} Nichols divides documentary into two modes of address, direct and indirect. Direct, or expository, relies on interviews and voice–over in its relationship to the viewer while indirect uses observation. All the films we are looking at rely more heavily on direct address, using indirect sparingly. Nichols explains how exposition falls into the realm of rhetoric, which thus ‘demands our recognition of it as a signifier of ideology’.\textsuperscript{320}

Expository cinema, especially direct–address documentaries, establishes a temporal relationship stretched, like that of narrative, between a hope and a memory. With exposition, though, the anticipation of closure centers less around motives carried out by characters in a world of their own and more around propositions made by narrator(s) referring to a world we all know. In fact, exposition usually makes a tacit proposal to the viewer as part of its contract negotiations: the invocation of, and a promise to gratify, a desire to know.\textsuperscript{321}

Without a doubt, these four films indulge in the techniques of seduction and promise resolution of some kind. In Acteal: 10 years, despite not having the results of their legal applications resolved, they still find a perfectly succinct conclusion by declaring: ‘now we are going home’. While all the films leave loose strings, they all abide by the rules of narrative.


\textsuperscript{317} Carl Platinga, ‘Moving Pictures and the Rhetoric of Nonfiction’, p. 309.

\textsuperscript{318} Carl Platinga, ‘Moving Pictures and the Rhetoric of Nonfiction’, p. 320.


\textsuperscript{320} Bill Nichols, Ideology and the Image, p. 178.

\textsuperscript{321} Bill Nichols, Ideology and the Image, p. 205. For the way documentary uses rhetoric in historical reconstruction, see Paula Rabinowitz, ‘Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory’, History and Theory, 32:2, 1993, pp. 119-137.
Richard Allen argues against the belief in film theory that film works fundamentally as an ideological effect and illusion to which the spectator is fooled. He argues that viewers, while realizing that they are watching a film, ‘nevertheless experience that film as a fully realized world’. This he calls the ‘projective illusion’. While the illusion no doubt exists, the ideas of the ‘cinema of attractions’ as well as more nuanced ideas of screen and spectator open up the idea of mimetic play once more.

The idea of film as mirror is also important here, based on Jacques Lacan’s idea of the ‘mirror stage’ in which an infant sees itself in the mirror, recognizing itself (the self) and the image of itself (the Other). The theory was seen to explain the pleasure derived from the cinematic experience. From the words of Lacan it is easy to see the appeal to theorists and filmmakers alike. Describing the mirror stage he states:

> This development is experienced as a temporal dialectic that decisively projects the formation of the individual into history. The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body–image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development.

The themes of ‘awakening’ into history, drama and narrative, anticipation and insufficiency, the fragmented body and its totality reverberate throughout the films. Editing creates a cut and through extended or rapid pacing manufactures anticipation of the next shot. At the same time, this movement in which the self and the Other take shape either in the mirror or on the screen, allowing the possibility of intersubjectivity, becomes fundamentally and irrevocably based on misrecognition.

Film theorist Vivian Sobchack has condemned the use of the concept of the mirror in cinema studies. She argues that this approach ‘condemns the very ontological being of the cinema as substitutive (rather than expansive) and deceptive (rather than disclosing)’. Despite this critique of the mirror as a limiting concept it has received a recent boost from neuroscience.

---

The discovery of mirror neuron networks\textsuperscript{325} is believed to explain ‘the human ability to imitate, understand, and anticipate the actions, intentions, and emotions of others’.\textsuperscript{326} This has enormous ramifications for understanding cinema’s affective nature, its connection to embodied learning, and its relevance to intersubjectivity. As Tikka points out, ‘the idea that people share innate neural spaces invites one to draw analogues to an experiential cinematic space’.\textsuperscript{327}

Elsaessar and Hagener speak of three paradigms of the mirror which have left their mark on film theory: firstly, ‘the look into the mirror as a window on the unconscious’; secondly, a ‘reflexive doubling’ which operates more as a distancing effect in which cinema’s illusion is acknowledged; and thirdly, ‘the mirror of the other as identified by anthropologists as a component of human identity, agency and intersubjective communication’.\textsuperscript{328}

Going back to the opening three characters in \textit{Acteal: 10 years}, we can find an interesting triangulation of such mirroring. Firstly the storyteller in whom we see our own wisdom and narrative strengths; secondly we see the inverted image of the ‘evil’ president, a symbol of outside corruption and power in which we see our own complicity in the desecration of indigenous cultures; and thirdly we see María, the victim and survivor of the massacre in whom we see our own victimhood. Each mirror not only reflects certain paradoxical relationships to the film, but it also distorts. The storyteller is off–screen, the image of the president is archival and his voice is cut out, while María talks to someone beside the camera, and thus seemingly over our shoulder, refusing to look us in the eye and reflect our own desire to associate with the victim. We thus see ourselves three ways, but in reflections which are also other.

\textbf{Struggling against the gaze}

The perceived power and influence of cinema has also found its own forms of resistance, and reflexive doubling found its home in the New–Wave and Third Cinema of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{329}

\textsuperscript{325} For a complete overview of both the relevant scientific and cinema studies literature, see Pia Tikka, \textit{Enactive Cinema: Simulatorium Eisensteinense}, Jyvaskyla: Gummerus Printing, 2008, especially chapters 5, 3, 2.
\textsuperscript{326} Pia Tikka, \textit{Enactive Cinema}, p. 220.
\textsuperscript{327} Pia Tikka, \textit{Enactive Cinema}, p. 223.
\textsuperscript{328} Thomas Elsaessar, Malte Hagener, \textit{Film Theory}, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{329} As David Wood points out, the ‘marriage of the terms ‘arthouse’ and ‘revolutionary’ is certainly not irrelevant, but it betrays a bias towards the way such cinemas tended to be circulated and consumed outside Latin America’. It points to a larger pattern in film studies of collapsing Latin American concerns
Mimicking cinema’s production within the films themselves, this approach to cinema questioned its own construction and perception. As Cook and Bernink explain:

Counter–cinema therefore systematically challenges illusionism with strategies that subvert each of its major codes – disrupting linear causal relations, denying narrative closure, fracturing spatial and temporal verisimilitude, undermining identification and putting pleasure into question.330

Fundamentally a rebuke to Hollywood mainstream, it also becomes a crisis point where cinema becomes confused about the power of its own illusions. We will however see in the films, particularly in A Place Called Chiapas, how this self–reflexivity has been used as a veil to mask old prejudices and classic documentary approaches. The self–reflexivity that emerged to acknowledge the fact that cinema was an illusion, has become an illusion itself.

Just as the mirror brought the idea of cinema from one of exterior to one of interior, the motif of the eye reinforces interiorisation. Following the work of Foucault and his theorisation of the panopticon the eye becomes a tool of omnipresence and oppression.331 The eye can elicit through the look and the gaze ideas of knowledge and enlightenment, assuming the privileged position of the eye as a window into the soul. On the reverse side it can become a tool for sinister observation and surveillance, conjuring up ideas of power and guilt felt under the present or imagined gaze of the ‘disembodied eye’ of the camera with its ‘strong illusion of power and omnipotence’.332

Hollywood created the model of how film ‘should’ be and therefore the reference to reject. The model revolves around the dramatic film, ‘a self–mystifying vehicle of Western beliefs’, which is cleverly constructed through editing and angles so that we ‘stare through the window of the screen directly at the ‘real’ world’.333 The response in the 1960s was ‘Third Cinema’ which ‘aimed to ‘decolonize’ both the industry and the image’. The paradox, as Robert Rosenstone illustrates, was the highly Westernised artists and intellectuals who fostered the movement and the relative unpopularity of their popular (of the people) films.

---

330 Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink (Eds), The Cinema Book, p. 118.
331 See; Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, London: Allen Lane, 1977
332 Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, Film Theory, p. 85.
In an echo of the subaltern studies agenda, their approach to history on film was always set against the backdrop of the ‘struggle’; ‘they have set films in the past for the same reason as they have set them in the present, have used history as a way of commenting upon current problems of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nationalism’. At the same time, Rosenstone sees the dramatisation of their own history as merely satiating the viewers the same way American films did.

Rosenstone therefore poses the question: how can motion picture revision history? To what extent can we let the ‘truths’ of visual history be our ‘truths’? All film is historical by nature, an object produced at a certain time and place; the nature of its truths is another question. As he points out, while film can on the one hand capture ‘history’ like no other medium, on the other hand, it must ultimately ‘fictionalize, romanticize and oversimplify the past’. The question remains how history can be put on film and how to judge it?

The Third Cinema of Latin America, which aimed to engage the audience in political topics, sacrificed the privilege of the producers and directors and collaborated with the subjects they were filming. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino set out their beliefs in the manifesto, Towards a Third Cinema. It states:

> Third cinema is, in our opinion, the cinema that recognizes in that struggle the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic manifestation of our time, the great possibility of constructing a liberated personality with each people as the starting point – in a word, the decolonization of culture.

In this militant cinema that reflected so much of what was happening politically, the camera became a gun and a profound sense of nation was always at the fore. In this way, history, nation, rebellion, the social and the artistic, all fed into this militarised liberation art form. Beyond these aims, however, we once again witness the incredible power given to the camera: ‘The camera is the inexhaustible expropriator of image–weapons; the projector, a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second’. And: ‘The great themes – the history of a country, love and

---

unlove between combatants, the efforts of a people that awakens – all this is reborn before
the lens of the decolonized camera’. 338

So the themes of nation and rebellion, the objective and subjective repeat, and the question of
the films power, whether made by locals or outsiders, becomes muddled again by accusations
that they merely imitate and thus legitimise the stereotypes, paternalism and hegemonic
power of those above. Nichols concludes by telling us:

It is not real historical process that necessarily prompts wonder when we encounter it
in the cinema, but the apparent duplication of historic process. This approximates
magic – the ability to control nature, to bend it to our bidding [...]. Remembrance is
what gives specificity to the cinematic experience. We sit spellbound amidst
oscillations between the duplication of reality and the reality of duplication, between
the two–dimensional image and a three–dimensional world, between a system of signs
and an external realm to which we are referred. 339

We come back to the magic of the filmic approximation of history and the historic
approximation of filmic wonder and reality.

In most corners of the world now, including Chiapas, in moments of violence and resistance it
is not uncommon to see both state forces and protestors filming each other. Theoretically we
can follow a trail from Dziga Vertov’s ‘cinema eye’ and Benjamin’s ‘optical unconscious’, which
would both reveal the world as never seen before. Skipping to Lacan’s above mentioned
‘mirror stage’: the infant when imagining its reflection looking back at it sees the Other gazing
back, this simultaneous self–identification and self–conscious awareness of the self–generated
Other creates subjectivity. This seems the epitome of the aesthetic of terror as the tussle of
violent repression and noble resistance is recorded, where it is not hard to imagine the one
side using the other’s video in the construction of their own narrative. As such, both sides
become creators and violent destroyers of one hypothetical film.

Stepping aside from the black and white conception of film as either oppressor or liberator,
Anne Frieberg takes up the subject of the gaze and the commodification of its mobile and
virtual realms. Looking at the mobile gaze of the flâneur and the virtual gaze of the panorama
and diorama of the nineteenth century, she traces a history from early modernity to the

postmodern that ‘negotiated new illusions of spatial and temporal mobility’.

Frieberg sees the spectator’s position as one of ‘imaginary visual omnipotence’, while the body becomes a fiction, ‘a site of departure and return’. As such, the viewer potentially becomes his/her own storyteller and through the act of viewing begins a dialogue with his/her self.

The point of creating such subjects and observers is to meander through the newly energised consumerist society: ‘The commodity–fetish – umbrellas and dolls and millinery – were like museum relics that instantiated the dialectical images of the new and the ‘already past’ and became, in convergent synthesis, the “ever–same”’. As I will note throughout, documentary, with its use of the archive and the contemporary, the myth and the reality, partakes in exactly the same dialectic.

With the packaging of tourism and the grand tours of Europe, the mobile gaze was commodified. Especially in A Place Called Chiapas the sense of a tour through the region and its cultures is central, and the other films never fail to take advantage of scenic cutaways. As Friedberg elaborates:

> The subjective effects of the tourist are not unlike those of the cinema spectator. Tourism produces an escape from boundaries, it legitimizes the transgression of one’s static, stable, or fixed location. The tourist simultaneously embodies both a position of presence and absence, of here, and elsewhere, of avowing one’s curiosity and disavowing one’s daily life.

Frieberg returns to the themes of the cinema of attractions as such, exposing the restraints of apparatus theory to express the pleasure and disposability of spectatorship. If this is so, the documentary becomes the perfect medium for joining the mobile and virtual gaze in an exotic journey to far–flung places and peoples to partake of the trauma economy, where illusion and the perversity of surveillance and voyeurism can be neatly packaged and then disposed of.

Following in the vein of Taussig and Nietzsche, Frieberg sees not only the sinister aspects of such travel (and here we can include the privileged nomad), but rather an experience that offers up both pleasure and pain. As such, she asks: Isn’t cinema spectatorship pleasurable

---

precisely because new identities can be ‘worn’ and discarded? Susan Dever also looks at film as she crosses back and forth over the US/Mexico border. She travels with films in mind rather than through films, ‘watching old movies out of time if not place’ to explore a sense of melodrama in ideas of national coherence and cross border identity that seems to possess equal parts pleasure and pain. Like Aristotle’s pleasure in the assimilation of mimetic play, the viewers can become masters of their own journey of illusion and wonder, picking up and putting down subjectivities like products in a store.

This very voyage through space and time, however, also creates pain. The space created between the here and there, the then and now seems to be haunted by nostalgia linked to temporal mobility and ‘the postmodern nostomania (excessive nostalgia) for the past’. Nostalgia is in the titles of the films, the references to places and soon to be lost peoples. And what happens as we embark on this modern day grand tour is that the locals are filming us back. In two of the films, A Place Called Chiapas, and Acteal: 10 years, the act of filming while being filmed is picked up multiple times. The condition of extreme military presence in Chiapas and their tactic of filming the communities and keeping them under constant surveillance are filmed by those being surveyed.

This double mirror effect, where the filmed person films while being filmed, verging on the edge of absurdity, seems likely to end in a house of mirrors, where subjectivity becomes so intensified that it cracks. Cinema thus becomes a place for ‘staging the drama of becoming “subject” in the form of compulsive repetition’. The gaze that objectifies and commodifies becomes haunted by its own staging of ‘becoming subject’, and its distance from the object provokes nostalgia. This haunting nostalgia thus becomes inherent in such expeditions through film, for, as I will show, any and all acts of searching are made on the assumption that something is missing.

Suturing the eye and the gaze

---

344 Anne Frieberg, Window Shopping, pp. 184-185.
346 Anne Frieberg, Window Shopping, pp. 188-189.
347 Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, Film Theory, p. 89.
The process of editing, cutting and pasting a film together, adds an element that would seem to disrupt the gaze and any simulacrum of reality, yet it is exactly this intervention that adds to the existential power of cinema to stage such dramas. This has been addressed by ‘suture theory’, as explained by the Elsaessar and Hagener:

The moment of rupture introduced by editing potentially brings the otherwise hidden machinery of vision (the ‘apparatus’) to the viewer’s attention, and thus produces a moment of anxiety and loss, which in the subsequent shot has to retrieve, bind up or stitch together, in short: has to suture.348

Rather than weakening the relationship between viewer and film, rupture and suture strengthen the bond, making them ‘stick the more fervently to the filmic flow’.349 The idea of strengthening through suturing echoes Taussig’s idea of mimesis being the ‘suturing of nature to artifice’ that bestows power and magic onto the copy. The use or predominance of editing to control the temporal and spatial elements of the film also posits film in the field of narrative text.

This seems to make cinema somewhat reliant on the consequential moments of tragedy, where rupture leads to the sudden awakening of the senses, in which filmic perception is shocked back into normal perception, only to be reassured by the instantaneous suture of the next edit. Once again we begin to see the condition in which the moment of rupture and suture, memory and remembering, as well as tragic awakening becomes predominant. It also echoes the insufficiency and anticipation of Lacan’s mirror stage, where the fragmented self finds its totality in the Other.

This aspect of suture and editing leads Marlin Wahlberg to note the affective and representational aspects of film through duration and tempo. The existential phenomenology that Wahlberg propounds ‘includes a romantic recognition of the human gesture—a confidence in cinema to transmit directly the experience traced in faces and gestures’.350 The focus on duration has signalled the relative time that a shot is held, ‘the specific temporal mode for each gesture’351, where sadness is conveyed through a longer held shot, while humour is conveyed more briefly. Here the gaze is dissected into its temporal components.

348 Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, Film Theory, pp. 89-90.
349 Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, Film Theory, p. 90.
350 Malin Wahlberg, Documentary Time, p. 79.
351 Malin Wahlberg, Documentary Time, p. 79.
Wahlberg points to the other side of the coin, velocity, as a particularly relevant and mostly ignored aspect specific to documentary. Velocity, either in the image or through the camera’s movement, in documentary can add to the claim of truth of the moment. The shakiness of the image adds a level of authenticity, where the blurring makes ‘the mediating process as conspicuous as the referent’. As such, duration and velocity offer up the possibility of frame breaking events, where perceived limits of tempo can be manipulated, and where specific tempos become synonymous with particular gestures and landscapes.

Ideas of duration and its fragmentation or framing are dependent on consciousness and the viewer’s social and cultural conceptions of time. For cinema, the moment of interest is the intersection between ‘the space–time of the image and the duration in which both the film and the film viewing are embraced’. Extreme examples of hour long takes show how, rather than merely representing or suggesting a kind of realism, the long take can become a meditation on time and duration itself, overriding the subject matter as the protagonist.

In documentary, this affect and centrality of duration is intimately linked with testimony where ‘the poignant event of time passing often seems to result from the assumingly spontaneous performance of the social actor’. A pause here, a movement there, a shot which is held just that bit longer than usual or cut before we can recognise what is happening: all possess the potential to construct a relationship of trust, or otherwise, between ourselves the viewer and the subject.

This stems from what Wahlberg calls ‘real–time approximation’, the correlation between lived time and filmed time. The extended and unedited shot has the potential to create a slowing down of time as the viewer becomes ever increasingly aware of the presence of time passing on the screen and the centrality of time as subject. Such moments where screen time approximates lived time become uncomfortable and slow due to the awareness of the voyeuristic nature of viewing.

Watching María in the most vulnerable of situations this voyeurism is avoided by her gaze being directed over the viewer’s shoulder. The viewer is safe to watch without feeling intrusive. Her testimony and that of the others is cut quickly to avoid too much dwelling on any particular phrase or gesture. The space to breathe is given between the testimonies, as the music swells and sweeping landscape shots take us from one person to the next. Through

---

352 Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p. 80.
354 Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p. 91.
these edits the narrative, created by the testimony, creates its intrigue, as one by one the survivors reveal the story of Acteal. While the film’s tempo moves evenly and calmly along, these ruptures and revelations elicit the intrigue necessary to drive forward the narrative.

And so María Vázquez Gómez speaks:

When they came to kill us we were fasting and at prayer to ask for tranquillity, peace and justice ...

I confirm that it is true that they came here to massacre. They came here to kill us and we never thought of killing anybody nor robbing them, nothing. I openly report that a crime was committed here. Because I was left alone— they killed my mother, my family. In this photograph, we can see my brother Alonso and his children all dead. What has been said is the truth. It is not a lie ...

My demand is that the root of the conflict is investigated. Investigate the ones that planned all of this war ...

In the year of 1997, they wanted to exterminate Las Abejas. But it will never end. The men and women have become more conscious. In spite of the death of our 45 brothers, many of us remain in the struggle for justice, for the respect of human rights ...

The direction of the gaze and the distinction between viewer and voyeur can become malleable. Roles can be reversed through critical reflection, the long take, which unnerves through its duration and has the potential to make the viewer aware of his/her voyeurism, thus turning the gaze back on the viewer. This opens up the uncomfortable thought that the testimonies of the people from the Las Abejas community on film, in which they assume a pose that opens up to the camera yet does not look straight down the lens, are exposing themselves to the voyeuristic gaze of an outside world that gains as much perverse satisfaction from other people’s suffering and confessions as they do from any other voyeuristic pursuit.

Tactile contact

Beginning with the idea of the eye as the central organ of perception, to the act of seeing and the concepts of voyeurism, fetishism, exhibitionism and the male gaze, and finally to the
unreturned and ever present, decentred gaze, with its problems of power and surveillance, the focus on the eye finally gives way to the skin and its ‘culturally and semantically charged surface of interaction and communication’.355

Skin and touch come with their own paradoxical components, the skin is at once the protective layer between inside and outside, yet fragile and easily scarred, it becomes the most obvious marker of racial difference while touch can be tender or violent, transporting a sense of affection or offending over–proximity. Combined with Benjamin’s concept of the filmic surgeon who cuts through the skin in violent thrusts, the relation between the Self and the Other through skin and cinema becomes revolutionary.

In Acteal: 10 years we can see how skin signals a boundary as well as difference, and how contact is attempted. Chiapas is portrayed as a state of indigenous communities, the darker skin defining them from the majority mestizo Mexican population. As they display the scars and wounds, the skin of the victims of the massacre in Acteal also becomes a place of memory. Wound up in the specific history of Chiapas that is reinforced in all the films, a complete sense of place and people is formed. Scarred skin and scarred place extend back from the present events to envelop five hundred years of struggle. Skin, landscape and history become one and the same: fragmented bodies on fragments of film.

In the testimony of Mariano Vázquez Ruiz the viscerality of the events emerge as his arm gestures suggest things falling or coming towards him, or perhaps he is gathering something in his arms. He states:

And the assassins were very close, shooting in bursts and since there were lots of people they fell into a pile. They were rolling downhill and they all made a pile there. I was underneath and everybody kept falling on top of me. I shouldered many dead and it was horrible. I was going with my little son and the bullets still didn’t reach us because we were in a small gorge but everybody else was falling because of the bullets... It is not a lie. They killed my wife and my two daughters and I saw it. I was wounded as well and my son lost fingers from one hand in that massacre...

His gestures could be the dead falling down on top of him or they could be his way of gathering them up into his safe grasp. The sweeping shots of landscape that surround his testimony, his indigenous skin and the testimony of how that skin was scarred by bullets and death all come together in a filmic gesture that suggests either a crushing weight or a gentle and all–encompassing gathering up of the fragile and weak.

355 Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagener, Film Theory, p. 109.
Vivian Sobchack, accounting for the objective and subjective natures of the filmic experience, looks for the sensuous possibilities of film. Building on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological work on perception, she begins by asking, ‘what else is a film if not ‘an expression of experience by experience?’

More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience. A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood.356

Sobchack contends that perception and expression do not operate and resolve themselves in a dialectical synthesis, but rather, ‘in the simultaneity of subjective embodiment and objective enworldedness’.357 This coextensive subjectivity and objectivity is what thus allows intersubjectivity and an affinity between viewer and film in the act of viewing.

There is a self–conscious embodiment, leading to intersubjectivity, and as Allan Casebier explains, in phenomenology the object is never in the experience: ‘what appears to us in film experience guides perception to an independently existing object’.358 Wahlberg’s evocation of emotions and perceptions in film are also related back to cinema’s physical relation to the viewer. This is primarily through time and cinemas close association with music through its use of rhythm and tempo that connect directly to the nervous system and the beat of the heart. In this way, ‘[j]ust like music the ultimate cinematic expression would directly interact with the viewer’s emotions’.359

The tactile nature of film and memory also appeals to David McDougall. Enactive memory, ‘that most closely associated with emotion’, and represented in film through habitual physical actions could be seen to be the closest we can get to overlap. At this point editing becomes a crucial element in reproducing the effects of enactive thought. As McDougall explains:

Editing also creates imaginary geographies – cinematic landscapes of the mind in which we as spectators walk and take our bearings. It is one of the objectives of films

359 Malin Wahlberg, Documentary Time, p. 68.
of memory to create such a space, as analogues of the spatial dimensions of memory.\textsuperscript{360}

This focus on haptic perception is reinforced by studies into early cinema, as I have spelled out with the ‘cinema of attractions’, and the idea of the mass education of populations dealing with modern urban settings. As such the real and perceived distance between screen and audience mediated the relationship between citizen and the new, fast paced and technologically driven city environment. Endless metaphors are made between memory, mind, computers and media to the point that ‘[m]emory is unmoored yet dominated by media’.\textsuperscript{361} In such an environment, new modes and norms of distancing and proximity had to be established as well as new inequalities. As such, these films, which explore the marginalised and the dispossessed could be seen to be establishing new modes of contact.

Laura Marks takes as a starting point the ‘memories of the senses in order to represent the experiences of people living in diaspora’.\textsuperscript{362} Through the concepts of film’s materiality and the contact between screen and viewer, she suggests the tactile nature of film through vision, a ‘haptic visuality’.\textsuperscript{363} Through this a mimetic relationship between viewer and cinema is formed. Memory is held in the senses and cinema becomes a site from which issues of race, gender, multiculturalism and hybridity can be explored.\textsuperscript{364}

The intercultural cinema that Marks looks at thus offers up answers to ‘public and personal amnesia’.\textsuperscript{365} Marks believes that such cinema is not about historical veracity, but rather about ‘making history reveal what it was not able to say’.\textsuperscript{366} Through the memory of images, things and senses, the screen becomes a membrane and a contact zone.

In all four films the struggle between memory and history is central. Conflicting views raise the question of who is telling the truth, who has forgotten or who is lying. As I will show, the filmmakers themselves become actively involved in stressing their own views on top of the films, archives, interviews, and testimonies, but in this recognised space of trauma, the victim, aggressor, and bystander are not always easily identifiable. This leads to cinema’s relationship

\textsuperscript{360} David McDougall, ‘Films of Memory’, \textit{Visual Anthropology Review}, 8, 1, 1992, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{363} Laura U. Marks, \textit{The Skin of Film}, p. xi.
\textsuperscript{365} Laura U. Marks, \textit{The Skin of Film}, pp. 24-25.
\textsuperscript{366} Laura U. Marks, \textit{The Skin of Film}, p. 29.
to death, deception and illusion. As Mulvey points out a film moves from its initial stillness to the action of camera, subject and narrative only to return to ‘the aesthetics of stillness’:

Death as a trope that embodies the narrative’s stillness, its return to an inanimate form, extends to the cinema, as though the still frame’s association with death fuses into the death of the story, as though the beautiful automaton was to wind down into its inanimate, uncanny, form.\(^{367}\)

In this context, cinema stands out as a promising ‘technology of memory’ for Wahlberg: a possible tool with which to represent historical time and to invoke the experience of past events through recorded testimonies, compiled archival footage, and the presentation of other vestiges and imprints of historical importance. This she refers to as the ‘documentary quest’.\(^{368}\)

Wahlberg takes up the issues of time and image in documentary film and the largely ignored aesthetic and affective dimensions – themes usually reserved for fictional cinema. Such an analysis of film addresses what she sees as documentary’s ability to offer up ‘sublime representations of time, history and memory’.\(^{369}\) This is where the conquest of lands and peoples coincides with the quest of the documentary, where the imagining of conquest meets the image.

Film, and particularly documentary film, has a problematic yet intricate relationship to history and historical representation where the ‘phenomenology of the image as imprint and record fuses with the classical index argument’.\(^{370}\) This index argument, which links documentary to ideas of veracity or truth, is thus expanded to include the concepts of desire, imagination, image and time in the cinematic experience.

Through the selection of images and their juxtapositioning, combined with the idea of duration in regard to editing, documentary films can become suggestive of our relationship to both the material and existential concepts of history and memory. The trace, however, also allows for a drift towards imagination and the possible betrayal of veracity. Just like contact and the moment of mimetic play, synthesis can slip into conquest and truth into fantasy. At the same time, the possibility of the sublime moment of revelation is always at hand.

\(^{367}\) Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, p. 70.
\(^{368}\) Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p. 102.
\(^{369}\) Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p. x.
\(^{370}\) Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p. 3.
Las Abejas

From the sublime to the saintly, human senses need to be verified. To feel, hear, touch, or see, means nothing if they cannot be made sense of. We all know what the earth feels like, what a child looks like, and what a gunshot sounds like, because our experiences of these things have been verified through our contact with other people. One can hear a gunshot but it is only through our experience within society that we can put a name to it and communicate an idea. If we cannot share the experience, the sound becomes disconnected to the gun and the body that drops dead as the noise reverberates through the surroundings. In the moment of violence that breaks from the mundane it seems that we need to check if our senses have not malfunctioned: to qualify if that sound really did come from that gun and if the body that dropped dead really did so.

The testimonies from the survivors in the immediate aftermath of the massacre in Acteal reveal a process of corroboration. The witness to the witness becomes a sounding board. In these dialogues between the witness, the secondary witness, and the broader community, some context, some sense, or history, can be made. The irrational can be rationalised. The dream or nightmare can be brought back down to earth. For a moment there can be understanding, or in this case, injustice can be resolved and made right by a communion with God himself.

Time, places, and numbers seek to locate and quantify the horror and barbarity of the event. The survivors appeal to some sense of order, whether for themselves or in the hope that by ordering and reporting the facts, justice will be served. Compare this to the way the testimonies inevitably wander from facts to the incomprehensible horror and violence of the attack. Specific details of movements and actions jump to ponderous reflection on the tragedy or to direct blame for the fatalities. Perhaps in these three areas we can come to understand how memory helps to order or create meaning around the past; from what was to what could have been.

Factual details place the past within a real place and time understandable to everyone. Reflections on the tragedy seek to place the past in a cultural or social context in which it can be compared to other experiences and through which it can be communicated to others. By seeking for someone or something that is responsible for what happened, in the name of ‘justice’, the past is brought into the present and future and takes part in some kind of continuum.
The massacre is sometimes portrayed as being inevitable, at other times it is said that no one expected it. It is blamed on concrete factors such as the price of coffee and political power, and abstract ideas such as justice, peace, and democracy. It is also hinted at that the violence was neither based on concrete nor on abstract objectives. Through the testimonies, the madness and bestiality of the massacre surfaces.

The testimonies reveal a space in which everything that is meant to signify order in reality represents chaos. The only consistency is in the horror. In this reality people are killed for working, and children are saved by the dead.

Out of this space comes the power of the word, and specifically the name. The testimonies name everyone, the dead, the assassins, and the responsible politicians. Names work both ways. The witnesses name the dead and those responsible and the authorities take down the names of those who speak out. Words and names become both weapons and weaknesses. The exact power that lies behind these names and words is difficult to know, but there is a force that drives all those involved in the events to name.

As archival footage plays of the burial of the dead, the voice of Zedillo returns, his image is layered with wild and naked flames. From his podium he states:

> Violence is by definition a criminal act and that is what occurred yesterday in Acteal, a cruel, absurd and unacceptable criminal act to which the only response can be the most severe application of justice.

The flames that have been superimposed on his image engulf the dead, the words of justice, and the symbols of the republic.

From this climax, the film turns to the analysis of the experts, the members of the NGO, FrayBa, Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, the priest Miguel Chanteau, General Gallardo, and journalist Ricardo Rocha. Interviewed in their offices, they detail the lead–up to the massacre, the events of the day, and the subsequent failures of the authorities. While supporting the testimony of the victims, they paint a picture of the belligerent nature of the authorities, up to the president.

Here memory of the event extends beyond the personal experience to the larger context of the counterinsurgency. While all these ‘experts’ were in some way involved with the communities at the time of the massacre, language and memory is something quite different.
Rather than memory theirs are historical explanations. It is the point at which memory turns into history, and as such provides a significant juxtaposition.

Once again, the film uses newspaper headlines from the time of the event, scrolling through a dozen headlines from national papers and magazines, signalling the historical nature of the event.

At this point, there is a rupture. From testimony, that which happened, the film jumps to that which is happening. On the tenth anniversary of the massacre, a reunion is held in Acteal, in which the community gathers with media and supporters to reignite the memory and struggle for justice. The construction of the amphitheatre for the reunion is documented as the community holds cultural events to support a ‘national encounter against impunity’. As such the memory of that past becomes the action in the present and the community expands from its insular beginnings to embrace ideas of the nation. This commemoration marks a point in the film in which the discourse of memory and hope converts into action, the legends of the ancestors become grounded in the present.

And so, the catechist returns to his story of the twins:

So what did the twins finally do? They showed their powers by killing dogs and bringing them back to life, they burnt houses and rebuilt them. But the lords of Xibalba, who are the masters of the death, found out and they sent for the twins, but they answered, ‘we don’t know anything, we are not important enough to meet the “king”’. When they finally came to the ‘king’ he asked them to show him their powers. He never thought that they were the twins, that he must kill them and exterminate them. The lord of Xibalba asked the twins to kill themselves and bring themselves back to life. So they did it. The lord of Xibalba admiring all those marvels asked the twins, ‘kill us and make us live again’. But since they were enemies they killed them, took out their hearts and didn’t revive them. That’s how peace came to the world. I compare that to the wisdom of our elders. They say that if you hurt somebody there will be consequences coming upon you. I compare this to what happened in Acteal. The massacre brought peace. Although our brothers did not kill others, they were killed with their arms crossed; their only felony was to tell the truth that they didn’t agree with killing their brothers. If our Priista and paramilitary brothers could think properly, if they would reflect and reconsider; peace is also for them […]. They thought that if they killed us, we wouldn’t raise our voices any longer, and that the people of the Las Abejas and Zapatistas would no longer continue their struggle […].
With the story continued, we return to images of the village, people marching, families gathered and the local choir singing their song of resistance. The struggle of the ancestors has converted into the struggle of the people, a struggle defined by hope and memory.

This leads us to the next chapter and the issues of history, quest and conquest in Mexico and Chiapas. As we have seen, documentary film has struggled with its own issues of quest and representing history. These struggles in representation, however, throw a light on the broader struggles of remembering and narrating history. So we will go back to the beginning of conquest in Mexico, to find out how past events and interpretations can help us to understand the films and how the films help us to understand the past.
4 – Conquest

Circling La Selva

Lacanja: 50 years ago the American missionaries arrived in Lacanja and taught the Lacandon Indians about God. In the 1970s the government gave them land. Their ancestors used to believe in the spirits of the jungle, they believed a certain birdcall was the sound of the devil. So an old man at the crossroad tells me while I wait for a bus. His mother didn’t speak Spanish and as a child he hunted with a bow and arrow, now they hunt with guns although the road and all the cars scare the animals away. He tells me that when he was twelve he got lost while hunting and went for two days without food or water. I think to myself that a hunter should be able to find food and water in the jungle but I don’t say it. I ask about the politics of the area, he tells me that they don’t get along with the people from Nueva Palestina, a town half an hour away, they want to cut and burn the forest while the Lacandon communities try to protect it. They also have problems with the police and military checkpoints that are looking for illegal Guatemalan immigrants and sometimes confuse them, but now the police and military know who they are. ‘And the Zapatistas?’ They have no interest in them, here nothing happened but there are more military around since then. The town has been here for generations, since the time of his mother’s mother’s mother’s mother. He is a Lacandon Indian first, then Mexican. I mention that this part of Mexico must have been one of the last parts to be conquered, ‘así es’ he replies. That’s the way it is.

Comitán: Entering Comitán I am greeted by the tourist police. In a town with no tourism a band of uniformed characters patrol the streets with little maps, accosting anyone with a backpack and hauling them off to a hotel or museum. After the isolation of the jungle this town has a quiet desperation about it, you cannot cross the main plaza without being stopped by someone wanting to speak to you. A migrant worker recently returned from the USA wants to practice his English with me; ‘the blacks are all thieves’ he tells me, then asks if Australia is near Russia. I guess it is. In the hotel the buzzing of the insects is replaced by the screaming of children in a place so sparse and dirty that it seems the wicked invention of a nightmare. The bathroom is so dirty that after a month without a shower I decide to wait a few more days. The paper–thin walls remind me of a story by Julio Cortázar, La Puerta Condenada. The cries of a baby
throughout the night disturb the protagonist who decides to confront his neighbour. There is no baby yet the cries continue, whether they are the product of the imagination, of a ghost, or the protagonist’s insanity we never know. Such poorly built hotels or apartment blocks play wicked tricks. Sounds come from below and above, from the side and bouncing off walls. Their origin is always impossible to trace, as is their veracity. Silence is as disturbing as the screams.

The plaza of Comitán is the Mexican colonial past brought into the present. The rich landowners parade up and down, occupying huge tables in the restaurants, where the usually boisterous staff turn as meek as sheep as the patron approaches. The patron plays the man of the people roll, shaking hands and joking with the staff, he is one of them but his posture and gaze remind them that he owns them. If they play the role of grateful and pleasant slave they will be rewarded, a smile on their face and their head always lowered.

An old American approaches me in a restaurant; he is desperate to speak English with someone. How anyone could end up here I can’t figure out. He has spent the last nine years in Guatemala, putting together a dictionary in six different languages of all the goods and services imaginable. He only speaks English and has pieced it together by using other dictionaries. No one will publish it. Now he is wandering around Mexico killing time and trying to figure out whether or not his life has been wasted and what it all means. The next day I see him again and he repeats the same stories as the day before.

Belisario Domínguez is probably the most distinguished figure to come from Comitán. He has his own museum. He was assassinated during the Revolution for defending the ideals of reform. One hundred years later those reforms haven’t arrived to Comitán, but everyone loves him anyway.

Another American approaches me in the plaza, ‘Are you American?’, ‘No, Australian’. ‘Oh, they’re OK, you having a good time?’ He is in constant war with the local Mexicans, he hates them and they hate him. He has been in regular fights with them and they once tried to run him over for being a gringo he tells me. He received five thousand pesos from a local human rights agency as a result. His prostitute girlfriend in Tijuana is dying from hepatitis and is on the run from the law. He tells me he has paid for a boy to walk again and for a blind woman to see again. He is thinking about going back to Tijuana where he knows a nice place three blocks from the ‘whorehouse’, or going to Honduras for a black girl. He tells me the other American I had met earlier is still a bit unnerved about something that happened in Guatemala with an underage girl. Meanwhile the Mariachi’s stand beside the restaurants as the sun goes down, waiting for the clients to come along.
Las Margaritas: Nothing much seems to happen in Las Margaritas, people endlessly circle the main plaza. Tonight they are voting on the local beauty pageant. There are state elections coming up as well, but the potential ‘Miss Margaritas’ seem to have had access to greater campaign funding and their posters dominate the public space. Everything else in Las Margaritas gives one the impression of a migration. Every three seconds boys yell out ‘Comitán, Comitán’, advertising the destination of the multiple bus operators. There only seems to be one destination but they scream it out as if it were the apocalypse. Other signs point to the most important migrations; busses direct to Tijuana and Western Union offices. The offices are next to each other and it is not hard to understand why. Workers leave to cross to the USA from Tijuana and the money comes home via Western Union. Wetbacks exchanged for greenbacks.

Contact, interpretation and narrative

In these observations we can see the staging of colonialism, or rather, a contemporary globalised neo–colonialism. Distant powers supply gods and gift land to the people who already possess it. Money and labour flow in and out and this flow governs everyone and everything. Thus the Other is either a prostitute or a thief, either they are paid or they steal, especially the blacks. The patron bestows his graces on the servile masses, the patron saint stands over a town that would make him/her blush with shame, and the holy fools descend en masse. In this case the Americans: the first speaks six tongues while only understanding one and the second is Christ like in his charity yet full of hatred for those he helps. Meanwhile an aesthetic of terror appears to me in the billboards that advertise both the election of Miss Margaritas and the governor. And then there is me, the privileged nomad, simultaneously desiring detachment and objectivity along with connection and understanding. This forms the colonial narrative. The events and actions seem random yet they contain their own logic.

In his explanation of what makes a tragedy Aristotle tells us:

Tragedy is an imitation of a complete, i.e. whole, action, possessing a certain magnitude […]. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an end is that which does
itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it.\textsuperscript{371}

The plot must be ordered and self-contained, and while the plot has a beginning, middle and end, the actual play or artistic work may take place at any point along the imaginary time continuum of events. As such, while a murder may be the dramatic moment, the work can begin before, during or after the event. What is essential is magnitude: ‘they should have a certain length, and this should be such as can readily be held in memory’, in which through probability or necessity there is ‘a change from good fortune to bad fortune, or from bad fortune to good fortune’.\textsuperscript{372} Thus to realise the logic of the above-mentioned observations and of the films we must travel back to the beginning.

In his exploration of the literary origins of violence, John Docker follows on from tragedy and early histories to the biblical story of the Exodus and Virgil’s \textit{Aeneid}, introducing the narrative of the victim in which ‘the belief that earlier bondage, persecution and suffering justifies later violence, conquest and destruction’.\textsuperscript{373} This narrative he sees as being disastrous to human affairs, a justification for indigenous dispossession and an example of the victim becoming aggressor.

These stories of travel and reversals in fortune also bring with them their own implications of a civilizing dialectic. As Docker suggests, civilisation too ‘makes journeys’ and is in constant motion.

Civilization always comes from elsewhere. Here the journey of Aeneas and the Trojans, as escapees from the destroyed city of Troy who proceed to settlement and empire-building in another place, to which they bring culture, learning and law, is exemplary.\textsuperscript{374}

The founding of Rome and the birth of the Roman Empire thus become the ultimate reference point for all subsequent acts of settler colonialism, where the just arrived conquerors portray themselves as the bringers of civilisation and the heirs of ancient Rome. Not only that but through either God or Jupiter ‘divine sanction is given to conquest, colonization and genocide’.\textsuperscript{375}

\textsuperscript{373} John Docker, \textit{The Origins of Violence}, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{374} John Docker, \textit{The Origins of Violence}, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{375} John Docker, \textit{The Origins of Violence}, p. 139.
The action in the case of this thesis is the conquest and colonisation of Mexico, an event that followed on from the reconquest of Spain by the Catholic Kings against the Moors. Even though the tragic reversals revolve around the events of 1994 and 1997, they become concentrated episodes of a greater tragic event. The beginning of this tragedy starts with contact between Europe and the Americas. As Steven Stern argues, the arrival of Columbus ‘symbolises a historical reconfiguration of world magnitude’, in which ‘the fusion of native American and European histories into one history marked the beginning of the end of isolated stagings of human drama’. Tzvetan Todorov locates the discovery and conquest as one of the most extraordinary events of human history. As well as being the greatest genocide, it is also the most incredible encounter of civilisations. It is, as he remarks, the moment in which ‘men have discovered the totality of which they are a part, whereas hitherto they formed a part without a whole’.

Clearly the ramifications of such an expedition could never have been foreseen or understood by any individual or community, either European or Mesoamerican, yet the histories of these first contacts and actions have come to condemn and condone entire continents of people in a way that echoes down to the present day. In this sense it would seem appropriate to extend the title of Acteal: 10 years to 500 Years of Impunity: And how many more?

The stories of invasion, betrayal, alliances, bloody violence, and conversion that make up the discovery and conquest of New Spain (Mexico) and the Americas have long defied a final and definitive interpretation or narrative. The arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas in 1492 and the defeat of the Aztec empire in 1521 by Hernan Cortés are still problematic in terms of naming and ascribing meaning to the events. The ‘discovery’ of America for example, was in 1958 reinterpreted by Edmundo O’Gorman as the ‘invention’ of America. The ‘invention’ of America recognised the process, on the European side, of creating meaning from the ‘discovery’ and ‘conquest’ of the Americas.

376 For pre-Columbian histories in Mexico, see Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, Mexico: Taurus, 2005, Alan Knight, Mexico: From the Beginning to the Spanish Quest, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
Along with the geographic discovery of the Americas came the conquest of the indigenous peoples of America, the ‘Indians’. Some five hundred years later the conquest has reinvented itself as an ‘encounter’ of two civilisations. Discovery/invention and conquest/encounter illustrate the continuing tension over what happened all those years ago and what those events of discovery and conquest mean today. Peering back to look at the lives of the two men who are most emblematic of the discovery and conquest, Columbus and Cortés, we can begin to see the language, philosophy and science that would define the colonial era. The discovery of the lands and peoples changed the conception of the world on both sides of the Atlantic, and this process of reimagining the world is, in the words of Mexican novelist and essayist Carlos Montemayor, ‘still without a final solution’.  

The arrival of Hernan Cortés in Mexico was a major advance in the colonisation of the Americas and introduced a new concept of conquest. While Columbus represented an older order of mystical and philosophical conduct in his discovery of the Americas, Cortés would come to represent everything that was new and brash about the ‘New World’. As Stern suggests, for all the expansive geographical ‘discovery’ linked to Columbus and Cortés, the real object of discovery was the self and the Other: ‘The conquest confrontations promoted not acts of being, but acts of becoming: politically and religiously charged acts of self–discovery and self–definition’.  

Thus: the tragedy of misrecognitions, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations would come back to haunt both the victor and the victim as essentialist ideas were projected onto the protagonists of conquest and resistance as if they were competing aspects of the human condition.

Alongside Columbus and Cortés perhaps we can add Nettie Wild, the director of the film A Place Called Chiapas, as representative of another form of questing and conquest(ing) in the New World with the modern weapon of the camera. Surely now the power to create and distribute images in and out of regions can have just as much influence over lives as conquest and colonialism as far as the definition and redefinition of identity is concerned. Indeed, the history of photography and film share a close relationship with travel, conquest and empire as illustrated earlier by Poole.  

As I add Wild to this list then I must also add myself as

382 For excellent essays on the moment of Colombus leading to current patronising, moralistic and Eurocentric imaginings of the Third World through a whole armoury of media tools, including documentary film, see, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media, London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
researcher and privileged nomad, as well as the viewers of such films must add themselves as consumers of such productions.

The original ‘clash of cultures’, as we might call the conquest of Mexico, was a phenomenal singular event. The size and range of Aztec power in many ways rivalled if not eclipsed that of Spain. As we can see in the writings of the conquistador Bernal Díaz, the city of Tenochtitlan was awe-inspiring in both its size and beauty to the extent that he notes how, ‘we did not know what to say, or if this was real what we saw before our eyes’. The military defeat of the Aztecs by Cortés was no less impressive. The conquistadores imagined the way in which they would be remembered by future generations as the warriors who defeated the great Aztec empire with only a ‘handful of men’. Not only was this conquest a military victory but an event that would change the way that man saw himself in the world: ordinary men could change the very course of history.

At the same time that it began, the great grab for land and legacy also represented the first crack in Spain’s control over the men who conquered in its name. The city of Tenochtitlan fell to the Spaniards in 1521. Cortés, at this great moment for the Spanish crown, was on the run from Spanish authorities. Authorisation for his voyage had been cancelled, yet he sailed on, and after arriving on the Mexican coastline he would be constantly looking forward, searching for the city of the Aztecs, as well as looking back, hoping that the authorities were not too close behind. To some extent, the success of his conquest was due to his status as fugitive. He could not turn back, so he could only go forward.

This attempt to get rich in the name of the crown while simultaneously in defiance of it influenced the very narratives that conquistadores such as Cortés and Díaz wrote. The letters, journals and diaries kept by these men were not only to serve the annals of history, but were more specifically written to make legal claim to land and wealth. While celebrated for creating a new type of historical realism, in contrast to the bureaucratic writing of technocrats and the mystical writing of the clergy, Mexican historian Enrique Florescano sees them as primarily complaining and begging to the crown. Cortés had to get himself out of trouble and for Díaz the desire to write his memoirs came from ‘the compulsion to make known his merits and services and demand the deserved retribution’. And so this new form of narrative based on detailed description and observation, rather than interpretation, seems to have emerged out of petty quarrels and selfish concerns.

384 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 301.
The legacy they sought to bequeath was very much material and earthy. Tzvetan Todorov, whose groundbreaking work on the conquest of America I will follow closely, suggests that what mattered to Columbus more than anything else was recognition from Europe while Cortés would ultimately seek recognition in America. This movement from a European narrative into an American narrative would allow him to act, according to Todorov, and react to events on the ground in a brutally effective way, where the end results would justify the means, and which would set the guidelines for subsequent conquest on the continent.

At this point it becomes possible to see the how the conquest has come to be interpreted. Forced to move forward, Cortés had to improvise in every situation; the time to sit back and interpret, the time to ponder the significance of events and signs was not there. In this predicament Cortés did something very different to Columbus, according to Todorov: instead of interpreting signs, he deliberately looked for information and utilised it.385 In this regard he can be seen to represent modern man. With the skills he had and the information he obtained he was able to overcome incredible odds. Cortés’ contribution to conquest and colonisation was his ability to understand the singularity of events and how to manipulate them. Rather than interpreting events and signs through the lens of archaic European ideas, he recognised the difference of the Indians in order to conquer them.

These men, and Cortés specifically, are, as Todorov argues, ‘the first to have a political and even historical consciousness of his actions’.386 This event would signal the beginning of the individual’s potential in America, the potential to act independently and create one’s own destiny. In terms of traveller’s tales and storytelling, something we must remember when returning to the films, a precedent was set for both the grandeur and historical singularity of events. With the tales of knights and the age of chivalry in their hearts, they set forth with the consciousness of their own legacy ever present in their minds.387 The conquest was not only of other peoples and places, but also over history, time and memory.

The advantages that Cortés may or may not have had must be, of course, compared to those of his adversary. The strategies of Cortés were successful in as much as he defeated the Aztecs: he won the war. In war strengths are only strengths if they correspond to the

opponent’s weaknesses, in this sense, the weaknesses of Montezuma and the Aztecs, according to Todorov, can be condensed into their inability to understand the singularity of the event unfolding before their eyes. He explains how, much like Columbus in his explorations, the Aztecs interpreted events through their existing belief structures: ‘it is somehow domesticated, absorbed into an order of already existing beliefs’.\footnote{388 Tzvetan Todorov, \textit{The Conquest of America}, p. 74.} The Aztecs were doing what they had always done. War was not unknown to them and colonial rule was what they excelled at, yet the Spaniards proved to be an opponent they could not incorporate into their systematic ways of knowing. As Todorov tells us, ‘an overdetermined world will necessarily be an overinterpreted world as well’.\footnote{389 Tzvetan Todorov, \textit{The Conquest of America}, p. 64.}

Here I must pause: the interpretation that Todorov provides, as sophisticated as it is, starts us down the road of cultural and racial essentialisation. While he often condemns and mocks the Spaniards for their cruelty and violence, the fate of the Aztecs, and by extension the entire indigenous population of the Americas, is eternally subject to their primitive and exotic foibles. As Stern explains, addressing the conquest as a problem of ‘cultural contact’, ‘we may conclude that the main tragedy lay not so much in sordid questions of power and exploitation, but in culturally preordained failures of understanding’. However, he continues, such an analysis, ‘simply condemns choice targets for lacking the cross–cultural wisdom that eludes most of us’.\footnote{390 Steve J. Stern. ‘Paradigms of Conquest’, pp. 24-25.}

As such, following the argument of Todorov, the more advanced communication skills of Cortés and the superstitions of Montezuma can explain away the entire history of conquest and colonialism, ignoring the nuances and examples of Spanish misunderstanding. As any war can illustrate, it is easy to condemn the loser for simplistic and ineffective stratagem, in this case however it has gone on to mark an entire civilisation. For Todorov, Montezuma could only interpret events through what had already been, ‘here only what has already been Word can become Act’: in a cyclical cosmology manifested in the calendar and sacred time and space of creation, the present and future were repetitions of what had already been.\footnote{391 Tzvetan Todorov, \textit{The Conquest of America}, p. 66.} The only way to deal with present events was to seek answers from the past.\footnote{392 This does not mean that Mesoamericans had no concept or understanding of the individual’s importance or historical significance. Florescano points out the many ‘forms and manipulations and representation of the historic reality used by the governing class in the era of splendour of the classic Maya’. Enrique Florescano, \textit{Memoria Mexicana}, p. 86.} An event as extraordinary as the arrival of the Spaniards could not be incorporated into their belief systems, therefore,
instead of dealing with the Spaniards as men; they could only be dealt with as gods. While for the Europeans history is created in a ‘profane time and space’, for the Mesoamericans it is the opposite, ‘the fact that it has weight is due to a significance that transcends the time and space in which it occurs’.393

In this regard prophecies were based just as much on what has happened as what will happen. It is as much memory as it is prophecy, and it collided with European linear time, ‘the one–directional time of apotheosis and fulfilment’.394 The European/Christian tradition, allowed for a forward movement and development until the final judgement. The world had a creation and will have a final end, whereas for the Aztecs the world consisted of cyclical creation and destruction in which they forever remain the victims of history.

The tragic quest

Inga Clendinnen pulls this interpretation apart to reveal a series of misunderstandings that have gone on to shape conquest and colonialism in Mexico and the Americas. What she reveals is an Aztec world where, although the calendar and omens played a role, action and reaction to Spanish tactics developed throughout the battle for Tenochtitlan, and ‘the identification of the recurrent in the apparently contingent was very much an after–the–event diagnosis, not an anterior paralyzing certitude’.395 The actions of Cortés also reveal a mind just as confused as any Aztec. Warfare for the two opposing sides meant different things, and more importantly, so did victory.

While Aztec influence extended widely throughout Mesoamerica, Clendinnen points to the ‘European hallucination’ of an Aztec empire. It was rather based on a system ‘held together by the tension of mutual repulsion’396 and war was played out under a closely regulated sense of honour and prestige where the best warriors were captured and sacrificed rather than killed on the battlefield. Towns and cities were just as quickly discarded as they were captured and every arrow and every blow was guided by a strict sense of honourable competition. A battle between uneven opponents was not a battle worth fighting and the siege of a city and its civilian population was unthinkable.

396 Inga Clendinnen, “’Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty’”, p. 78.
The Aztec defenders, however, quickly came to understand that they were not fighting under normal circumstances, while Cortés would have been well aware of the Aztec mentality through his experiences in fighting his way to the city and from Indian allies. The resulting annihilation of the city, however, seems to have left both sides traumatised and confused by the other’s actions to such a degree that it still resonates today. Clendinnen describes how Cortés was changed after the assault on Mexico into something of a tragic hero:

It is possible that as he ran through his degraded routine of stratagems in those last days Cortés was brought to glimpse something of the Indian view of the nature and quality of the Spanish warrior. His privilege as victor was to survey the surreal devastation of the city that had been the glittering prize and magnificent justification for his insubordination, and for the desperate struggles and sufferings over two long years, now reduced by perverse, obdurate resistance to befouled rubble, its once magnificent lords, its whole splendid hierarchy, to undifferentiated human wreckage. That resistance had been at once ‘irrational’, yet chillingly deliberate.397

In the face of the Spanish methods of ‘dishonourable’ conduct, the Aztecs seem to have taunted them by making cannon fodder of themselves and acting out the most brave, crazy, and honourable deaths that they could. Rather than surrendering, they became bolder and thus highlighted the barbarity of the Spanish, ultimately leading them to destroy the thing they most desired, the city. Faced with his own violence and cruelty, Cortés was to have one more shock that upended any sense of understanding.

Well aware of the honour system of capture and sacrifice amongst the Mesoamericans, Cortés then witnessed the brutal and ecstatic violence of his Tlaxcalan allies against the Aztecs in defiance of everything he had come to expect. The Tlaxcalans were the Aztec’s greatest enemy and had suffered terribly by them. The opportunity to take revenge was rare and the extent of their rage was something of an anomaly. For Cortés, however, this was a vision of hell. As Clendinnen describes,

[t]here he saw ‘fierce and unnatural cruelty’, an unnatural indifference to suffering, an unnatural indifference to death: a terrifying, terminal demonstration of ‘otherness’, and of its practical and cognitive unmanageability. Todorov has called Cortés a master in human communication. Here the master had found his limit.398

397 Inga Clendinnen, “‘Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty’”, p. 92.
398 Inga Clendinnen, “‘Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty’”, pp. 93-94.
Here is what seems to me an example of Zeus’ law and an uncanny resemblance to Troy. In striving for greatness Cortés has transgressed the limits of acceptable conflict and when this transgression has come back, refracted through mimesis in the excesses of the Aztecs and Tlaxcalans, he has remained shocked to the core and left with a ruin. In such a context, mimesis does not come back as a mirror image as such, but rather a distorted and befouled exaggeration that is barely recognisable. The battle for Tenochtitlan therefore becomes the perfect manifestation of the tragic event. In the moment of victory Cortés destroys the very thing he desires. If we think of this as coinciding with the moment in which man recognises himself and his Other in the word then the roots of modernity and globalisation are haunted by tragedy.

From this point we also have the ignition of the civilizing dialectic. In an apparent act of mimetic response, the Aztecs see the cowardliness of the Spanish and respond with almost mythical self–sacrifice. The Tlaxcalans see the violence of the Spanish that unleashes their own inner rage. Both responses confound the Spanish, moving from what seemed like a potentially fruitful and positive early contact to utter confusion and fear.

Not understanding the social, cultural and ritualistic context of the Other’s mimesis, mimesis itself is adopted and mimed, leading to the ‘interlocking dream–images guiding the reproduction of social life no less than the production of sacred powers’. This ‘colonial mirror of production’ is for Taussig where the ‘mimicry by the colonizer of the savagery imputed to the savage’ creates a spiralling descent towards violence and exploitation based on misrecognition, and ‘[w]hat is faithfully captured is a power’.400

Clendinnen concludes her analysis of this first contact and violent conflict:

If for Indian warriors the lesson that their opponents were barbarians was learned early, for Spaniards, and for Cortés, that lesson was learned most deeply only in the final stages, where the Mexicans revealed themselves as unamenable to ‘natural’ reason, and so unamenable to the routines of management of one’s fellow men. Once that sense of unassuageable otherness has been established, the outlook is bleak indeed.401

The ideas about the imperative to act, mixed or synchronised with the cyclical calendar and the conception of destruction and recreation of the indigenous Mesoamericans, would also

---

399 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 65.
400 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 62.
401 Inga Clendinnen, “Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty”, p. 94.
have their consequences. Florescano warns: ‘after the conquest these ideas will reappear with force in messianic and apocalyptic forms, interwoven with the scatological ideas of Europe and Christianity’.402

The conquest of Chiapas

The Mesoamericans were not, however, the only ones to be going around in circles. Brian Gollnick illustrates how in an early history of the conquest of the Lacandon region written by Juan de Villagutierre Stomayor in 1701, the Spanish mission of religious conversion played out an endless repetition against native resistance, creating ‘a narrative of loops that justify the same story of military and missionary failures’.403 The Spaniards came in the name of peace, yet were accompanied by the traditional enemies of the Lacandons and preceded by stories of violence. When the Lacandons react with pre-emptive and prudent hostility, there is incredulity.

Every encounter between Spaniard and native is treated as a first contact, devoid of context and history. ‘The history of colonial power is thus erased in order to construct the implicit, unquestioned (and unquestionable) goodwill of the Spanish expedition’.404 Thus, every future foray sets out with equal parts innocence and suspicion. Every missionary is convinced of his own good will, yet every village that receives them sees another potential conflict or deceit. Here we see the desire for every traveller to see him/herself as the first to enter a particular space. From here we move into the jungle ...

A full moon, howling dogs and military vehicles emerge from the mist. We jump to a crucifix and indigenous peoples praying by candlelight. The narrator begins the story of the film A Place Called Chiapas.

During the time of Christopher Columbus, there was a famous debate between a theologian and a priest. The theologian argued that Indians were natural born slaves, the priest replied that a man who grows rich enslaving Indians is a son of Satan. It is not clear who won the debate. But the Spanish continued their conquest of a new world beyond their wildest dreams.

402 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 132.
403 Brian Gollnick, Reinventing the Lacandón, p. 28.
404 Brian Gollnick, Reinventing the Lacandón, p. 35.
This haunting beginning suggests the journey into another world and another time, a mystical and mythical place of timeless fear and enslavement. From the shadows the narrator continues: ‘Five hundred years later, a mestizo, a Mexican of mixed blood, rides out of the jungle and onto the Internet [...]’.

The film jumps from this distant image to the computer screen, funky music reveals shots of the Internet pages belonging to the Zapatistas. The screen shows images of Marcos, enlarged by a click of the mouse until his face and eyes become pixelated beyond recognition. While Marcos recites his poetry, the funk is turned up on soundtrack and the title appears above a mist–covered landscape: A Place Called Chiapas.

This first sequence sets up two of the great legacies of conquest and colonialism. Firstly: conquest and the uneasy classification of Indians, secondly and following on from the first: the uneasy positing of indigenous peoples between the ancient and the modern. The images of shrouded landscapes and religious ritual remind us of the atemporal, the military remind us of the unended conquest, while the internet images and music place us in a familiar and comfortable present recognisable to all. The focus on the screen reveals the idea of technology as central in overcoming these dilemmas of the past, a tool of classification that may ultimately resolve the debate between the theologian and priest.

The image of Marcos is enlarged, mouse–click after mouse–click, to show in more and more detail the eyes of the masked man, the man beyond recognition, but what this sequence reveals is the endpoint of the technology, the final digital image of ones and twos, a binary opposite. The first query, however, refers to a mysterious debate over the nature of the Indian. Despite the narrator’s evocative suggestion of intrigue and conspiracy around secretive theological discussions, a great deal is known about such debates. As we will shortly see, both in Spain and New Spain, legal and theological matters were recorded in great detail. This raises the question then of why the filmmaker is deliberately making a mystery out of something that is actually well known? I would suggest that she is miming the supposed mystical and mysterious nature she attributes to Chiapas.

This is also evident in the referral to the Zapatistas and the Internet. Here is a fascination with the idea of ‘primitive Indians’ using the latest technology, when in fact it is the filmmaker herself who has a primitive fascination with technology. In this MTV style montage of images and music it is obvious that it is the director and editor who are getting carried away with the joy of juxtaposition and mimesis in film, while the Zapatistas, like any political or military force would do, are evidently getting on with communicating their propaganda. And so the film
reveals its trajectory, a journey into the unknown world of Chiapas, armed with the history of indigenous stereotypes of good and bad, noble and childlike, and a fascination with technology. The quest to encapsulate ends in pixilation.

As the title suggests, this film will itself become an expedition of cataloguing and naming – an attempt to grasp the Other. As Wild herself reveals, it is primarily about a quest: ‘will Nettie get the interview with Marcos?’405 The voice–over, a ‘voice of god’ narration, guides us through the journey, an omnipotent voice of reason that asks the questions and gives the answers while naming the people and the places. The voice sets the scene, supported by the images, suggesting the mystery and the mysticism while recollecting its journey into the place called Chiapas. After the title a map locates us in the south of Mexico and the voice reveals itself and its relation to Chiapas:

I come from Canada, Mexico’s free trade partner. In Canada we debated the free trade agreement, here in Chiapas they went to war over it. That was in 1994, since then there has been an unsettled peace.

Images of the indigenous people and military vehicles are accompanied by panpipes as the narrator describes her relation to the people. The camera focuses on a woman. As she gesticulates, the narrator quotes her: ‘Give me twenty pesos for the picture’, says this Tzotzil Indian woman, ‘and twenty pesos for my daughter, and twenty more for my son’. The camera pans to the children who stare back – to the woman’s call for alms neither the camera nor the narrator respond – she interprets and quotes, but refuses to answer, remaining detached from the situation.

The locals are left to linger under the gaze of the lens, as the narrator seems to ponder for a split second what this could mean before continuing her confession. The telephoto lens zooms in on women carrying loads of wood on their heads, seemingly adding the weight of its gaze to the weight of their bundles. The confession goes on:

I am drawn to the Zapatistas with an uneasy excitement. I’m an outsider looking in at those that must change the world in order to survive it. As we near the village of La Realidad I find a Mexico living in fear, a country that has borders within borders. Approaching the rebel territory we are stopped by government officials.

In this fragment the narrator signals to the viewers the emotions that they should share with her, the sense of danger and excitement entailed in this crossing of borders to the other side. Reminiscent of the conquistadors’ diaries, all that passes before her eyes and the eye of the camera is taken in through a filter of wonder. The people and places don’t give up the right answers and so they are relegated to the realm of novelty and curiosity. The images are collected as traces of a world and a history that does not, and cannot make sense. Nonetheless, not unlike my fieldnotes, they are collected and archived as proof that she was there, and a legacy is created.

Another map appears on the screen to draw out the road to the town of La Realidad, signalled by three little Zapatista men: ‘La Realidad, in English it means reality. This is where the road stops and the rebellion began’. The narrator translates what she can while signalling moments of rupture and border. The camera captures a family sitting down to pose. The narrator explains to us who they are as they stare back at the camera. Rather than transgressing spatial boundaries it is more like a violent transgression of the Other’s body through the combined gaze of the camera and the narrator’s commentary. If the cameraman works as a surgeon, as suggested by Benjamin, then this is surgery with the patient under a local anaesthetic, staring back at us. They remain silent as the camera finds other subjects to observe: women cutting down a tree, an old woman shelling corn. The narrator continues to explain to us the conditions of health and poverty under which these silent people live.

Teresa tells me that when the gods created the Mayan Indians they called them the people of corn, the true people. The other people from another part of the world came and put the Mayans under their boot. But the Mayans said to themselves, \textit{ya basta}, enough, we will take ourselves underground and we will wait for the moment to rise up like corn.

The old woman, Teresa, stares back at the camera while the voiceover tells her story. We are reminded of the story told to us at the beginning by the narrator, of the theological debate. Once more the narrator continues the tradition of speaking of and for the indigenous peoples even when they are standing right in front of the camera with the ability to tell it themselves. These people are once again relegated to ghosts, (and we can see how ghosts don’t have to be dead) as the film jumps to Mexico City, having captured the images of the quaint Indians.

To the sounds of the marching band and images of fireworks over Mexico City the narrator gives us our history lesson and reveals the fundamental moment, the event, the cause and the crux of the matter. It is revealed as montage:
That moment came on New Year’s Eve 1993. In Mexico City, members of the ruling party were celebrating the New Year, the institutional revolutionary party had ruled Mexico for almost seventy years. The ruling party was celebrating their free trade agreement with Canada and the United States, it was to begin the following morning, the deal they said would launch Mexico into the first world. But this time they had made a mistake. To make way for free trade and large farms growing export crops, the ruling party stopped distributing land to campesinos like Teresa, now campesinos had nothing left to lose. As Mexico City celebrated, 1300 km to the south in Chiapas, squads of indigenous guerrilla soldiers moved out of the mountains.

And so the moment of triumph is once again thwarted and the violence of the free trade agreement provokes another moment of fierce and cruel response.

**Motives**

Todorov concludes that there are ‘narrative’ civilisations and ‘interpretive’ civilisations. The Europeans have the beginning and the end of their Christian narrative, to which they must fill in the middle, while the Mesoamericans are masters at interpreting the signs around them to which they must react accordingly. It is this advantage of action, according to Todorov, over reaction, which allowed the Spaniards to triumph, for it was they who set sail for the Indies and not the Aztecs for Europe. This would suggest that the narrative model of the Europeans came out on top, yet desire or need to interpret has evidently not been vanquished entirely.

Following the ideas of Bonfil Batalla, the imposition of ‘imaginary’ Mexico merely covers a dormant ‘profound’ Mexico and these imaginary and profound spaces also exist in the outsiders’ account of Mexico. While the conquest of the new world may have signified a split between faith and reason, the need to believe has not evaporated. Five hundred years later, as *A Place Called Chiapas* tells us, a mestizo man emerged from the jungle to lead an indigenous army and all the sureties of the modern world seemed to be turned upside down. While narrative, interpretation, faith and reason seem to be as confused as ever, the mythical, tragic and rational continue to mutually sustain each other.

The question thus becomes; why set off for distant lands? On the more functional level Columbus was searching for a passage to Asia, and the support from the Spanish crown was premised on the idea of financial gain. The pursuit of wealth is a key motive but it is not the only one. Columbus was a religious man who saw himself as a kind of crusader who would
bring the word of God to Asia. Not only was his aim to spread Christianity, his voyage was also inspired and guided by biblical texts rather than rational thought or empirical data. At the same time he was an explorer, the wealth gained from his exploration would be a celebration of his exploits and discoveries. Here we have the three key motives for discovery and conquest according to Todorov: the religious, financial, and the sublime. The third motive here, the sublime, is the aspect of discovery for discoveries sake, the pleasure in finding something new and the self-satisfaction attached to it.

Discovery for the sake of discovery and pure joy in the sublime also echoes the pleasure that Aristotle describes as fundamental to the human condition. As Taussig suggests, the synergism between beauty and terror becomes a force that could be ‘as much the motor of history as are the means of production of material life? Much like the mimetic play celebrated by Taussig, the quest for the sublime can function as much more than a necessary counterpoint to the burden of religious dogma and financial restraint. Indeed, Columbus’ exploration has been likened to Don Quixote for its sometimes absurd, crusading aspects combined with the delight of discovery. Quixote is also one of the favoured characters in the writing of Marcos. As quixotic as his adventure may have been, the motives for discovery and the subsequent interpretations of what was found would become indicative of colonial logic in the Americas, and this motive of sublime transcendence would be as crucial as any other.

However, in A Place, the stated motive of the quest is to capture Marcos. Obviously financial concerns on such a production are paramount, the activist/journalist sentiment is always present, and the sublime motive also finds its counterpart in the sublime possibilities of representing time, history, and memory in documentary film as outlined by Wahlberg: however, it is always through the prism of capturing Marcos and the suffering of Chiapas that we must see the film. As David Mosquera points out, there is in documentary an ever-growing predilection for the representation of the poor and marginalised, ‘the capturing of poverty through greater authenticity and intimate access, while arousing glimpses of empathy or social

---

407 Todorov places emphasis on Columbus’ delight in nature and the exaggerations he often makes, pointing to the pleasure of discovery as a counterweight to the practicalities of finding gold and converting Indians: ‘he seems to find in the activity in which he is most successful, the discovery of nature a pleasure that makes this activity self-sufficient; it ceases to have the slightest utility, and instead of a means becomes an end. Just as for modern man a thing, an action, or a being is beautiful only if it finds its justification in itself, for Columbus ‘to discover’ is an intransitive action’. Tzvetan Todorov, The Conquest of America, p. 13.
408 Michael Taussig, Beauty and the Beast, p. 3.
justice’. He suggests that what we have is a ‘vivid manifestation of the commoditized cultural content’ that is, ‘reflective correspondingly of a ‘precarization’ woven into global image and labor flows with a utopian, transformative imprint of ever more extreme realities of destitution’. What we seem to thus have is something like the aesthetic of terror and a referent to the sense of a precarious economic situation, wrapped up in a culturally colourful package of hope. The film continues:

Shots of the city being occupied and of the military counteroffensive: the story continues in stop start fashion, relegated to a list of dot points.

The tourist city of San Cristóbal de las Casas woke up to find an indigenous army in its streets. Some soldiers carried AK47s, others carried sticks, they had seized six hundred and fifty ranches and now controlled a quarter of the state of Chiapas. On the television news one man appeared a foot taller than the rest, unlike the indigenous guerrillas, he spoke Spanish. Subcomandante or subcommander Marcos started translating for a revolution. The Mexican army counter attacked. The Zapatista demands appeared on the Internet. They wanted control over their lives and the land. People died on both sides, some say one hundred and fifty, some say five hundred. A ceasefire was declared. The only person who could bring both sides to the negotiating table was Bishop Samuel Ruis Garcia. The indigenous people call him tatik, it means grandfather.

Shots of the dead and wounded, cut to shots of angels and statues in a church:

The bishop started mediating a fitful series of peace talks. The Zapatistas tied white ribbons around their weapons to signal a paradox, guns that wish to be silent. A year later in 1995 the Mexican army invaded Zapatista communities in search of rebel commanders. All they found was Marcos’ pipe. For two years afterwards there has been a troubled peace. Zapatista villages remain surrounded by thirty five thousand Mexican soldiers, the military continues to rumble through La Realidad, sometimes twice a week sometimes twice a day. But now for five days the tanks have stopped because outside eyes are watching La Realidad. Encuentro means gathering, the Zapatistas have invited the world to an international gathering in the jungle.

Shots of the dialogues and Zapatista marches, the military patrols through the villages:

---

Three thousand people show up, anarchists from Spain, communists from Italy, assorted Latin American revolutionaries, indigenous people from all over Chiapas, me with my Canadian Mexican film crew, and a guy in a cape called Super Barrio. The Zapatistas need the protection of a civilian movement, they are building the encuentro as an international gathering against neoliberalism and for humanity. At this point it is anybody’s guess what that means. The guests are searching for something new to believe in, the Berlin Wall has fallen on communism, for them, the encuentro is a type of post glasnost revolutionary Woodstock without the acid. I wait with my crew and the rest of the press for subcomandante Marcos. The women of La Realidad tell me Marcos, a man with pale skin, came from the mountains twelve years ago.

Shots of the gathering, masked soldiers and the civilian guests surrounded by press. Then montage and schizophrenic referencing of history and observation comes to a halt. We return to Teresa who finally gets to speak for herself, the first time that an indigenous person is allowed to speak in the film. Asked about Marcos she responds:

We don’t see his face like we see ours. Ours we see clearly, but his stays covered. We can’t see him. Whatever the poor eats, he eats. When he’s here, is he going to eat better food? What we eat, he eats. If we eat vegetables, he does too. We don’t believe he’s from the city. We can’t believe it.

The narrator gives us her summary of Marcos, the appearance and the myth, revealing the gulf between the two worlds of interpretation of the outsiders and the communities themselves:

The government says Marcos is from Mexico City that he is a professor of philosophy and communications, Marcos says the Zapatista movement is in fact more about ideas than bullets. The New York Times calls the Zapatista uprising the first postmodern revolution. Marcos invokes Emiliano Zapata, the hero of Mexico’s 1910 revolution. Zapata, who led an army of landless peasants, Zapata, whose revolution was betrayed. Zapata was camera shy, Marcos is not, he poses for the French fashion magazine Marie Claire. The media is Marcos’ long–range missile, to keep the world’s attention on the Zapatistas Marcos must continually reinvent himself and the imagery of the revolution.

An archive image of Zapata is juxtaposed with the image of Marcos posing for the press. The juxtaposition raises some issues. The Mexican Revolution was the first major conflict to ever
be recorded on camera and some eighty years later the Zapatista uprising is being hailed as the first postmodern revolution.

What seems obvious from the words of the narrator in comparison to Teresa is the inability to label and name the conflict. Whereas for Teresa the man Marcos eats and acts like them, the narrator must dredge the annals of history while drawing analysis from the *New York Times* and the government in Mexico City. She seems reluctant to see or hear what is right in front of her, and what the indigenous people she talks to tell her directly. Thus the fight for land and rights becomes, under the gaze of the rest of the world, a self-fulfilling fantasy of postmodern rebellion that both delights and horrifies. For the outsider there must be an *El Dorado of meaning* hidden somewhere in the jungle.412

A montage of images from the world’s media follows, the obsession with the superficial, the spectacle of Paz. And then to the edge of fear. The narrator reveals what she sees to be the truth behind the gloss and the reality she has discovered:

> Back at the *encuentro* the Zapatistas and their guests dance on the edge of reality. It is a courtship between romantic ideals and harsh politics. Between those who can leave Mexico and those who cannot. And then there are those who could not attend the *encuentro* because they are victims of a hidden war. A month before the *encuentro* I encountered a group of people the revolution has almost forgot. I followed dark rumours of fear and violence to the north of Chiapas [...].

> There is supposed to be a ceasefire. But these people have been forced to flee their village. They’re Zapatista supporters but if they go home, can and will the Zapatistas protect them? I begin to realize that my camera is framing the gap between rhetoric and reality.

In this extraordinary admission, the narrator claims to have caught something with her camera no one else has been able to see. The camera is given special powers as a tool, which sees beyond the human eye. The terrified, wet and hungry people stand in front of the camera which pans across them, eying their misery and despair with a cool distance. The victims of the war become the prize scoop for the narrator, proof that things are not as they seem in this foreign land that seeks to delude her. This ‘aha!’ moment proves her right, these Indians can’t be trusted. This surely is the reinvigoration of the primitive in modernity.

From the refugees, the narrator moves to a family of rancheros and then to the indigenous people who have taken their land during the uprising. During the interviews the impression is created that neither the farmers nor the campesinos can be trusted. The rancheros are portrayed as rich and racist, and the indigenous as lazy and stupid, incapable of using the land they have appropriated. Meanwhile the Zapatistas maintain a line of idealism and celebration while refugees, their own people, die. Chiapas has become a land of illusion, where no one can be trusted.

After Marcos refuses her an interview she comes to the conclusion that she has discovered another terrible secret:

I ask Marcos what the Zapatistas are prepared to do for their supporters trapped in the north. I send Marcos a note asking for an interview. I am not prepared for what happens next. ‘No, the interview is not possible’ he tells Javier, ‘and she knows why’. I don’t know. Has my question crested a security risk by identifying Zapatista supporters in the north? Or have I discovered the human cost of the peace talks? Are the refugees being pushed aside so that the Zapatistas can maintain the ceasefire?

Once again, the narrator seeks to reveal something that no one else sees and her tone is one of accusation more than query. Just like the stories of conquistadors five hundred years earlier, this visitor finds the intrigue and illusion that she seeks. She is on a quest to test the moral and ethical fibre of these indigenous people who dare to give hope to the outside world.

Once again she returns to the idea of the repetition of Zapata’s life in the life of Marcos. Returning to archival footage she suggests the risk to Marcos’ life that was realised in the betrayal and death of Zapata. Then it switches to Ramona, a Tzotzil indigenous woman who is a commander in the Zapatista army. As she leaves to speak in Mexico City, the camera jumps back to the displaced from the north of the state of Chiapas. As they attempt to return to their village, the camera team accompanies them as witness, and, as the narrator suggests, security: ‘The presence of our camera and crew is the only security they feel that they have’. Here the camera becomes part of the history making process, as the gaze that magically protects as it records and archives.
Tropics

In the film *A Place Called Chiapas* (and also in this thesis), the very title suggests to the viewers that they will journey to somewhere unique and special. In the extremes of the highlands and the jungle of Chiapas we can find landscapes perfect for fertile and romantic imaginings. Gollnick, however, explains how he now sees the jungle not in stark contrast to modernity or the failures of modernity, but rather

in part as a contrast to the utopian discourse of ecological preservation and in part as a step toward reimagining the jungle not as a natural landscape tied either to base instinct or spiritual revelation, but as a social space inhabited by peoples whose experience has been largely excluded from the dominant forms of cultural expression.413

If we apply Taussig’s ideas of mimesis and the civilising dialectic to the jungle, we get a space that relates directly and inversely to the city. Rather than the binary opposite, or the reflection through which to critique, the jungle becomes entwined with the reality and imagining of the city. Gollnick then elaborates:

As the era of modernity’s self–critique through the mirror of nature comes to a close, the image of historical alterity associated with the jungle must be brought into contact with the forms of social alterity still generated through the settlement of the rain forest.414

The traditional interpretation of such spaces, however, still hangs heavily over the narratives that emerge from and around them. Nicolás Wey Gómez stresses how the latitudinal aspect of Columbus’ journey reveals a crucial aspect of the philosophy behind the discovery and the subsequent interpretation of what was found. He remarks, ‘latitude was an integral and explicit organizing principle in the Indies enterprise’.415 As the title of Wey Gomez’ book suggests, the idea of the tropics was crucial in the reasoning to set off on the voyage and the subsequent actions of establishing a colonial empire around the tropics. The aim of heading south was fundamentally based on the idea that particular spaces held particular qualities in

---

413 Brian Gollnick, *Reinventing the Lacandón*, p. 15.
414 Brian Gollnick, *Reinventing the Lacandón*, p. 17.
regard to both lands and peoples. Wey Gomez explains to us how ‘the ‘schooled’ heirs of Plato’s and Aristotle’s physics considered place to be one of the principles of the universe’. 416

Nettie Wild heads south from Canada to Mexico with a particular focus on place, and Wey Gómez has recently refocused attention on this crucial aspect of Columbus’ journey and its importance in the subsequent conquest and colonialism. As such it creates an intriguing comparison between the explorers of five hundred years ago who went with the intention of returning with spices, and contemporary filmmakers, who set out to return with exotic and compelling stories of the mestizo revolutionary and his gang of Indian rebels.

The importance that the south has/had as a particular space in the European imagination was twofold: it was hot, which was deemed ideal for encountering concentrations of precious metals and stones, and it was inhabited by monstrous beings, distinguishable by their ever darkening skin tone the further one ventured south. 417 Skin pigmentation was directly linked to latitude, and Columbus’ journal constantly refers to the colour of the peoples he encounters. In the film Wild uses maps of Mexico and Chiapas to situate the audience with the use of little masked Zapatista cartoon figures.

The geography that informed Columbus’ voyage incorporated a holistic worldview. The geography of the time linked place to philosophical and political ideas ‘in a cosmological tradition that imagined the orderly workings of the geocentric universe as the machina mundi, or “machine of the world”’. 418 The machina mundi attempted to impose order over the world; it was an idea that linked place, man, and God in a systematic relationship of natural order and balance. It was such an idea that allowed Columbus to ‘know’ what he would find and where before he set sail. The idea sets up an interesting comparison with the movie camera. As a machine that organises perspective, subject to the laws of optics, it produces a certain degree of uniformity, like the science of navigation at the time of Columbus, no matter who uses it or for what purposes. As Wey Gómez explains, however, on top of such laws were layered various ideas of philosophy and morality.

Although the idea of the machina mundi was still debated as to its exact nature the concept itself was believed by those who opposed and supported Columbus’ voyage alike. The concept

417 Wey Gomez illustrates the power this held over the imagination of Columbus: ‘Columbus believed that he was bound to find ever-greater quantities of coveted resources as he sailed farther south [...]. Columbus reasoned that the great ‘heat’ he was suffering here proved that he could not be as far from the equator as the instrument read. From this heat, he also concluded that he was venturing into one of the richest gold-bearing regions of the globe’. Nicolas Wey Gomez, The Tropics of Empire, p. 40.
418 Nicolas Wey Gómez, The Tropics of Empire, p. 61.
was debated, as mentioned in the Canadian film, as to its exact nature by those who would endorse Indian slavery and those who opposed it. Despite these debates, the concept of the *machina mundi* became the arena in which the morality of conquest and colonialism would be argued: its basic principles remained unquestioned. In this regard I would suggest that documentary film, despite the debate around its realism and formalism, is also widely regarded as revealing something inherently true.

The *machina mundi* enabled Columbus to freely inhabit his role as religious crusader and divine messenger just as the camera and membership in a production company allows Nettie Wild access to the Zapatista territories. Dominion was also incorporated into the concept of geography, basically ‘temperate nations held *natural rule* over hot and cold nations’. Here Columbus had a cosmology that incorporated philosophical and religious justification for the enslavement of other races. Slavery even had direct biblical authorisation from the tale of Noah and the ‘curse of Ham’. This story in the Genesis had been interpreted in a quite extraordinary way to explain the curse on Noah’s grandson as permitting the enslavement of black sub–Saharans.

Such a complex cosmology revolving around the concept of place, which encouraged interpretation over narrative and which favoured dominion over the Other, gives pause for thought when considering a film called *A Place Called Chiapas*. This *Place* comes laden with imagination and fantasy that the film actively engages in its first few shots of misty jungles and haunted nights. The idea that place exerts an influence on those who inhabit it extends from the hazy scenery to the internal confusion of the filmmaker, who attempts to make sense of things but finds herself more and more perplexed. All the romanticism and scepticism projected onto those ‘south of the border’ is amplified for those in the southernmost part of the country. While Columbus had his crusading tendencies catered for, here the filmmaker has her desire to be investigator sated. In such a circumstance it is almost as if the camera becomes the modern *machina mundi* with its ability to organise the world around it.

In this atmosphere Columbus was to designate the newly found lands the West Indies, a title that, ‘instantly claimed its share in Mediterranean culture’s long–lived and ambivalent fascination with the tropics’. Unfortunately for Columbus a voyage by Vasco de Gama to India via the Cape of Good Hope would discredit his claims to have reached India. This, however, would not dissuade Columbus in his proclamations; if his West Indies were not India

---

419 Nicolas Wey Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire*, p. 84.
420 Nicolas Wey Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire*, p. 70.
then they were just as good. Due to their latitude the West Indies were, ‘ontologically speaking, the same place’.422

The same place indeed, however Columbus was to come across another obstacle. His Indians were not black, or not black enough. As Wey Gomez reminds us, ‘the dark skin of all ‘Ethiopians’—African or Asian—was considered by Mediterranean geographers to be the very mark of tropical monstrosity in humans’,423 therefore, if Columbus was to present his discovery as deserving celebration, he had to find another sign of the Indian’s barbarity. He accomplished this when he came across the Caribs, the man–eaters of the Caribbean Isles. These were authentically barbaric Indians. Wey Gomez eloquently describes Columbus’ success.

Unquestionably, in the ‘deformity’ or ‘disfigurement’ of the man–eater, Columbus mindfully and influentially reinscribed the moral depravity of an ancient Indian monster whose infamous crimes against nature now rendered him a perfect substitute for the ‘Ethiopian’ chattel Columbus had failed to find in his precious Indies.424

Here we have a systematic and deliberate search for immorality, depravity and deformity, a search that is bound to be self–fulfilling. In fact, immorality, depravity and deformity are the defining characteristics of the people he wishes to find. Flashback to A Place Called Chiapas and the Indians killing other Indians, the false talk and rhetoric, and the nobility and the savagery all mixed up in an undecipherable chaos. The revolutionary Indians of Chiapas are not revolutionary enough for Nettie Wild, and she actively goes in search of proof that they are not who they say they are. Such a search, and its success, perversely assures the balance and totality of nature and the universe. The goodness of the explorer is guaranteed by the existence and discovery of the evil Other.

It is from this point that the myths of what and who the Indians are and are not will begin to be inscribed onto them by the Europeans. Ancient and contemporary European ‘wisdom’ mixed with the peculiarities of events, such as Columbus’ desire to find India, his need to explain himself, and the geopolitical and religious realities of the day, will form the colonial experience and colonial reality. Indeed the need of the conquistadores to explain themselves back home starts to become a recurring theme. They are constantly running into trouble, running out of money and disobeying their mandates. As such, much of the narrative in these

422 Nicolas Wey Gómez, The Tropics of Empire, p. 175.
early times revolved around talking oneself out of trouble and justifying oneself to authority. Inevitably they find what they are looking for, yet such discoveries based on misunderstandings result in what appear to be cursed outcomes.

While the Spaniards quickly realised this southerly location was far from a barren desert and more comparable to a paradise, their opinion of the natives did not alter, they remained the barbaric and monstrous beings traditionally associated with the south, ‘childish or monstrous creatures of the globe’s infernal fringes whose liminal nature seemed to justify rendering them Europe’s subjects or slaves’.425

What was not in question was the Spanish mission to bring Christianity to the Americas. The universal idea of Christianity in which all men are created in God’s image extended his reign across the waters, and thus the salvation of souls fell onto the shoulders of the Spanish. With the recent reconquest of Spain from the Moors the feeling of religious fervour was at fever pitch. The discovery of new lands accentuated the feeling that it was all part of a ‘providential plan directed at unifying all the peoples and races of the world below the mantel of Christianity and the crown of the Catholic Kings’.426 It was the ‘men of letters in the service of the Spanish crown’, working with the ‘antiquated ideas of Aristotle’, which gave way to the implementation of the idea of natural born slaves and masters.427 As such, the Church and the State worked as one. In a similar way, documentary film, with its quest for realism, justice, depravity and deformity, finds out its victims no matter what.

**Black and rose legends**

Here we find the roots of what have come to be known as the ‘Black Legend’ and the ‘Rose Legend’ of conquest and colonialism. Patricia Seed explores the origins of these legends and the political motives behind them. Beginning with the 1511 rhetorical question of Fray Antonio Montesinos, ‘Are these [Indians] not also men?’, Seed explains how he ‘ignited a political controversy that would rage in Spain for the next four decades’.428 Indeed the ramifications of such a remark continue on today. On the one hand the Black Legend alludes to the cruelties and violence of the conquistadors and settlers, and on the other the Rose Legend points to the

supposedly brave and selfless acts of denunciation by the likes of Montesinos and Las Casas. As Stern points out, the Black Legend, ‘reduces the Conquest to a story of European villains and heroes’ 429 in which ‘a mythology of benevolence and disinterestedness – the self–image presented by Las Casas and others’ comes to stand unchallenged as a Rose Legend counterbalance. 430

On the one hand, we have unnatural cruelty and on the other disinterested paternalism and self–sacrifice. However, as Seed points out, the priests’ interest in the humanity of the Indian revolved squarely around the interest of conversion. Put simply, if they were not human they could not be converted to Christianity. If there were no one to convert then the whole religious mission in the new world would be useless. Doctrinal tradition, dating back to Thomas Aquinas, revealed three possibilities: they were either fully human, human but lacking reason, or animals. 431 While perhaps the colonists would not have minded if they were classified as animals, for the Church everything depended on them being human. For the Spanish Crown the conversions also meant a justification for the enterprise. As Seed puts it, on the potential for Indian conversion ‘rested the entire edifice of Spain’s political control over the New World’. 432

Fast forward to the debate over the subaltern and once again massive financial interests revolve around the trauma and visual economies.

Of course, missing from this debate is the indigenous voice, and the legacy of such colonial debates means that even today, according to Seed, to ‘be “human”, indigenous peoples of Spanish America still must be morally European’. 433 In the film A Place Called Chiapas this debate over the human nature of the Indians is referred to in the opening moments in mysterious tones, and in fact the film seems to give its own answer. The camera lingers on a mother and her children along the side of the road. The camera is zoomed in on their faces, obliviously from some distance, and as we see the woman gesticulate, the narrator, Wild, tells us that she is asking for money. The camera lingers on the faces of the woman and the children as they stare wildly back down the lens. They are reduced to the role of animals in a cage. Their voices have been cut out and rather using subtitles, the narrator interprets.

Here film’s capacity for voyeurism is exploited through the zoom and a lingering duration in a moment in which they beg for money, yet we are not even allowed to hear their voices, just

430 Patricia Seed, “Are These Not Also Men?”, p. 630.
431 Patricia Seed, “Are These Not Also Men?”, p. 639.
432 Patricia Seed, “Are These Not Also Men?”, p. 640.
433 Patricia Seed, “Are These Not Also Men?”, p. 652.
watch the wild stares and gesticulations. As the film progresses there is a movement from the initial problem of understanding the implications of the NAFTA treaty to exploring the morality of the Indians. By the end of the film it is their morality under the spotlight rather than the morality if the treaty. This also raises the crucial distinction made by Aristotle in his thesis on tragedy. For a great tragedy the confusion must unravel from misunderstanding and not morality or immorality.434 The danger of making judgments on morality here becomes obvious, for it is always the Other who must stand up to the judge’s moral standard.

During conquest and colonialism the objectives of each Spanish representative, whether soldier, settler, priest or official, usually served the interests of the other ones, despite their apparent contradictions. The result of these providential ideas was ‘the transformation of the American land and people into mere stage for the Spanish act’ according to Florescano:

> Nature only has life when the European enters it, the indigenous people only becomes subjects when they give testimony to the conquistadores gestures, and the indigenous past only becomes animated when it is illuminated by the gaze of the victor.435

To me this seems the accurate description of such a film where the morality of the Indians must always be held up to the morality of the filmmaker and the camera that hold the last judgement. The ‘Indians’ become props to illustrate the benevolence of the Canadian film crew, who while criticising the free trade deal that lead to the uprising and to which they are part, continue the age–old tradition of relegating the Indian to beast verging on the human.

Imagining the beliefs held by Columbus and many of his contemporaries, both philosophical and religious, mixed with superstition and myth, one can begin to understand the lens through which experience was interpreted. Some would be so entrenched in their beliefs that experience could never do more than confirm those beliefs, while others would have the flexibility of mind to convert New World experience into genuine conquest and destruction. Columbus was of the former’s camp. Todorov explains how Columbus’ mode of interpretation, his “finalist” strategy of interpretation was defined by what he thought he already knew: ‘the concrete experience is there to illustrate a truth already possessed, not to be interrogated according to preestablished rules in order to seek the truth’.436 From this position of faith, it would be impossible to do any more than discover and then interpret events and peoples in

the context of firmly held beliefs. One of the more incredible examples of this ‘finalist’ strategy involves an oath sworn by his sailors during his second voyage.

On the coast of Cuba –which Columbus believed to be part of a continent– he made them all disembark and swear, under threat of fine or having their tongue cut off, that they were indeed on the mainland and close to a civilised people.437 If Columbus could not be convinced that the island in front of him was an island, because he believed otherwise, what possibility did the indigenous populations have of convincing him that they were not Indians, indeed how were they to communicate with him? And in the film Wild makes similar demands of Marcos; he must admit the inconsistencies of his rhetoric while the camera is held to his head in a moment of interrogation.

The ‘encounter’ of two worlds was therefore fated to miscommunication yet interpreted by the moral standards of those with power. Both the Spaniards and the indigenous peoples of America would interpret the other’s actions and motives through the prism of their beliefs, failing to see what was right in front of them, and seeing things which did not exist. For the Spaniards this would manifest itself in the myths of El Dorado, beasts and lost tribes, while for the Aztecs of Mexico and other indigenous peoples it would manifest itself in apocalyptic myths of the end of the world. For the filmmaker it results in the ‘Indians’ who are noble yet savage.

Belief in the gods and their known worlds did not mean that both civilisations were not able to grasp the violent and immediate aspects of discovery and conquest. The indigenous peoples would quickly understand that the Spaniards were not gods, and the Spaniards would quickly realise that the Indians were not docile and innocent subjects. The problem would be the inability to recognise a difference in the other which did not entail either superiority or inferiority.

The example of language and the problems faced in trying to communicate illustrate the difficulty in understanding between Spaniard and Indian. For the Spaniards the difficulty was not just a matter of translation, it was whether or not the indigenous languages constituted language. Columbus was multilingual, so his ability to understand differences in tongues is undoubttable; however, he was unable to fully comprehend the difference and authenticity of the indigenous languages. He is described, in certain moments, of attempting to correct indigenous peoples in their own language, assuming that they were mispronouncing Spanish

437 Tzvetan Todorov, The Conquest of America, p. 22.
words. In these instances, without understanding a single word or sign, he forces a meaning onto the situation that will correspond to the outcomes he has already envisaged. In the film we hear that Nettie Wild possesses a basic Spanish, yet in the role of the narrator of the film she confidently translates every word and their meaning.

For Columbus, however, when he later finds that the information he has ascertained from the Indians (which he has invented in his own head) is not true, he becomes convinced of their treachery and dishonesty. At the same time, names are given to everything. Every place that the Spaniards come across is given a name in accordance with custom, honouring royalty back home, or referring to the geographical specifics of a place. They are literally entitling. It is a process by which they take possession of the land and negate any legitimate ownership that the native populations may have. They title the land and people, and entitle themselves as owners of that land and people. As well as this negation, they are also erasing the history and memory of the place, proclaiming it new and blank. The most incredible entitling must surely be that of labelling the indigenous peoples Indians. Not only renaming them, but completely inventing them in order to make them fit into the erroneous idea that Columbus had arrived somewhere else.

In an instant thousands of years of European prejudice were projected onto the indigenous Americans, an imagination born of studied ignorance. As Guillermo Bonfil Batalla stresses, before the conquest the whole of the territory was known and used in some way yet, ‘converted into an unknown land whose secrets and appearances had to be “discovered”’. This also corresponds to the gaze of the camera that seeks to reveal a world already known to us. However, Bonfil Batalla points to the way land and landscapes are guarded in the memory and become part of the person. In this way, despite the lost languages, names and histories, he suggests that today’s Mexico represents a profound continuity with the past in which knowledge of land and technologies remain dormant.

The way indigenous languages were (or were not) understood paved the way for how the indigenous body and soul would be understood. It was either the same but inferior, or

---

438 Todorov points to the absurdity of these dialogues, ‘he persists in hearing familiar words in their remarks, and in so speaking to them as if they must understand him, or in censuring their poor pronunciation of the names or words he supposes he recognizes. With this distorted understanding, Columbus engages in some absurd and imaginary dialogues’. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, pp. 42-43.
439 For an overview of the naming and early transformation of the Lacandon jungle as a borderland of the colony, see Brian Gollnick, *Reinventing the Lacandón*, pp. 19-20.
different and therefore not really existing. They were inferior and barbaric human beings or they were animals that did not possess language. Either way the conquest of their lands and the conversion of their souls were justified, the Spaniards would become their guides to spiritual salvation or they would become their masters. Todorov explains how this understanding of the Other by Columbus functioned:

What is denied is the existence of a human substance truly other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself. These two elementary figures of the experience of alterity are both grounded in egocentrism, in the identification of our own values with values in general, of our I with the universe – in the conviction that the world is one.  

These acts of entitling and the failure to recognise the Other as truly other represent the first seismic shift in remembering and forgetting in the Americas. By entitling and projecting the prejudice of Europe, the discoverers and conquistadores actively remembered home, while simultaneously, forcibly and violently ignoring and forgetting what was already there.

Here we come back to the cinema, also troubled by its mimetic nature in which filmic and natural perception must be reconciled. By filming (and not filming) it partakes in this process of claiming title to peoples and places. By imposing dialogue and voice–overs on top of images it reinterprets the world, and sometimes, by creating narrative, it corrects pre–existing narratives as if they did not know which language they were speaking or which story they were telling. With such comparisons documentary film cannot help but partake in conquest. Just as language was an entry point to explaining body and soul, so the gaze of the camera can potentially explore and probe the body of the Other from a voyeuristic distance, denying it any sense or sensuality. Intrigue also becomes crucial in initiating the momentum that carries a documentary through to where it desires to be. In this film Wild deliberately makes mysterious a well-known debate and from that point she has no option but to find the mystery and deceit she has set forth; another re–enactment of first contact based on myth and superstition.

**The struggle against time: hope and memory**

The narratives of the new world thus got under way. With religious, financial and sublime motives, the conquistadores confronted the real and metaphorical geographies of land and

---

people. Their experiences and encounters then filtered back through these guiding motives and imperatives. Carlos Montemayor signals three distinct processes of change and reformulation of the narrative. The first is the evolution of the idea of America in European thinking; the second is the idea the New World has of itself; and finally, the process of redefinition of the world by the original inhabitants of the Americas. These three visions of America have developed since the discovery of the continent by Columbus and could be said to roughly correspond with three epochs, the colonial era, independence and nation building, and finally contemporary struggles for indigenous rights. If we take a side step, however, we will also find another moment in time where conquest, history and narrative come into crisis to such a degree that the legacy of the conquistadores and their storytelling seems to have come to an end and film enters the stage.

In The Storyteller Walter Benjamin witnesses the ‘end’ of storytelling: ‘experience has fallen in value’, it was after the end of the First World War, and the men came home, ‘grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience’. The weight of mechanical warfare and economic inflation had contradicted experience to the point that ‘nothing remained unchanged but the clouds’. In a movement that echoes that of Columbus to Cortés, Benjamin explains how information had overtaken experience in value, verification over authority, the relaxation and boredom necessary for a good story had evaporated, and our relationship with death had changed fundamentally.

The idea of eternity has ever had its strongest source in death. If this idea declines, so we reason, the face of death must have changed. It turns out that this change is identical with the one that has diminished the communicability of experience to the same extent as the art of storytelling has declined.

With the loss of the concept of eternity time turned into the enemy, and as Benjamin witnesses in Georg Lukács’s writing on the novel, from the ‘struggle against the power of time [...] arise the genuinely epic experiences of time: hope and memory’. In the time of penultimateness that Taussig signals there is paradoxically no end in sight to such a malaise. These genuinely epic experiences are also genuinely tragic experiences: against time you cannot win while hope and memory more often than not turn into failure and falsehood. If a seismic shift of man’s understanding of himself in the world had occurred with the conquest

443 Carlos Montemayor, Los pueblos Indios de México, p. 27.
and colonisation of the New World, then so too had it occurred with complete war and global economic crises—and now we could add the rise of data over information.

Nonetheless, film and documentary have in many ways become the storytellers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and are thus burdened with the responsibility of communicating experience. In documentary film it would be fair to say, in the majority of cases, that information has overtaken experience in value, verification over authority, while boredom has come to represent the greatest sin imaginable. The relationship with death has been presented so many times on screen that little remains sacred while at the same time we are screened from real death more and more. That said, the four films all look explicitly at death, violence and legacy.

Time thus gives rise to hope and memory and through cinema there exists a medium that operates fundamentally through tempo, rhythm and intrigue, which mimes and suggests time and our experience of it. On the one hand, an epic story of ten years must be condensed to ninety minutes; on the other hand, a gesture or look can linger or be slowed down for much longer than would ever happen in real life. What matters is not the veracity to lived time, but rather the successfulness in suggesting experienced time. In all four films I am discussing in this thesis, hope and memory are central: the need to remember what was and what is, and the hope (or fear) of what is to come. As such, the struggle and quest to defeat time becomes entwined with the themes of tragedy, hope and memory, history and narrative.

Referring back to Benjamin’s storyteller, Taussig elaborates that where experience has been worn thin, the importance of the body comes to the fore, ‘as if the more damaging the impact on our capacity to experience, the more important the body becomes, until there exists only the body’.447 In ‘The Sun Gives Without Receiving’ Taussig addresses the idea of the gift. He looks at how it functions in a modern world where experience is devalued and ritual has been let loose, where memory contends with involuntary memory, and an excess of transgression and the focus on the object to restore order leads to ‘contracts with the devil’. The contract with the devil guarantees riches and wealth but this dividend can only be spent on luxuries. Taussig brings this idea from rural Colombia back to Europe, where, ‘the capacity to remember is under siege because, in a shell–shocked world, the capacity to experience has had to atrophy’.448

447 Michael Taussig, Beauty and the Beast, p. 64.
He refers to Proust’s eight volume work on memory, *À la recherche du temps perdu (In Search of Lost Time)* as an example of the lengths one has to go to in order to access the past, and how this work throws up the disruptive element of ‘involuntary memory’, triggered more often than not by an object. In pre–modern festival and ritual a space and time were provided for ‘licensed transgression’, which involved ‘excess consumption and excess giving, of squandering and letting go’.449 As such, repetition and ritual objects revolved in an ordered way allowing for memory and involuntary memory to co–exist and co–inhabit the same time, place and objects. In the transgressive act of the contract with the devil, in which memory and involuntary memory become confused in relation to the object, affecting capacities of experience, Taussig sees in the story of the contract ‘a striking mnemonic function, the mnemonic of the evisceration of memory’.450 Here–in lies a sense of both gain and loss.

The material wealth gained from the contract necessitates a loss, and involuntary memory, disconnected from memory and experience, bears witness to this. The excess gained through this transgression becomes documented through the story of the contract: a repetition of the moment of loss and a reaching out for it. Perhaps documentary film makes its own contract with the devil, a medium which inherently documents the passing of the present into the past, creating its own histories, yet, as an object of unlimited repetition, fails to pass into the past itself. The investment it makes in documenting memory and history seems to simultaneously eviscerate memory and experience. It becomes a luxury item and excess, only useful for indulgent reminiscence. As Taussig concludes, the same logic must apply to his own stories, and as such, ‘[w]e must not commit stories to the servile operation of getting them to say something that could be said otherwise’.451 Films, stories, and even theory, must not be utilised or enlisted to engage in battle for the sake of morality, equality, or justice, he writes, because, as objects of excess, they can only be spent on other luxuries.

Here we return to the idea of the gift, and in its pre–capitalist days, ‘the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to pay back’.452 Where generosity and self–interest coexist, the expenditure of excess always walks a tightrope, whether it is through gift or contract with the devil, and the givers and receivers risk falling into the trap of envy. Visual Anthropologist David McDougall elaborates on this quest and the sometimes–sinister ability of film to explore and manipulate communicable experience specific to memory:

Films have a disconcerting resemblance to memory. They register images with lens and emulsion in a process better understood but often no less astonishing than the physiological process of eye and brain. Sometimes film seems even more astonishing than memory, an intimation of memory perfected.\textsuperscript{453}

Here, once again, the cinema of attractions appears. The eagerness to be astonished by what everyone knows is not true bubbles to the surface. While documentary proclaims veracity and its ability to utilise information in a quest for truth, we see that, by its very nature, it simultaneously attached itself to the existential feelings of its era. While conquest and colonialism found themselves in a dialectic of civilizing and savagery, film finds itself in its own dialectic of real time and felt time.

**The momentous and momentum**

So we move from the event of the conquest of the Americas, noting the ultimate motives driving Columbus and Cortés: the financial, the religious, and the sublime. Through their interpretation and narratives, we realise the role of desire and imagination in conquest. In documentary we now begin to see the new frontier of time and space in modernity that becomes the object of conquest. The magnitude that Aristotle desires becomes fragmented and the beginning, middle, and end can extend to limitless horizons and become subject to endless repetition. Here the event of representational experience becomes the object of mimesis.

In this contraction of the event the resilience of memory begins to be questioned as forgetting and nostalgia intrude. The focus on the singularity of the moment and its paradoxical repetition through mechanical means seems to place perception on the edge of a cliff from which it is permanently close to falling. As such, the deceitfulness and illusion of the Indian to European thinking transposes itself onto image, perception, and memory.

The first screenings by the Lumiere brothers and the viewer reactions are like the first moments of contact in the New World. For Bernal Diaz it was the beauty of the city rather than the people than overwhelmed him, and in the cinema, rather than being amazed at the characters it was the capturing of the inanimate and ephemeral: ‘the steam from a locomotive, the brick dust from a demolished wall, and the shimmering leafs that seemed the

\textsuperscript{453} David McDougall, ‘Films of Memory’, p. 29.
real miracle of filmic representation’. This early wonder forms what Sutton calls ‘cinema’s creation of modernity and its time and space’. Not only did cinema look for the inanimate and ephemeral, but in its favourite locations of train stations and factories where the masses streamed in and out of public places, it also took mundane and unique urban spaces and multiplied them.

As Sutton explains, ‘cinema was created to make the individual, unique event equivalent and transferable’. The event is made into something epic in its particularity and singularity, but also normal in its repetition. As such, the regular, repetition of modern life comes to be potentially momentous: Cinema’s gift to the modern perception was a framing of the creation of moment as part of the new awareness of distance and proximity that is essential to experience. Tension and intrigue are created between the moment and the awareness of the moment’s passing, a loss and simultaneous experience of proximity and distance is created: the need to bring things closer while aware of their passing away and distance. This synthesises in an acute need to remember while complicating the potentialities of mimetic play. If mimesis is to bring about a second contact time, it seems that this moment will be subject to an instantaneous feeling of loss, even in the moment of greatest proximity. Like watching a film, just as we feel most absorbed and involved it finishes and we are left a little dazed and confused as we walk back out onto the street.

This moment of gain and loss even becomes routine through media representations of the ‘event’, creating a ‘commonality of experience’ that operates more strikingly than the disparate recollections of those who were there. As such, individual memory becomes reliant on, and susceptible to, the communal. As McDougall explains, public images serve society ‘as emblems of significant events and transitions, constructing a concept of the past but also providing ways of overcoming it’. He points to the repetition of disasters and events in the news in a particular format ‘which reassures us that the world goes on as before’. Much like the explorer who seeks the evil to reassure him of his inherent righteousness, mass media reassures us that the finely balanced machina mundi of disaster and recovery continues. In this sense it resembles the Mesoamerican cosmology of continuous cyclical (daily at six p.m.) destruction and recreation.

454 David McDougall, ‘Films of Memory’, p. 29.
455 Damian Sutton, Photography, Cinema, Memory, p. 65.
456 Damian Sutton, Photography, Cinema, Memory, p. 65.
457 Damian Sutton, Photography, Cinema, Memory, p. 84.
In today’s world of instant media and global reach the dynamics of social memory have changed, the continually revised local is often substituted by the fixed global. The media’s endless repetition of images does, however, take on the function of ritual according to McDougall, and the communal sensation of loss and gain is just as important as the specifics of the memories themselves. Like the technique of editing, the loss as one image disappears creates a nanosecond of intrigue that is cathartically soothed as the next image appears.

The emphasis on memory, or rather the compulsion to remember, leaves film in a perilous situation of bearing witness while also attempting to approximate the experiential side of memory. In film, with its catalogue of designated signs of memory, McDougall reminds us that there is a ‘frequent collapsing of memory and its sources’. Photos and antique objects are presented, newsreels, and, when an object does not still exist, re–enactments or emotionally provocative ‘signs of replacement’ substitute the missing image.459

Such observations cast serious shadows over the films we are looking at and their relation to the moment and memory. All the four films, to a greater or lesser extent, share a certain activist sentiment of injustice that needs to be righted as well as archiving and documenting events. The death from the massacre in Acteal, despite its barbarity is merely one more disaster in the history of mankind. Indeed, the statue shown at the beginning of Sowing Justice reminds us of worldwide injustices in which Acteal is only one. Through their emphasis on the event and on memory, a risk emerges of normalising the terror and horror through its cinematic actualisation.

The emphasis on trying to capture or allude to these events and moments as well as their experiential side has become a defining aspect of modern life, as Sutton explains: ‘The event, as a division of before and after that creates subjects and subjectivity, is the essential notion through which we humanize time’.460 As such, an attempt to reproduce, mimic, or portray the event becomes essential. Trying to grasp the thing, however, is something else. The element of time on the image has the potential, according to Sutton, to ‘reconstitute the becoming–mad of depths: a vertiginous array of present that extends back into the past and threatens to overwhelm us’. He continues describing the sickness of nostalgia, ‘presenting the past as if to haunt us, this is now the becoming–mad of death’.461 The photo the image and film, in capturing the present moment and ‘freezing’ it, have the potential to be spun around in a whirlpool of temporality.

459 David McDougall, ‘Films of Memory’, p. 31.
460 Damian Sutton, Photography, Cinema, Memory, p. xii.
461 Damian Sutton, Photography, Cinema, Memory, p. 95.
As much as the image points to what was, it also points to what may be. At the end of *A Place Called Chiapas* we are told that the Acteal massacre has occurred (obviously during post-production) and all of a sudden the film we have just watched takes on another meaning. As victims show photographs of the dead in *Sowing Justice* we are projected back to the moment of when that photo was taken and the person lived, and knowing that justice has not been done turns an innocuous photo into a monument of human folly. Seeing the frail old veterans of the *Last Zapatistas*, and the moment in which one of them passes away during filming, we know that soon they will all be dead. This haunting of nostalgia, where past and future spin out of control, where memory and imagination combine and magnify each other’s aspects, seems almost to transcend concerns of veracity and betrayal. Everything becomes focussed on the event, whether or not we missed it, saw it, or really saw it properly.

The ultimate nightmare thus becomes the event or the moment, the base of Aristotle’s tragedy that refuses to pass. The modern movement towards body–as–event thus posits the possibility that the tragedy becomes embodied into the body–as–habit. As I have discussed, the event began with conquest and colonisation and always ends in tragedy after the awakening from, and recognition of, habit or oblivion.

**Traces of conquest**

The rain pours down against a window through which we see the skull of a goat. We are now in the north of the state of Chiapas, where the paramilitaries are forcing the evacuation of towns of Zapatista sympathisers. People are crying and wailing, mumbling and talking but we are offered no translation. It seems here that the moment of contact is so strong and chaotic that it cannot be translated. Gestures replace translation and reality in an attempt to approximate the fear. These are the signs of replacement in *A Place Called Chiapas*.

When we are offered a translation of the testimony of the attacks the scene is calmer, now that order has been established, it is possible to translate. Contact, it seems, must be ordered. Alluding to the Zapatistas’ refusal to intervene militarily the voice–over remarks, ‘my camera is filming the gap between rhetoric and reality’. Here we have the defining moment of the film. A dichotomy is set up between the supposed rhetoric of the Zapatistas and a reality that only the
Canadian director has access to. What is really being captured is the staging of a drama, the imposition of a new narrative (the filmmaker’s) and ultimately a condescending analysis of these ‘Others’ and their ‘place’. Nonetheless the presumed power of the camera to capture such a thing reveals clearly a primitive fascination with technology.

Cut to the black Christ. A priest explains that to understand the violence you have to understand how power works in Mexico City. Cut to Mexico City and the Independence Day parade. Flashback to the assassination of the presidential candidate in 1995, picture of some corn, shots of the stock market, corn, stock market, military parade, circling vultures. Money and commodities are power, jump back to Chiapas and the local market of San Cristóbal, here Zapatista dolls of every shape and size, as well as postcards sell to the tourists. The space is adorned with graffiti of Marcos, Zapata and the EZLN insignia. The rhetoric of Mexican politicians and their corruption is montaged and juxtaposed with the rhetoric of the Zapatistas and their supporters. The power of film to understand is on show here. The mere filming of a place or thing, or the use of archival footage of things and places, are presented as if to see it is to understand it. The narrative and interviews ignite the images and vice-versa. Together they are presented as irrefutable evidence.

The film spirals towards its conclusion in a celebration of surreal contacts. Around the peace dialogues in San Andres indigenous supporters circle the building as a protection and symbol; a cordon of Mexican army soldiers in turn surrounds them. In the ranch of mestizo farmers an elderly man who has had a portion of his property taken by the Zapatistas dons a balaclava and proclaims, ‘I’m Marcos’, then giggles. The Paz y Justicia paramilitaries display a gruesome montage of photos of the dead and mutilated supposedly at the hands of the Zapatistas. Jump back to Mexico City and a fire-eater at an intersection. Mimicry and image flow over to excess, this is the miming of mimesis, and nothing has meaning anymore.

Finally, Ramona, a Zapatista leader, indigenous, fragile and tiny, diagnosed with cancer, speaks to the masses in the main square of Mexico City. This is the second largest square in the world and here is a person in the heart of the city of power and fear earlier described, reading from a paper in her broken Spanish, as it is not her first language. If ever there was a moment that showed the gap between the rhetoric and the reality it was this, but before finishing a sentence she is cut–off by the filmmaker who seems to value her own voice more highly. Contact is lost.

As Ramona speaks in the main square of Mexico City, the narrator cuts her off to add her own interpretation of the events.
Ramona wraps her Tzotzil tongue around the Spanish text, syllable by painful syllable. The Zapatistas have sent a brutally frank self-portrait to the zocalo, they are frail, poor, uneducated, proud, and they represent twenty eight million indigenous Mexicans. For one day Ramona captures a nation’s imagination. A few weeks later an operation saves her life, and then commandante Ramona disappears from the headlines and the country’s conscious.

Rather than letting the people speak for themselves, the narrator becomes the self-appointed spokeswoman and critic. Returning once again to the displaced, a confrontation is brewing as the community and the film crew confront a number of policemen and paramilitaries. The camera follows the group as it tries to re-enter the village but as the camera is turned off they come under attack and must withdraw. Here we see the camera as history writer and history maker.

We jump to images of the church, and then the grand finale. ‘It’s the day of the dead in the graveyard of La Realidad, and our last week in Mexico’. Images of the ritual move across the screen then: ‘As the light fades on the day of the dead, a man on a horse rides towards us’.

In this perfectly dramatic cinematic moment we see it is Marcos – the quest to interview him has been a success. He tells her:

In the mountains of Chiapas, death was part of daily life. It was as common as rain or sunshine. People here coexist with death, with the death of their own, especially the little ones. Paradoxically death begins to shed its tragic cloak. Death becomes a daily fact. It loses its sacredness. You see it as someone who you sit down with at the table, like an old acquaintance. You don’t lose the fear of death, but you become familiar with it. It becomes your equal. Death, which is so close, so near, so possible, is less terrifying for us than for others. So going out and fighting and perhaps meeting death is not as terrible as it seems, for us at least. In fact what surprises and amazes us is life itself. The hope of a better life. Going out to fight and to die and finding out you’re not dead, but alive. And, unintentionally, you realize you’re walking along a middle path between death and life. You’re walking on the edge of the border between them.

‘You’ve much to learn’, he tells the interviewer – finally, as the quest is completed. As in all quests, the final goal reveals itself to be something of a disappointment. Marcos highlights her ignorance, and we for a split second sense a moment of humility and self-reflection.
After she finishes the interview with Marcos, the credits roll. First a message comes up to reveal to us what has happened between the filming of the documentary and its completion:

On December 22nd, 1997, in the mountains of Chiapas, paramilitary forces aligned with the ruling party massacred 45 villages accused of being Zapatistas.

The dead included 10 men, 21 women, and 14 children.

A week later, the Mexican government announced it wanted to reopen peace talks with the Zapatistas.

Then they deployed 5000 new troops to a place called Chiapas.

This appendage concludes the predictions made throughout the film; that another level of conflict and betrayal was occurring ‘between the rhetoric and the reality’. The filmmaker was right. She revealed what no one else said. These victims become the fulfilment of her prophecy. Here prophecy has operated as memory; the memory of the Indians who do not live up to their mythical status as humble and noble saviours of confused foreigners.

Then, as the credits roll, images are shown, the outtakes, strangely revealing all the people who have appeared in the film holding the clapboard designed to designate the scenes on a film shoot and synchronise sound. In this last moment, after having produced an effect of history in the making, all is revealed to be an elaborate setup. The history makers and the victims of history become actors in the play. The humility and self-reflection seen a moment before seems to be nothing more than a trick or technique which we now see parodied.

And so the conquest of Chiapas by the Canadian filmmaker is completed, leaving us to ponder the nature of the narrative, the discoveries, or the inventions. From Cortés using information to improvise on the move, we have an overreliance on information that seems to bring us back to the same stagnation of over–determinism and over–interpretation that supposedly crippled the Aztecs. While fear and pity become the driving themes in the narrative, the tragedy of this film seems to be the failure to recognise what is clearly said and done. Every bit of information leads the filmmaker to the conclusion that there must be something more or something behind the words that only she can interpret. Just as signs of replacement can be used for memory, so too can they be used for self–reflection.

And so we see the moment in which the documentary quest turns into conquest. The traces of former conquests are picked up and remodelled into a new form of conquest. The mimesis of
mimesis is shown to hold internal potentialities from which innocent intentions can lead to dull yet powerful repetitions.

Although the narrator of the film arrives with good intentions of understanding the uprising and using reason and rationality to untangle the mess, she quickly falls back onto the assumptions and interpretations of five hundred years of miscommunication. This time, unlike the conquistadores and clergy who arrived with the sword and crucifix, the narrator arrives with her camera, capable of protecting her from too close a contact while revealing ‘the gap between the rhetoric and reality’. With faith in the revelatory powers of the camera, and ‘reason’ in her fears of Indian deceit, she finds what she sought after, the signs confirm her suspicions and her prophecy of death is realised in the massacre in Acteal. The staging of first contact is re–enacted once more.

So we move onto the next staging of colonialism, where those most commonly pitied, by understanding the attributes associated with themselves by the Spanish, harnessed such attributes as weapons of resistance. Thus the supposed magic and deceit of the Indian and the Negro became such a powerful presence that the colonist quickly came to pity himself. Such a movement is also evident in film when conventions and accepted representations are turned up side down, taking the viewer from a position of ultimate authority and putting them in the dock.
Oventic

Oventic is a small town about an hour from San Cristóbal. It is in Zapatista territory. The welcome sign announces that you are in rebel territory and that ‘here the people govern and the government obeys’. The gate is protected by two masked men who ask for my passport. Although firmly in Mexican territory, in this region one must pass the same procedures as upon entering a foreign country. In the room that acts as the immigration office there are children’s drawings of Che Guevara and the four men inside all have their faces covered. Just like at any immigration post I am asked for my profession and what I plan to do in the community. Once passed the formal procedures I am guided to the commission building. Inside a man and woman, both masked, welcome me. Once again they take my name and ask me what I am doing there. The simple question in broken Spanish from these masked people is unnerving. Unlike normal immigration checkpoints, the simple answers of ‘tourism’, or ‘just passing through’ seem inadequate. I answer that I would like to have a look around and a chat, although I am sure in that moment I do not really know what I am doing there. The slow manner in which the people talk, the long pauses between answering, along with the balaclavas, add surrealness to every word spoken. The economy with which they speak and the intense focus on the eyes – created by the balaclavas – presents me with the gravity of the situation. This is unlike any other tourist attraction.

I have read much about the reasons behind the Zapatistas masks, however, whatever the reasons might be the intensity of the gaze is extraordinary. For about an hour – maybe more or less, time seems to dissolve– I am sitting transfixed before these two Zapatistas. During that hour my eyes do not drift for one second from the eyes of these people. They tell me about the movement, the history of organisation amongst the indigenous communities and the battles against the ‘bad government’. The story they tell me seems almost unimportant, but what becomes clear is the power of the act of storytelling. The whole time I am fixed on the gaze which seems to speak so much more than who did what, when and where.
The process of listening is fundamental; they tell me how they don’t want people to come and join them, just to listen and then go back to their homes to repeat the story. There is no sense of victimhood in what they say, the uprising has given them the dignity of being historical actors and it is literally painted all over the town. Brightly painted murals adorn every building depicting Zapata, Che, rebel men and women, mixing ancient Mayan symbols with modern motifs. There are schools and cooperatives which produce boots and crafts, and the Junta de Buen Gobierno – the council of good government. The council is where the town is governed from and inside the place is covered with stickers and posters from everywhere and of everything from Che Guevara to the football team A.C. Milan. Above the desk is a portrait of Marcos. At the entrance/exit there is a shop and restaurant. The shop sells every bit of Zapatista memorabilia that you can image, t-shirts, posters, dolls, lighters, CDs and films. The walls of the restaurant are covered by photos of the uprising and day to day activities of the Zapatistas. The whole town is saturated with references to the movement and the historical past, which they wish to celebrate. The covered faces on the streets remind me that the past is still not the past, and the future is still arriving.

In Oventic memory and imagination seem one, what at first glance seems like an amalgamation of border control, education centre and souvenir shop metamorphoses into a point at which it becomes possible to transgress the myth and enter into the story.

**The last memory**

Looking back now, what this meeting shows to me is the extraordinary lengths we go to and the ritual we create in order to tell and listen to a good story. Flying half way around the world, spending days and nights on buses, through jungles and up mountains, past endless security checks by masked and armed men… And then when I retell the story I go to the same lengths to mask and hide it.

And so we move onto the performance of the Revolution and its final memory. Claudia Arroyo Quiroz points out that the latest generation of Mexican filmmakers, fiction and documentary, have portrayed the Revolution as a failure.\(^{462}\) Having not changed the country for the better, it

---

has become just another violent moment in Mexican history, or rather, something that never arrived. In the film The Last Zapatistas: Forgotten Heroes, the last remaining veterans of the Mexican Revolution tell their stories. The veterans are staged in their humble abodes and village surroundings, yet these poor campesinos recount the events of the Revolution and its subsequent betrayal with the energy and swagger of the young and adventurous men and women they once must have been. Historical fact becomes contradicted amongst the multiple accounts, while myth and personal account becomes the central axis. As they tell us from the beginning, despite the blurring of history, the belief in myth, and the many contradictions, this is the story of the revolution.

Despite these veterans not being Chiapanecos (they come from Morelos), and primarily identifying themselves as campesinos rather than indigenous, their story directly feeds into the story of the contemporary Zapatistas. Firstly through the common identification with Zapata, and secondly, through an acknowledged commonality of resistance and struggle that is acknowledged in the film. For me they create a disruption to the narrative, but a necessary one. The veterans begin their epic narrative with soaring voices, staged and edited to continue, contradict and bedevil the story of the Revolution:

Oppression and tyranny, great misery and poverty, hunger. The peasant was at the mercy of the Spanish ...

In 1910, we, the peasants of Morelos were deprived once again of our land, bringing to a head an unjust situation that had been evolving since the Spanish conquest. Throughout the region men and women rose up in arms driven by the ideals of a man called ... Emiliano Zapata.

Today the Zapatista veterans want to tell a story that we began in 1910 and have yet to finish: The story of the Mexican Revolution.

Land and liberty!

Justice and law!

Land, water, justice and law: They were the ideals of the Revolution.


The time of the Revolution, that was a sad time indeed.

Many died.

Many went hungry.

And so the last remaining veterans of Zapata’s revolutionary army introduce their story and the memory that they bequeath to the nation. The testimony shoots from the mouth of one to the other, and in their half forgetful attempts to reconstruct the past, while confronting their own mortality and the legacy, the history of the Revolution once again finds a fluidity that has become petrified by politicians and historians. Daniel Mosquera highlights how the work of director Taboada ‘destabilizes these myths’ ideological and populist hold on national imaginaries’, and by illustrating the constructedness of such myths through his own construction his films reflect on, ‘the nature of individual and collective popular memory as experiential processes that dispute and redirect archival and official repositories’. The moment they begin to remember, memory slips through their fingers and is replaced by the story of what was or what may have been.

This testimony of the last Zapatistas reminds me once more of Taussig’s essay about the old Colombian man, coincidently named Tomás Zapata who, rather than recounting local histories resorts to epic poetry and Greek mythology. Taussig sees this as suggesting ‘an art of interruptions, of cultural and temporal montage’. What Taussig describes as Tomás Zapata’s, ‘dignity and humor, his confidence and directness’, is reminiscent of the old veterans. This he describes as ‘an aristocratic style associated with the learned elite of yesteryear so as to critique the elite and the system of laws and property on which it rests’. Here in the film we see the poor peasant veterans dressed up in their Sunday best, elegantly framed and shot by the cinematographer, carefully and deliberately announcing every word and gesticulating with appropriate decorum.

The film is definitely not an observational piece, but for all its staging there is a poignant intimacy with the veterans. Although we don’t see Taboada in the film he is a relatively young man, and watching the film one gets the sensation throughout that these are grandparents speaking with their grandchildren about a topic that the parents are excluded from. The

---


466 Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p. 52.

467 Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p. 53.
strength of the intimacy seems to rely on the good–natured conspiracies that exist between grandparents and grandchildren.

Taussig ponders the encounter between researcher and informant and the nature of such storytelling relationships. He concludes that it is highly likely that his neighbours would have politely ignored the old man and his verses would have remained unheard. It is only through the most unlikely encounter that the stories and verse could flow, not dissimilar to Freud’s concept of the ‘playground’ in ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working Through’. The playground constitutes an arena in which ‘repetition is allowed to expand in almost complete freedom such that remembering can eventually become a force for understanding and even change’.468 This space is jointly created, and rather than working as a relationship between analyst and patient, is a ‘two–way street’, between two patients or two analysts, in which, through repetition, remembrance can be facilitated rather than blocked. In this film the staging created by director, cinematographer and subject creates such an unlikely yet playful encounter.

The epic poetry of the old man that is also evident from the veterans leads Taussig to ponder another possibility: that of the epic as history addressing marginalisation and ‘bearing witness to the lived effects of formalization’.469 The old man, as an uneducated peasant, has born witness to the violence and ‘progress’ of the state in its enforcement of agribusiness over subsistence agriculture. This follows on from Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which Homer’s *Odyssey* is read as the

primal tale of mimetic forms of knowing succumbing to the impersonality of capital and the modern state, the epic rendition of how yielding to the particulate sensuousness of worldly detail through imitation is turned against itself in the vast story of worldly progress.470

This sheds light on the thesis on varying levels. Firstly, in the epic renditions of the past by the veterans in the *Last Zapatistas* it is possible to see this marginalisation from both the positivistic reforms of Porfirio Diaz and the agrarian reforms following the revolution. If epic is the primal tale of man’s encounter with the impersonality of the state, then tragedy is the encounter with the failure of civilisation to resolve man’s problems. In the *Rancheras* that the veterans sing it is possible to see the element of tragic poetry. In the mythical tales of the

468 Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p. 54.
indigenous communities of Chiapas perhaps we see the reaction to the NAFTA treaty. Perhaps
the uprising of 1994, always fated to fail on any kind of military level, can be seen as a tragic
actuation and performance. Just as the ‘impersonality of capital and the modern state’
encroaches, so the impersonality of the epic, tragic, and mythic form responds. Not only have
responses by the indigenous people of Chiapas come in such formal ways, but a conscious and
concerted effort to avoid addressing any personal or individual questions and histories is
evident, much to the disappointment of journalists and researchers like me.

While the personal may seem to be subsumed by the epic (or tragic or mythic) the
performative nature of these poetic forms inherently involves embodiment and power
through sympathetic magic. This is opposed to the historian who gains power by objectively
standing apart. Through the poetic and performative nature of the verse it turns out to be ‘a
mobile location within and outside of time’, thus:

by laying claim to a profound kinship with a particular moment to which it gives voice,
the verse is able to stand apart from that moment and erode its momentousness. 471

Tomás Zapata’s response in verse, however, corresponds to the Recorder’s quest for factual
historical material. As Taussig points out, the poetry would become the raw material for an
historian, to be analysed and archived, to be appropriated for its ““authenticating seal,” even
“false consciousness.” 472 This, he concludes, shows us how the historian is ‘desperately trying
to deny the way such verse defamiliarizes the historian’s task and therefore has to be classified
as art, not science’. 473

We therefore have the encounter between the insider poet and the outsider investigator and
the repetition of the modern model of mediation between bourgeois and peasant, ‘a
mediation that effectively purified the peasant as a type on whose back all sorts of lofty
universals could be packed’. 474 Rather than the model set up by Walter Benjamin in his essay,
The Storyteller, in which story’s from exotic lands are brought back home and shared between
people of similar rank and file, Taussig uses the example of the Grimm brothers as a more
relevant insight into modernity’s mode of storytelling.

Here, the bourgeois tells the stories that have been collected from the peasant, two
dramatically unequal characters. This is the model of anthropology and the emergence of the

471 Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p.60.
472 Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p. 60.
473 Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p. 60.
primitive in modernity. Like Picasso’s use of African masks in his early cubist paintings at a time of crisis in the representation of the human figure, the role of the peasant and the primitive is to ‘endorse modernity’s sense of literality’, and, ‘to bring the ancients into the realm of the living no less than the body into the realm of the mind’. This is also the tragic formula in which the ancients set the scene that enables modern concerns to be enacted.

**Performing conquest**

Before continuing with the tales of the Zapatistas we must return to the beginning once more, in an attempt to find the twisted paths and labyrinthine ways in which stories, histories and memories have come down to us. Mexican historian Enrique Florescano signals three narratives and interpretations that emerge from Spanish conquest. The first is the providential/imperialist narrative of the crown, which justifies the actions taken in the most learned and philosophical language. This narrative is the legal and spiritual backbone of the imperialist enterprise. The second narrative is that of the Franciscans and Dominicans who create a mystical/apocalyptic interpretation in which everything is understood through biblical scripture. The Indians become the priests’ raw material for the creation of a Christian utopia. The third narrative is that of the conquistadores who create their historical realism from the deeds of their adventures in the style of travel and knights’ tales. Missing from these narratives is, of course, the Indian voice; the conquest has turned them into a silent presence: those to be pitied.

The Indian voice, however, has been present from the moment of conquest and accounts exist. Most famously they were collected by the Franciscan Friar Bernardino de Sahagún in the years following the fall of Tenochtitlan and published together by Miguel León–Portilla in 1959 under the title, *Visión de los vencidos* (Vision of the Vanquished), more commonly known in English as *The Broken Spears*. In it we find passages and poems the equal of any tragic tradition:

> Broken Spears lie in the roads;
> We have torn our hair in grief.
> The houses are roofless now, and their walls
> Are red with blood.

---

Worms are swarming in the streets and plazas,
And the walls are splattered with gore.
The water has turned red, as if it were dyed,
And when we drink it,
It has the taste of brine.

We have pounded our hands in despair
Against the adobe walls,
For our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead
The shields of our warriors were its defense,
But they could not save it.

We have chewed dry twigs and salt grasses;
We have filled our mouths with dust and bits of
adobe;
we have eaten lizards, rats and worms ... 477

Not only do the accounts and poems show a lament for the suffering and loss for the city and
nation of Mexico, but also a profound sense of betrayal or confusion with the will of the gods.
On the other hand, those who are seemingly sure of God’s will, the friars and priests who
sometimes collected such testimony and at other times destroyed it, play a contradictory role.

As Inga Clendinnen points out, misunderstandings between the native and the foreigner in
such circumstances have usually been labelled as a ‘confusion of tongue’, as competing
narratives that fail to recognise the other. Yet she concludes that the colonial project creates a
confusion spawning multiple realities leading to a ‘hall of distorting mirrors’ where the
individual finds himself amongst grotesquely distorted images of those around him, while
believing his image true ‘as familiar gestures and expressions are exaggerated, parodied, even
inverted’. 478 As such, as Clendinnen explains in her work on the early conquest and settlement

477 Miguel León-Portilla (Ed), trans. L. Kemp, The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of
Mexico, Boston: Beacon Press, 2007, pp. 283-284
478 Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570, New York:
in the Yucatan, the Franciscans who caused so much suffering were also amongst the Spaniards who suffered the most. The strength of their ideals, contorted in the reality of the Yucatan, led to the inevitable sense of betrayal as the ‘Indians’, ‘whose sufferings had raised their pity’, failed to embrace Christianity the way they so desired.\textsuperscript{479}

The Spaniards are the actors in these stories, as Florescano reminds us, ‘with the plantation of Spanish dominion the indigenous peoples stopped being actors in their historical circumstances and became subordinates to the conquistador’.\textsuperscript{480} The indigenous peoples only become present in their relation to the Spaniard as the receiver of his actions. This becomes true also of their voice. It is mainly through the translations of the priests that their memory is preserved in the archives, such as the case of \textit{The Broken Spears}. What they remember is only given significance if it is thought significant by the Spanish, and, it must be delivered through the intermediary of the Spaniard. In the hall of mirrors, however, Clendinnen sees a way to ‘strip away the cocoon of Spanish interpretation’ so as to reveal actions and patterns in indigenous responses to conquest and colonialism.\textsuperscript{481}

The first twelve Franciscans arrived in Vera Cruz in 1524 with their ‘mystic discourse’ based on ‘salvationist ideas of primitive Christianity and nourished by the messianic and regenerative medieval religious thought’.\textsuperscript{482} The new Spanish empire was then built on the ruins, literally, of the Aztec empire, ‘just as the new Spanish churches were constructed upon –and even with – the rubble of native temples’.\textsuperscript{483} After this initial destruction, however, historian Alan Knight writes how the Spaniards opted mainly for a life of further conquest informed by the desire to find \textit{El Dorado}, or for a life of luxury and relaxation, ‘where those values we identify as ‘aristocratic’ came to permeate the whole’, reliant on slavery controlled through traditional caciques.\textsuperscript{484} This allowed a degree of indigenous autonomy to exist for a while – despite the decimation of the nobility and priests – and the survival of traditional societal organisation, ‘albeit traumatized’, and threatened by disease.\textsuperscript{485}

The spiritual conquest of Mesoamerica was therefore just as crucial as the military in the subordination of the populace. From the often absurd mass conversions Cortés made of uncomprehending people during the Conquest, to the systematic conversions of the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{479} Inga Clendinnen, \textit{Ambivalent Conquest}, p. 128.
\textsuperscript{480} Enrique Florescano, \textit{Memoria Mexicana}, p. 264.
\textsuperscript{481} Inga Clendinnen, \textit{Ambivalent Conquest}, p. 132.
\textsuperscript{482} Enrique Florescano, \textit{Memoria Mexicana}, p. 284.
\textsuperscript{484} Inga Clendinnen, \textit{Ambivalent Conquest}, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{485} Alan Knight, \textit{Mexico - The Colonial Era}, p. 11.
\end{flushleft}
Franciscans and others afterwards, the story of the arrival of Christianity to the Americas is both profoundly shocking and a fantastic example of religious flexibility and cultural adaptability. The Spanish priests often represented the best and worst of friends.

Florescano points to the ideas of the Franciscan, Jerónimo de Mendieta, who ‘considered the indigenous people the ideal material for installing a terrestrial paradise’.\(^{486}\) This type of relation between the priests, monks and friars who first came to Mexico and the indigenous populations is of particular interest because of how it set up a pattern of missionary zeal when dealing with indigenous peoples. Knight explains how they viewed them:

> In the eyes of the friars, especially the Franciscans, the Indians were spiritual children, special wards, blessed with human rationality (as yet untapped) and pristine virtues (as yet untainted). They seemed meek, decorous, docile and industrious; they were like ‘soft wax’ ready to be moulded... The friars therefore took it upon themselves to connect and educate the Indians, while sustaining the Indian social order, which seemed to them gratifyingly non–materialistic.\(^{487}\)

It is the blueprint of the paternalistic relationship between non–indigenous and indigenous societies that will be repeated over the centuries. On the one hand this contact initiated a process of acculturation while remaining ‘profoundly subversive’ to the economic and political aims of the crown.\(^{488}\) For the Franciscans it was not merely an act of compassion, their ascetic relationship to the world was the complete inversion of the conquistadors’ mad grab for gold and gave them a ‘special poignancy and authority of a deliberate denial’.\(^{489}\) Death and disease, combined with an attraction to millenarian ideas, led to the often–superficial conversion based around ‘correct external behaviour’, but with the fervour of those released from the ‘hardships artificially contrived in the Old World’.\(^{490}\)

An example of the many contradictions is the Dominican, and first bishop of Chiapas, Fray Bartolomé De Las Casas, who fought for indigenous rights while supporting African slavery.\(^{491}\) Following on from Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, the first chronicler of the Indies, who had

---


\(^{487}\) Alan Knight, *Mexico - The Colonial Era*, p. 36.


\(^{489}\) Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquest*, p. 46.

\(^{490}\) Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquest*, pp. 47, 49.

described the Indians as ‘cannibals and addicted to sodomy, with heads four times bigger than the Europeans’, Las Casas began his opposition. Having owned and then liberated his own Indigenous slaves, Las Casas set to defending the native populations from the Spaniards while establishing laws and rights through the crown.492

While celebrating the natural virtues of the Indigenous, he accused the Spaniards of ‘destroying paradise’.493 While he may have struggled against the excesses of the Spaniards, his entreaties for them to be restrained in the name of God conversely signalled the legitimacy of Spanish rule. According to Florescano, a righteous, Christian rule was acceptable by Las Casas. Nonetheless, his stand against the most abhorrent behaviour of the Spaniards ‘came to be the foundation stone of the libertarian tradition in Latin America’: the epitome of the Rose Legend. Las Casas was to be the first bishop of Chiapas and he went about setting up his idyllic and utopian society of priest and Indians.494

The crusading fervour of the Church, and indeed the Conquest in general, must be put in some kind of context. It followed on almost directly from the re–conquest of Spain by the Catholic Kings and the eviction of the Moors. The discovery of the New World therefore, ‘opened up ‘dazzling vistas': the prospect of mass conversions (to complement those of the Jews and Moors of Spain), spiritual triumph over Islam, perhaps the end of the world itself’.495 The process of conversion was unequal in its geographic and doctrinal success. The relatively ‘pragmatic theology’ of Mesoamerica which tended to favour successful gods over vanquished gods gave the Catholics a boost.496 The therefore powerful Catholic God and his band of saints and angels did not find it difficult to enter the indigenous pantheon; but this did not mean the old pantheon would disappear.

The act of conversion also guaranteed a certain degree of protection against the Spaniards who acted hastily against idolaters. ‘Prudential theology was therefore seconded by a form of prudential socio–political reasoning’.497 Old ways refused to die despite the best efforts of the first wave of idealistic clergy to arrive. ‘New converts happily mingled the old and the new in a hybrid ritual and theology which was shot through with heresy’.498 The Maya south in particular, where a traditional cosmology continued to exist, resisted conversion. Here, as

492 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 303.
493 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 315.
494 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 316.
495 Alan Knight, Mexico -The Colonial Era, p. 32.
496 Alan Knight, Mexico -The Colonial Era, p. 38.
497 Alan Knight, Mexico -The Colonial Era, p. 41.
498 Alan Knight, Mexico -The Colonial Era, p. 44.
Clendinnen describes, degrees of success and failure would mark colonial relations to the present day.

In these early days of settlement the fear of relapse into pagan ways and the force of any kind of ritual led to the banning of almost all gatherings, especially where drinking or dancing could take place, even ‘idle and illicit chat’. Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquest, p. 58.

Indians appeared to be embracing the faith, building their own churches, being baptised, and performing the ceremonies of the church. Problems merged, however, as they returned time and time again to be re-baptised, others hid their children from the friars, and the rituals in the churches began to reek of pagan rites. Of course the response to such behaviour was swift, and the example of the Franciscan Diego de Landa in the Yucatan is extraordinary.

Arriving in New Spain in 1549 his inquisitional style and approach included the destruction of all the Mayan books he could get his hands on. His ability to achieve this paradoxically reveals both a sympathy and confidence in the Indians as well as a ruthlessness and singularity of mind in his earthly mission. Such books were extremely closely guarded, and de Landa’s access and knowledge of them shows an extraordinary level of trust between himself and indigenous leaders. De Landa also set up his own courts to punish those presumed guilty of religious blasphemy. Clendinnen describes the violence, torture and performance of these trials, conducted outside of any legal code, as producing the mise en scene of the inquisition harnessing all the power of Christian ceremony. Once again he was very aware of, and witness to, the importance of theatre and dance in Mayan life. His own performance of trials could be seen as a mimesis of mimesis, a fighting of fire with fire.

The terror and cruelty produced a reversal of norms and the indigenous people began to seek refuge and protection from the settlers. In an attempt to produce the idols that the priests accused them of worshipping they would dig up mouldy and broken old relics from abandoned temples. The absurdity of the situation was magnified at every turn, as oppressor became protector, the guilty became innocent and vice versa. Pity, suspicion, guilt and the sense of betrayal spiralled out of control to the point that any and every action led to stronger reprisals.

As Clendinnen concludes, the Franciscans ‘did not confuse the human voice of pity with the commandments of God’. In their belief of their own disinterested role as protector of the

499 Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquest, p. 58.
500 Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquest, pp. 69-70.
501 Carlos Montemayor, Los Pueblos Indios de México, p. 41.
502 Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquest, pp. 76-83.
503 Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquest, p. 112.
Indians, the apparent betrayal by the Indians led to the ‘emotion–charged punitive rage of the betrayed parent’. What seems at play here is the power of the imagination to transform the confessions of the Indians, ‘so vivid, so rich in compelling detail’, into plain reality. Combined with the epic performance of the trials the dastardly guilt of the Indians was too good to refuse. The familiar nature of these events is confirmed in de Landa’s account of the Yucatan written years later in Spain. Rather than the deceitful and treacherous pagan Indian he nostalgically describes the tender and docile children of paradise. The protective father once again feels tenderness towards his errant children.

Despite the exploits of de Landa and many more like him, traditional practice remained, sometimes cloaked by catholic imagery, but never far from the surface. As Knight so aptly remarks, ‘not for the last time in Mexican history erstwhile idealists despaired of changing society by transforming men’s minds’. The heady days of early conversion was tempered as a wave of more secular clergy replaced the likes of the Franciscans and Dominicans, and social relations turned towards economic concerns. The failure of the missionary idealism of those early years and its desire to find a paradise of God’s children in the New World did not end without its casualties. The destruction and burning of idolatrous gods, temples and texts represents a form of cultural genocide on an unimaginable scale.

This sense of betrayal and deception on behalf of the friars reveals their terror and internal conflicts, but it also reveals a deep sense of communion with the indigenous people. As Clendinnen points out, early incursions into Indian territory and Spanish accounts show the common reference to ‘deceptive displays of friendship’ where those who were friends one day became enemies the next. Such deceptions point more to a misunderstanding of signs, gestures and hierarchies, yet the potential of friendship, as misguided and ultimately shallow as it turned out to be, reveals another side of some fundamental yearning for communion. As Taussig points out, stories of first contact around the world, at the moment before translation was possible, often show an initial delight and pleasure in mimicry and communion.

As fleeting as these sublime moments may have been, these initial contacts and their potential for friendship also created the potential for betrayal and deceit. Such contacts were also haunted by the stories of men gone native. Shipwrecked Spaniards were known to be living

---

504 Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquest, p. 113.
505 Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquest, p. 121.
506 Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquest, p. 125.
507 Alan Knight, Mexico - The Colonial Era, p. 50.
508 Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquests, p. 7.
509 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 93.
with the Indians in the Yucatan and the Spaniards had captured some to work as interpreters. From these exchanges, informant’s myth, reality and suspicion of the opposing camp took on a life of their own. If the conquest and colonisation of the Americas was to reveal the entirety of the self, then the Spanish self hid within it the fear of its own barbarity and primitiveness.

Clendinnen posits that the eventual victory of the Spaniards in the Yucatan, as well as coming from disease and military supremacy, can be understood through the parochial nature of indigenous societies and the local experience from previous invasions and incursions that the enemy would eventually move on. However, the logic of colonialism saw the religious and ruling classes exterminated when they no longer served the Spaniards, leading to the most profound rupture according to Florescano. These ruling classes understood and interpreted the calendars; their loss meant the loss of connection between man and the cosmos: ‘To destroy this relationship was to untie them from the cosmos, to throw them into a space and time without support’.  

As the Spaniards squabbled amongst themselves over control of the country, corruption, nepotism, and rancour towards the Crown grew, while battles of resistance and rebellion continued. Through these early actions against Spanish rule we can see patterns of resistance emerging that will be repeated under different guises up until the present. Indigenous peoples still vastly outnumbered the Spaniards who: ‘lived with a lurking fear, occasionally reinforced by chilling experience, that the feckless Indian would turn ferocious savage, perhaps in unholy alliance with the black slave’. The new social reality that classed people into the categories of caste, Spaniard, Indian and black, also signified the beginning of an Indian identity and resistance.

Indian identity

The survival of oral histories and traditions (despite religious conversion), as well as the annihilation of the nobility who formally divided and stratified Mesoamerica’s indigenous peoples, created an environment in which an Indian consciousness and identity developed. More a result of social factors than anything else, this unity drew on ‘diffuse communal

510 Inga Clendinnen, Ambivalent Conquest, p. 35.
511 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 332.
512 Alan Knight, Mexico - The Colonial Era, p. 102.
memory and sentiment.\textsuperscript{513} Florescano points to the formation of a post–conquest indigenous narrative consisting of ‘a rejection of the present and the restoration of an almost magical past of ancient governance, when “everything was good”‘.\textsuperscript{514} This, he suggests, will become the underlying theme of all future indigenous insurrection.

Resistance to Spanish systems of organisation was common and bit by bit the multitude of ethnic groups began to think of themselves as the Spaniards thought of them; as Indians. Rebellious groups quickly realised that ‘Ladinized Indians’ (one familiar with Spanish ways) could be leaders. ‘Acculturation, in other words, could facilitate resistance as well as docility’.\textsuperscript{515} This would set a precedent to be followed by other ‘outsider’ leaders such as Zapata and subcomandante Marcos. It would also demonstrate a willingness to learn, plagiarise, and appropriate new ways of battle.

The first instances of rebellion rejected everything imposed from outside. Florescano points out how resistance to the Spaniards was always looming and how it moved from insurrection with purely traditional indigenous objectives to incorporate Christian and Spanish customs, methods and beliefs. Major uprisings in Mïztîn in 1541–1542 and the Yucatán in 1546–1547 were completely anti–Spaniard and anti–Christian.\textsuperscript{516} These uprisings called for a complete rejection and extermination of everyone and everything European and found their authority and justification in native gods. However, the destruction of traditional centres and reorganisation along European lines, forced migrations and the devastating impact of disease, gradually led to a syncretisation of narratives.

One of the more remarkable examples of how this syncretism of European and indigenous memory operated, as well as a great instance of mimesis of the image world, is the Primordial Titles of the late seventeenth century. Designed to put the indigenous possession of land in a legal framework, they used both drawing and text to illustrate claims to ancestral lands and history. At first appearance they seem to show a complete failure of the communities to understand or grasp Spanish legal codes or even basic European concepts of time and space. Florescano points out how some Titles put the arrival of the Spaniards in the year 945, others 1907, while history and myth became completely confused. While this may seem a failure to grasp forms, Florescano sees it as an example of a new understanding of Spanish authority.

\textsuperscript{513} Alan Knight, \textit{Mexico: The Colonial Era}, p. 119.
\textsuperscript{514} Enrique Florescano, \textit{Memoria Mexicana}, p. 335.
\textsuperscript{515} Alan Knight, \textit{Mexico -The Colonial Era}, p. 70.
On the one hand, the use of years and dates are understood to have special importance, as the Spanish always dated everything, so the communities did so too, even if they didn’t know why and what they meant: they became signs of legitimacy and/or magic. On the other hand, the use of ridiculously distant dates signified a mythical importance to them, ‘rather these dates have the quality of cosmic dates which do not merit explication; they are seen as new arrangements of the world which are self-justified’. 517

Laura Lewis explores the themes of power in colonial Mexico through an analysis of the legal system and black magic. She also introduces a third party into the mix, the often-ignored African slaves. The mix of black, white and Indian in a system of competing institutional forces of the crown, church and state, began to reveal patterns of power and ascendancy which flowed back and forth, where the mythical counteracts the historical and the magical the legal. As such, in these hierarchies and reverse hierarchies, each group took on certain attributes of power and weakness. Such hierarchies were also depicted in the pintura de castas in which all-possible combinations of black, white and Indian were painted in a way that served as somewhat of a precursor to eugenics.

Despite the racial profiling and discrimination the colonial system still had to function, and in the colonial courts all sectors of society, including Indians, blacks 518 and mestizos were quite litigious. The legal system was not only used to suppress but became ‘sites for colonial identity construction within the strictures of colonialism’. 519 Such early courtroom documents point to indigenous victimisation at the hands of random black brutality that more often than not went straight back to the orders of the Spanish masters. As Lewis tells us: ‘As well as protecting Indians, Spaniards were the ultimate source of their abuse’. 520 The ‘blacks’ were the intermediaries, the overseers and managers of the Indians. Black aggression, strength and supposed sexual powers were used to highlight the supposed ignorance, weakness and powerlessness of the Indian. On the other hand, witchcraft was seen to come from the Indians which was then passed onto the blacks and lastly the Spaniards who were seen as the least understanding and powerful of such black arts. 521

517 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 376.
520 Laura A. Lewis. ‘Colonialism and its Contradictions’, p. 417.
521 Laura A. Lewis. ‘Colonialism and its Contradictions’, p. 420.
Taussig points to what he sees as the two great narratives to emerge from the Americas: the narratives of the ‘Indian’ and the ‘Negro’. While the ‘Indian’ has been ‘recruited to the task of carrying the originary America’ and adding authenticity to the American story, the ‘Negro’ has been ‘recruited as the carrier of disturbance and fragmentation’.\textsuperscript{522} Lewis also highlights the account by Bernal Díaz of the outbreaks of smallpox attributed to a black man, revealing that from the outset conquest and colonialism linked the black man to disease and inferiority.\textsuperscript{523}

Through anthropology and its ‘fetishization of the Indian’, a vision of the world and history has been sustained in which mythology, kinship and ecology, create ‘coherent intelligible structures […] a veritable structure of structure itself’.\textsuperscript{524} From this happy equation, however, the ‘Negro’ has retained the burden and the power to ‘disturb the patterns’\textsuperscript{525} of meaning and sense in America, while remaining very much part of the story.\textsuperscript{526} As Taussig points out, ‘this history is every inch a history of labor discipline’ and ‘a Sacred History too, in which race—fantasy takes the place of heavenly fantasy’.\textsuperscript{527}

These narratives and fantasies thus played out in law, work, social relations, in unity and in rebellion. Florescano highlights the movement from the initial indigenous revolts that rejected everyone and everything Spanish to an acceptance of the new god and saints of the Europeans, ‘making the values theirs, converting them into indigenous divinities, saints and rites’.\textsuperscript{528} Florescano sees this not as a rejection of the Spanish, but a new search for identity that was broken with the conquest. While the indigenous people searched for identity, so did the creoles of the New Spain. The synthesis of Spanish, Indian and Creole identity found its most important manifestation in the cult of Guadalupe.

The cult around Guadalupe developed over the hundred years following the conquest. Its most popular interpretation is that of an apparition of the Virgin to the Indian Juan Diego in 1531. The significance of the apparition and its resultant imagery was that the Virgin was an Indian Virgin, not a white one. More than anything, for the creoles it meant justification and legitimacy of identity, not as Spaniards, not as Indians, but as Mexicans. The apparition of the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{522} Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{523} Laura A. Lewis, ‘Colonialism and its Contradictions’, p. 410.
\textsuperscript{524} Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{525} Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{526} For more on identities and how concepts of mestizaje, multiculturalism, and even contemporary genome research continue to exacerbate such classical divisions of blacks, whites and Indians while celebrating unity and las tres razas, see; Peter Wade, ‘Rethinking Mestizaje- Ideology and Lived Experience’, Journal of Latin American Studies, 37, 2005, pp. 239-257. And; Peter Wade, ‘Blackness, Indigeneity, Multiculturalism and Genomics in Brazil, Colombia and Mexico’, Journal of Latin American Studies, 45, 2013, pp. 205-233.
\textsuperscript{527} Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{528} Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 404.
\end{footnotesize}
Virgin meant that Mexico was a predestined land; it also became the model for future reclamations of identity and a way of ‘self-affirmation for the isolated and uprooted indigenous populations’.  

Rebellion

During the conquest Chiapas remained on the periphery. As Mexican historian Emilio Zebadúa explains, its remoteness and distance from the major trade routes as well as its poverty kept it in a state of underdevelopment. The first attempts at conquest occurred in 1524–1525, with one party from New Spain and another from Guatemala, with varying degrees of success. Both colonies would thus fight over rights to the lands. In 1527 Diego de Mazariegas was named governor of Chiapas on behalf of the government in Mexico City, in 1530 the Spanish crown ceded the land to Guatemala, and it was then traded back to New Spain then back to Guatemala.

Las Casas arrived in Chiapas in 1545 and immediately supported the end of indigenous slavery. This quickly brought him enemies, and as a result his stay in Chiapas only lasted until 1546 when he had to flee. By the end of the sixteenth century the dream of Las Casas in Chiapas was over. Colonialism brought its share of epidemics, mass forced migrations and draught, and, ‘in this ambience of cataclysm, unexplainable death and powerlessness, various towns in the highlands of Chiapas witnessed extraordinary miracles and apparitions’. While disease and oppression had left an indelible mark on the communities, following colonial logic, both landowners and the Church allowed traditional organisation to remain as a mean to better control them.

In 1712 the Maya enacted one of the most serious revolts to hit the colony. It formed around a revival of indigenous cults, a rejection of the Spanish church and crown, and a sacristan–turned–prophet Sebastian Gómez de la Gloria. Gómez claimed to have been in heaven, where

529 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 425.
532 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 428.
he had talked to the sacred trinity, the virgin Mary, Jesus, and Saint Peter.  

Robert Wassertrom looks at the 1712 uprising to discuss ideas of resistance and submission. While he points to a heritage of academic research which has posited the traditional and communal nature of indigenous Chiapaneco societies as a hindrance to social progress, he sees in the events of 1712 the seemingly contradictory coexistence and heightening of resistance and submission. Here he finds an extreme disaffection with colonial and postcolonial forms and:

a tradition in which both submission and resistance play equal (if sometimes equivocal) roles, that constitutes the common historical experience of Indians in Mexico and that continues to animate both their sense of ethnic identity and class consciousness in our time.  

The situation in Chiapas leading up to 1712 reveals many of the circumstances illustrated by Clendinnen in the Yucatan following conquest. Increasing numbers of clergy were entering the territory along with the increase in church owned properties, taxes and tribute. Wassertrom points to this lucrative business for the church, based on the work and tribute of the indigenous populations, which coincided once again with fear and concern for native ritual and ceremony.

The response of the church was to aggressively investigate and ban any activity even vaguely suspicious or superstitious. In the years leading up to 1712, however, ever increasing accounts of miracles and divine appearances spread throughout the highlands of Chiapas. In the town of Cancuc in 1712 a chapel was erected to house the image of the Virgin found by a young girl. As the local priest came to destroy this sacrilege and punish those responsible he was met with claims by the locals that they were the true representatives of God, not the Spanish clergy. Meanwhile the indigenous prophet, Sebastian Gomez arrived at Cancuc and began organizing an indigenous religious hierarchy to oppose the Spanish in what he saw as a república de indios, ‘a New Spain, a second empire in which Indians had become Spaniards and Spaniards had become Indians’. In a not dissimilar way to the Zapatista uprising, this new ‘Indian’

533 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 439.
republic did not gain universal support from all the indigenous communities; many fiercely opposed it, yet despite its relative inferiority to Spanish forces it took off.

Wasserstrom alludes not only to the ethnic divisions between native and Spaniard, but also to class divisions. Faced with the options of acculturation and mestizaje, what emerged was a willingness to change everything but one: ‘their right to be naturales’. As such, the tension between subordination and resistance also contained a fundamental desire to reject the class system and labour conditions imposed by the Spaniards. The communities would sacrifice everything but their Indian identity, rather than join the ranks of mestizos at the bottom of the class system.

With many parallels to the current situation in Chiapas, the Maya rejected Spanish institutions while adopting Christian symbols and, ‘inserting them into a radical nativist ideology [...]’ Gomez propounded a new syncretic religion which, far from being a reversion to paganism, claimed a higher revelation than the Spaniards’ Catholicism’. Violent reprisal followed and the rebellion was put down. The blame was placed on the excesses of religious and economic activities. However, the economic, cultural, and spiritual suppression that continued would ensure the continuation of Mayan discontent and survival of the messianic vision. This would surface once again in the Caste Wars of the 1840’s; the Tzotzil Rebellion of 1869; and in the Zapatista uprising of 1994.

Florescano identifies the key aspects of such insurrections and uprising in their colonial context: firstly there is a profound collective aspect combined with charismatic leaders, or messiahs, and formed around sacred events such as apparitions. From an intensely divided society and oppressed peoples comes the search for identity, an inversion of hierarchies, and a ‘symbiosis of the sacred and the profane, at time indistinguishable’, which will lead to better times. For weapons they will turn to a ‘mythical indigenous arsenal: witchdoctors specialised in the magic arts, soldiers immune to death, leaders with extraordinary powers, and supernatural forces which favour the indigenous peoples’. Note here how these powers and magic are the things that the Spaniards first attributed to the Indians, and the Indians to the Spaniards, from their initial contact and misunderstandings. Note also the similarities in the way Las Abejas turned the Acteal massacre into a sacred event and themselves into spiritually pure. As such the camera becomes a magical tool/weapon as well.

538 Alan Knight, Mexico -The Colonial Era, p. 148.
539 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 460.
540 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 467.
Around these events and interpretations narratives began to combine the historical with the mythical. Despite the conviction of the Spaniards that the indigenous peoples lacked a written history, thus a past, present and future project, Florescano points out how these groups ‘never broke their links to the sacred’, which, ‘could not be explained by history, but only through myth’. These myths, around which all ritual and cults revolved, were based on concepts of origin and creation: ‘a reign that existed before in an idealised past, in a golden age whose recuperation is converted into the maximum aspiration’. As such, with a cyclical temporal understanding in which the destruction/creation myth predominates, the actions of individuals are understood outside of the historical register and ‘mythic memory’ and through ‘archetypes and models of action, exemplary conduct is understood and converted into sacred prototypes’.

Before the conquest, theatre, comedy and the parody of hierarchies played central roles in yearly festivities of the Maya. This tradition continued during the colonial years, much to the annoyance of the Spaniards. This highlights another important point; as well as a level of misunderstanding in regard to politics and society, a broader level of misunderstanding existed in regard to the economy of aesthetics. As Clendinnen explains: ‘the Maya were engaged in a traffic in symbols of deference and regard, extravagant in ritual, high in rewards, but economical in products’. The failure to recognise the complexity and aesthetic nature of such a large proportion of indigenous politics and economy extended also to the depth of their historical and mythical memory. Wars of retaliation and vengeance were carried out, sometimes centuries after the initial atrocity. In times of hardship or famine the communities would retreat into a kind of hibernation, frugally waiting better times.

In this regard, Clendinnen suggests at their disposition to ‘experience subjugation without relinquishing their sense of autonomy’. Thus the Spanish conquest became another invasion or disaster to patiently see through. In the meantime they could occupy themselves with the task of harnessing the symbolic colonial power of the invader through aesthetic and ritualistic possession. Clendinnen also points to the Mayan relationship to the gods as ‘profoundly contractual’ and to the idea of transcendence through suffering and sacrifice to ‘be brought

---

545 Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquest*, p. 149.
briefly into harmonious participation with the rhythm and pulse of the gods’.  

Blood and ritual created the spectacle of fertilisation and harmony appropriate for the aloof gods to ‘invoke those functions through mimicry’. Thus the symbolic, aesthetic and the secretive all conferred power in a system which could bide its time.

Meanwhile, in and around the valley of Mexico rebellion took on another aspect, more commonly based around a ‘mixture of violence, levity and inebriation’. With the annihilation of the Aztecs and a much stronger imposition of Spanish rule in the region, the inhabitants of the valley had less room to move and were more quickly acculturated. With the Aztecs well and truly obliterated, and therefore posing no threat to Spanish rule, a freedom to dream was possible. ‘Mexican intellectuals could romanticize Mexico’s Aztec past – it was remote, safe, amenable – and weave it into a pretty tapestry of ‘proto–national’ myth’. A pleasant form of remembrance was created that would please Mexico’s mestizo population and assuage concerns over the violence of the Conquest: of course the celebration of the Aztec empire (Mexico’s pre–history) in the national narrative would do little to rectify the ongoing abuses directed towards Mexico’s surviving indigenous cultures.

**Narrative and revolution**

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of two dominant schools of thought in Mexico. Liberals and conservatives struggled over the meta–narrative of the nation. The conservatives followed the line of the conquistadors and early Spanish settlers who ‘generally denigrated native culture, characterized it as brutal and savage, and particularly condemned its idolatrous and ‘satanic’ nature’. They ‘interpreted the conquest as the birth of the Mexican nation, Cortés as its founding father, and the apparition of the Virgin Mary, as the Virgin of Guadalupe [...] as its christening’. The liberals, on the other hand, attempted to break free from rigidity of the colonial order.

Spain was threatened by the English on the seas, by a newly emerging United States on the edge of its colonies, and by Napoleonic France back in Europe. With their eyes on unstable borders, the fear in their hearts turned inwards as looming social discontent manifested in

---

indigenous myths and signs that ‘walked by themselves: they were ghosts which seemed to have life’. In such an atmosphere another example of the absurd, or the power of the mimetic copy, emerged. The King of Spain, paradoxically, became a symbol of resistance, revolt and liberation. He became disassociated from the poor governance of the Spaniards and became a mythical figure who defended indigenous and Creole Mexicans alike; ‘a paternal power and a patriarchal personality, a source of justice, a sacred authority, and a protective entity’.

Powerful forces began to identify not as Spaniards but rather as Mexicans, and the king became the symbol of their rebellion. This, however, was not the case with the ruling elites in Chiapas. With the outbreak of rebellion in 1810 a palpable fear was felt across the border. While Chiapas was still part of Guatemala at the time, the threat of rebellion, especially due to its ‘racial and popular’ character, put the fear of God into those profiting from the harsh treatment of indigenous communities.

With obvious political motives and a desire to distance themselves from Spain, the liberals began to celebrate Mexico’s ancient history and imagine a narrative linking the arrival of Christianity, the Virgin of Guadalupe, the providential nation and its independence. Others rejected the supposed providential aspect of Mexico’s history and therefore rejected the role of the Church along Enlightenment lines: ‘anticlericalism would be the touchstone of liberal ideology and historiography’. This would symbolise the contradictory role of the Church in Mexican history. Two of the major independence leaders were excommunicated priests, Hidalgo and Morelos, while the man who finally achieved independence, Agustin de Iturbide, was seen as doing so ‘with a guarantee to maintain the Catholic religion’. Therefore the selection of national heroes would depend on the pro or anti–Church position of those filling the pantheon.

---

553 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 523.
554 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 526.
556 Emilio Zebadúa, Breve historia de Chiapas, p. 89.
557 Thomas Benjamin, La Revolución, p. 15.
558 Thomas Benjamin, La Revolución, p. 16.
With independence came the need to unify the country under one myth, and so national historical writing began. The Insurgency needed an historical justification that was found in the Aztec past: ‘In exalting the last Aztec emperor Cuauhtémoc and the Insurgency’s leaders Hidalgo and Morelos, they tried to give the infant country the prepackaged heritage found in Creole patriotism’. The narrative was thus set, with mythic past, freedom from slavery, and the founding fathers in a pantheon of national heroes. Constitutions and decrees followed, as well as the founding of museums and archives, as the creation of the nation and unifying mission get into full swing. It was at this point in 1824 that Chiapas formally returned to Mexico. This reincorporation also saw a distinct division amongst the regions of the state along the lines of conservative and liberal thought. This division also marked a fight over control of land and indigenous communities, ‘which, in the state, continued being the main source of wealth’.

It is from this post–independence period that Florescano recognises the creation of the modern narrative and national memory of Mexico with its positive and negative connotations. The energy to remember was only matched by the energy to forget, and the battle between liberals and conservatives converted the colonial past into ‘the black epoch of Mexican history’, and thus, ‘[t]he negation of a Hispanic past ran parallel with the condemnation of the indigenous past’. Added to this, the meagre protection offered to indigenous communities and collectives under colonial rule was eradicated by the new liberal government. In this new ‘reductionist’ history an obsession developed in which all narratives went towards ‘exalting the triumph of liberalism’ while forging ‘an intolerant mode of viewing the past’.

Meanwhile in Chiapas, ‘where the corporative control was most extended and consolidated, the difficulties of progress were greater’. Here, as Zebadúa tells us, for the most part things continued as before, with the grand landholders keeping Chiapas isolated. With the Leyes Agrarias in 1825 and 1832 restrictions were placed on indigenous communal land holdings, and in 1827 with the Ley de Servidumbre anyone without employment could be recruited for military service or labour.

---

560 Thomas Benjamin, La Revolución, p. 16.
561 Emilio Zebadúa, Breve historia de Chiapas, p. 96.
562 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 553.
563 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 556.
564 Emilio Zebadúa, Breve historia de Chiapas, p. 97.
565 Emilio Zebadúa, Breve historia de Chiapas, p. 99.
The liberal reforms of the 1850s, which appropriated much of the land belonging to the Church, followed by the defeat of French forces in the 1867, finally left the liberal factions in power and in control of the national narrative. The Liberals officially proclaimed their cause to be the cause of the nation, their heroes to be Mexico’s heroes, their enemies Mexico’s enemies, and their interpretation of national history to be the history of Mexico [...]. Mexico at last possessed a master narrative.

The building of the nation was thus solidified through education, museums, publications, art, music, maps, newspapers, and civic festivities. In this unharnessable movement to progress and the unification of the nation one group was to become the greatest threat from inside, the indigenous peoples, ‘the enemies of progress’. The republic turned into a centralised dictatorship under Porfirio Díaz and economic and political progress combined with theories of social evolution reduced the indigenous Mexicans to mere obstacles to be overcome.

On the other hand, ‘almost at the end of the nineteenth century the economy of Chiapas had not progressed much’. Isolated and fragmented, Chiapas still remained on the periphery. Demand did, however, begin to grow from overseas investment championed by Porfirio Díaz. Wood from the Lacandon jungle, coffee, meat, and sugar began to attract foreign investment. Commercial demands needed labour, and, through the mobilisation of workers, ‘voluntary and forced’ large migrations began in order to break ‘the campesina forms of organisation that were an obstacle to the exploitation labour intense agriculture’.

---


567 Thomas Benjamin, La Revolución, p. 17.


569 Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, p. 564.

570 For a look at why Independence and liberal reforms failed to produce a stable democracy, see Gabriel L. Negretto and Jose Antonio Aguilar-Rivera, ‘Rethinking the Legacy of the Liberal State in Latin America: The Cases of Argentina (1853-1916) and Mexico (1857-1910)’, Journal of Latin American Studies, 32:2, 2000, pp. 361-397.

571 Emilio Zebadúa, Breve historia de Chiapas, p. 115.


573 Emilio Zebadúa, Breve historia de Chiapas, p. 119.
A century after the beginning of the independence movement of 1810, fireworks and electric lights illuminated the Zócalo in Mexico City in celebration of *el grito*. The celebrations ‘expressed both elite and popular attitudes toward historic moments and individuals, and contributed to the creation of secular heroes and holidays’ in order to ‘construct collective memory and political culture through images and words’. Liberal and positivist perspectives set the tone for conferences, monuments, parades, even a ceremonial reconciliation between Mexico and Spain. While pre-Columbian indigenous were celebrated, contemporary Indians were seen as the enemy of progress. The event while attempting to unify the nation under one common memory, also was aimed at impressing foreign eyes which meant the concealment of the less attractive parts of the city and its impoverished and indigenous inhabitants.

All this ultimately acted as the starters gun for massive upheaval and revolution that became the ultimate symbol of the Mexican project of unity and independence. It was both a violent break from the past as well as a continuation. The Revolution saw the end of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz that lasted thirty–five years, and ushered in the ‘perfect’ dictatorship that spawned the PRI who remained in power until 2000 (and recently returned to power in 2012). In many ways it was and remains a paradox. As John Womack Jr. so eloquently explains in the first sentence of his history of the revolution; ‘This is a book about country people who did not want to move and therefore got into a revolution’.

While the violence engulfed the whole country, power was ultimately not won by force but was rather secured between the warring factions with the consolidation, appropriation and control of the ‘revolutionary myth’. The revolutionary myth, memory and history would be harnessed and inserted into the larger project of ‘*forjando patria*, forging a nation, inventing a country, imagining a community across time and space called Mexico’. The collective revolutionary memories would be used both for and against the ruling party and find its ultimate contestation in the Zapatista uprising.

---

574 For more on the ‘idealized’ national space which Díaz wished to create, see Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, ‘1910 Mexico City: Space and Nation in the City of the Centenario’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 28:1, 1996, pp. 75-104.
At the end of the Revolution a unified narrative was needed to present to the nation as well as satisfy competing groups, ‘a civil religion to underwrite the new status quo’.\textsuperscript{580} The Revolution became the ‘religion of the patria’ and as such would provide both the legitimacy to rule as well as the legitimacy to rebel. As Thomas Benjamin writes, ‘La Revolucion is identified with the most sacred values and the highest principles of the Republic, as well as the greatest needs and aspirations of its people’.\textsuperscript{581} In this climate the greatest political insult is that of being a traitor to the Revolution.

The representation of the Revolution was done by a ‘rather thin but widely scattered stratum of insurgent literati’ who ‘constructed la Revolucion Mexicana as an imagined force and invented tradition in Mexican history and political life’.\textsuperscript{582} Meaning was given to the Revolution as it progressed. First it was historicised as part of an ongoing Mexican revolutionary tradition, and secondly it was reified and ‘presented as an autonomous force of nature or history’.\textsuperscript{583} There were however competing memories, histories and myths.

By 1928, after the death of all the revolutionary leaders it became necessary to create a more conspicuous link between the government and revolutionary memory. As Diego Rivera\textsuperscript{584} started painting his murals celebrating the Revolution, rebellion broke out in 1926. The three–year conflict by Catholic peasants against the government –known as the Cristero rebellion– was to be one of Mexico’s biggest uprisings claiming ninety thousand lives. While Rivera and his murals would be remembered and celebrated for many years to come, the Cristero rebellion\textsuperscript{585} would be largely forgotten, incompatible with the myth of the Revolution. The 1920s also saw the birth of indigenismo, ‘with its propensity towards retrospective eulogy of pre–Hispanic societies’.\textsuperscript{586} This played out not only on canvas and murals, but also on screens where the popularity of indigenous plots is suggested by Martin Lienhard as coming from

the rigour that the community displays in punishing those who transgress traditional norms is in brutal contrast with the beauty of the environment and the peaceful

\textsuperscript{580} Thomas Benjamin, \textit{La Revolución}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{581} Thomas Benjamin, \textit{La Revolución}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{582} Thomas Benjamin, \textit{La Revolución}, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{583} Thomas Benjamin, \textit{La Revolución}, p. 42.
nature of the indigenous people... the native communities reveal, from behind their smiling masks, their true, static, repressive and self–destructive nature, and above all, their incapacity to face up to the challenge of Modernity.  

And so it seemed in Chiapas, for once again Chiapas moved when the rest of the country was quiet and stayed still when others were in revolt. As such, ‘a political or armed organisation representing the opposition forces did not exist’. When the revolutionary forces of Madero attempted to bring the revolution to Chiapas in 1911, however, they met heavy armed resistance. In the highlands in and around San Cristóbal, the conservative forces mobilised indigenous communities promising them land and concessions. They were slaughtered, and Chiapas remained on the sidelines of the revolution. In 1914 the revolutionary groups of Villa, Zapata and Carranza had control of the country with Carranza self–proclaimed head of state. He had his man, Jesús Agustín Castro, take control of Chiapas, quickly turning things of their head and representing ‘a threat to the traditional order’. Resistance groups made up of guerrilla units were formed and became the ‘revolution Mapache’. While they remained resistant, they could not manage to take any major towns or cities, and despite failures, their strong rebuke of land reform meant that ‘combat and violence continued’. In 1920, with the revolutionary forces fighting amongst themselves, a Mapache boss was installed as governor of Chiapas, ‘and with it the Mapache revolution won’.  

Despite such failures in Chiapas, which could be ignored as always, it was time to formalise ‘La Revolucion hecha tradicion’. Much like the Aztec memory, once the Revolution was safely dealt with it could be converted into tradition and myth and be celebrated. In 1929 the Partido Nacional Revolucionario was formed (which will later become PRI) and on the twentieth of

---

587 Martin Lienhard, ‘La Noche de Los Mayas’, p. 39  
588 Emilio Zebadúa, Breve historia de Chiapas, p. 133.  
590 Emilio Zebadúa, Breve historia de Chiapas, pp. 140-141.  
591 Emilio Zebadúa, Breve historia de Chiapas, p. 144.  
592 Emilio Zebadúa, Breve historia de Chiapas, p. 147.  
593 Thomas Benjamin, La Revolucion, p. 93.
November the first annual sports parade was held to celebrate Revolution Day. Parades, monuments, national holidays, official histories, ‘la Revolucion in performance sought to heal those wounds of memory and, for a time, largely succeeded in doing so’. Cinema played its part in all this, as Carlos Monsiváis suggests. The mythologies created in the golden age of Mexican cinema, which corresponded to the mass social movements in both rural and urban centres, were designed to, ‘explain how to survive in the bewildering age of modernization’. The cinema in this era shaped national identity and social roles within the society, and in its excessive desire to mould a modern Mexican society, ‘it affirmed nationalism and deformed it to the point of caricature’. Through cinema, people from all parts of Mexico were shown what supposedly made them part of one unified country; cultural and regional differences were shown as curiosities rather than being treated as fundamental, and the modern Mexican nation was celebrated most commonly in the Revolution. In the post-revolutionary years, and in particular between 1935–1955, Mexican cinema, ‘more than any other cultural form, modernised tastes and prejudices and refashioned the idea of the nation by transforming nationalism into a big spectacle’.

Performing revolution

Just as de Landa used the theatricality of inquisition to combat the threats he saw from Mayan ritual and performance, so too can performance and ritual combat the institutional performance of Revolution. In this way poetry finds another link to the modern condition through its use of rhyme and repetition to address shock and trauma. Working from Freud’s ideas of neurosis and the need to re-experience a forgotten past while remaining outside of it or aloof from it, Tausig focuses on the aspect of repetition and the way it become an end in itself, ‘a compulsion so profound it exceeded even the search for pleasure’, and through repetition ‘anxiety acted as a stimulus shield preventing fright from creating shock’.

595 Thomas Benjamin, La Revolucion, p. 97. For more on the continuation of the Revolutionary legacy and in particular, President Cardenas, from 1934-1940, see Alan Knight, ‘Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?’, Journal of Latin American Studies, 26:1, 1994, pp. 73-107.
597 Carlos Monsiváis, ‘Mythologies’, p. 117.
599 Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p. 63.
While Taussig makes clear that the peasant poetry of Tomás Zapata shares little with the modernist poets in either style or content, what it does share is the categorisation as a poetry of shock, ‘not only as an expression of the art of memory but as the memory applied in modern times to the aesthetics of shock’. In this way, Zapata displays a public voice, rather than a private one, dealing with the violence and displacements of the marginalised peasant experience in Colombia.

What we also see in the testimony of the revolutionary veterans is the repackaging of pity and tragedy. In the trauma economy of suffering and redemption, which I have shown in operation from fall of Tenochtitlan and onwards, the ability to (re)present and (mis)recognise pity in the other has been a central axis in the formation of the particular colonial logic of Mexico.

The veterans of The Last Zapatistas also display this tendency to repetition and engagement with pity and tragedy. The filmmaker obliges them with the clever paced editing that only film could achieve, shifting from one veteran to the next before the truth or deceit of their claims can be verified and before the viewer begins to wallow in reflected self pity. Every statement and every shot seems to reveal a truth, but with a quick wink of the eye before we jump to the next shot:

We had to move around at night all the time so we wouldn’t meet up with the government because we hated them so much because they were killing our people. Here they got hold of seven innocent boys and hung them all from the trees around the church.

Millions of vultures would come to the site of the massacres to eat the flesh. At night only the coyotes fighting over the bodies were heard.

The government was getting nearer, massacring as it came. In ... in ... what was the name? ... Tlaltizapan. In Tlaltizapan they’d already killed the children and that’s why we were all afraid and my father took us away from here, we left.

Of course we lived in fear, our lives were hanging by a thread. There was a time when the government enforced conscription. I remember there was a detachment of soldiers here controlling everyone coming in and out. When we went to the town centre they didn’t say anything but when we came back they’d ask ‘where are you going?’, ‘I’m going home sir’, ‘Going home, be damned! Get on inside’ and they’d lock

---

600 Michael Taussig, ‘Constructing America’, p. 65.
you up in the train wagon while in town other soldiers were seizing the young men putting them on the train too and sending them away to war, to the unknown. So they’d say ‘better to go with Zapata than to be taken by the government’ that’s when Zapata should have won.

I didn’t join the revolution because I wanted to. I was forced to, Zapata stole me. In a place called La Lluvia. We were watering the cattle there and swimming when Zapata arrived. We were fighting, throwing water at each other, and he said ‘that’s what I want, fighters. That’s the sort I need. Look boys, let’s see if we can get back what’s been stolen from us with the help of my compadre Otilio Montaño and his ideas. If we do get it back it won’t be for us. Land, water and justice will be for those who come after us. We are going to die and I want you to come with me on this cause. I am calling for a just cause’.

And then in 1913 they brought in the so called conscription. They took the young men, filled up the trains and sent them north. The old men were sent into exile to the Yucatan, now an elegant tourist area, an exile from which they never returned.

I was fourteen and my brother thirteen, when my mother, crying said: ‘My sons, the government is coming, bringing conscription. If they take you I shall never see you again. At least here I’ll know where you are, where you die’. I didn’t really want to but my 13 year–old brother said ‘come on’ and we went. That was why she sent us to the revolution. The government enforced conscription and our mothers were left weeping. The government wanted Morelos to fall so Zapata would have no more supporters. They wanted to finish the people off. That’s why they brought in conscription.

I was Zapata’s messenger boy. At night he’d give me a horse and would hide papers inside my sandals. When I got there they’d take them out and put more in and I’d go back to give them to him. That was my job.

They told me my father had been shot by the government. I felt bad because my father had loved me a lot. I was fourteen when they shot him. We were always together. I could think of nothing else but ‘once and for all, if they kill me then let them but I’m going to join Zapata. I may die, but I’ll go down fighting’.

In this time of innocence turned upside down by war and injustice, where young boys are ripped from their mother’s breast, where fear lurked over every hill, and children become pawns and hostages and a way to exert terror, death becomes a choice. One can die here or
there, now or later, but one must die. Paradoxically, considering their old age now, their youth at the time of the Revolution heightens the sense that events occurred in a kind of Peter Pan world in which young children ran around fighting the corruption of adulthood. These extremes of old age and youth seem to suggest the power of approximation and distancing in storytelling. In youth we live in the present and everything seems so very immediate, while in old age we have a lifetime of hindsight. The assimilation of these two perceptions of time gives the stories a force and authority which seems to out–manoeuvre historical ‘truth’ and data. In these spaces of fear and death, these people who should be pitied, somehow, in the same breath, turn pity and tragedy into epic strength.

The stories they recount seem to echo the testimonies from the Acteal survivors, the official reports and the ‘investigation’ by the Canadian filmmaker, but somehow the themes of fear, pity, death and betrayal seem different. We have seen how narrative arranges events, and there seems little doubt that for these veterans history and story become one and the same thing. The Revolution is the event, the moment that was and is betrayed. From the betrayed moment emerge the modern condition of nostalgia, memory and hope, and testimony of the veterans seems to consist of these three elements in equal part. There still seems a difference to the other stories, as if these old peasants somehow take possession of these elements to create something transcending; nostalgia becomes epic, memory becomes mythic, and hope becomes sacred. They seem to simultaneously embody the story while remaining apart from it, as if difference and assimilation can be overcome with the cheeky grin and glint in the eye that they all seem to have.

The patterns of resistance that we have looked at once again arise. The Spanish become the ‘oppressor’ despite the fact that Mexico had been independent for nearly one hundred years. Times, dates, people and slogans seem to transcend their literal meanings, and, like the Primordial Titles, become through a mimetic movement, powerful forces of resistance. Most evidently, sacred and profane time synthesise in the charismatic leader/messiah.

And Zapata said ‘I want neither weapons nor money, I want the land’, and that’s why we have land.

Here he would give the money to the poor. He’d bring herds of goats and send for all the poor people and give them a goat each. Zapata never mistreated the peasants. He was never uncivil to them. El Señor Emiliano Zapata.

Zapata was a true man, steadfast, not a liar.
He didn’t fight for his own ambitions. When Venustiano Carranza entered Mexico City Zapata had already entered the National Palace. If Zapata had been ambitious he would have sat in the presidential chair, like Venustiano did. But he was totally unambitious. What he wanted was a good thing, that we should all be happy, that we should have a safe place to live in and that we should have enough to eat. That’s what he fought for.

He was like any peasant, but what they were doing to his parents and family and all the people, that hurt him. That moved him to make the uprising.

His goal was for the people to remain owners of their land because they had land but the Spanish had taken it from them. So Zapata rose up in arms to return the land to the peasants.

This was Emiliano Zapata’s barracks. We are in the place where Emiliano Zapata had his hitching post. Right here. I’m not telling a lie, I never do, ever.

Very kind and serene, very quiet. He didn’t twirl his moustache, he always kept it tidy. I twirl mine, but he didn’t. A well-kept moustache … and very calm. He wasn’t one to get carried away.

He liked bullfights. He liked cockfights. He liked women. He had women everywhere, he wasn’t just anybody.

That yes. He liked the women. That’s fine! Women are beautiful, because they have the loveliest beauty in the world, because they’re a comfort to men, they’re the contact with love.

Young, he was young.

Zapata came and he married Luz Zúñiga. Then he married Goya Zúñiga because Don Manual Zúñiga was double–crossing him. He was with both the landowners and Zapata and Zapata said to Don Manual ‘I won’t hang you because your daughters defend you but if in three years I return I want these daughters of yours to be maidens just as God brought them into the world. That’s how I want to find them’.

Zapata’s power emerges in a sentiment towards the land and justice as we would expect, but it seems to blossom in the way he does the same things as everyone else, but not quite. Like the Primordial Titles mentioned above, Zapata lays claim to the land in the name of the
people, while he also lays claim to the women of the town. His ability to win the ladies becomes as legendary and memorable as his ability to defeat the enemy and maintain his moustache. But once again, it is in the mimetic movement, from being like everyone else but slightly different, more serene, more macho, more daring, that he exerts such influence. It is, however, only in death, and more specifically in the story of his death, that he seems to become truly mythic.

As he entered, they sounded the bugle as if to honor a general. Then this lieutenant stepped back a pace and shot him in the back. Then those over there opened fire. And these others began to fire, two volleys.

It wasn’t he who died, it was his *compadre*.

Yes, he died.

I don’t know if he died or not.

He died.

Yes he died.

I myself feel he didn’t.

No, no he didn’t die.

He died ... who says he didn’t?

Well ... not in the Revolution no, but now they say he’s dead ... who knows.

When the government soldiers brought him in dead they entered the Villa de Ayala, mocking him and shouting, ‘long live Zapata!’ All the soldiers were shouting, ‘long live Zapata!’ What a tasteless joke, he was already dead.

They laid out the dead man, killed by the government and the people were forced to say he was the leader but many realized it wasn’t him, and whoever said it wasn’t was killed immediately.

After three years he saw how all the people were working their land now that it had all been divided up. Then he says, ‘Now’s the time *compadre* if you’re going to take me to your country let’s go’. ‘But what about money?’, ‘There’s money’. They went to Anenecuilco to get the gold they’d buried there. ‘Let’s go’.
‘I’m leaving’. He told us, he was with a tall man. And they left ... for Arabia.

Yes, he has two children in Arabia. Zapata has two children in Arabia.

That’s a lie, that is, Zapata never left Morelos. We know Zapata didn’t leave Morelos. We were hardly able to get out of the way of the government here in Morelos let alone go to Arabia. Arabia’s not close—by like Puebla or Oaxaca. Arabia’s miles away.

The Italians took him ... he must be dead by now.

He’s dead now. He died in Arabia.

Zapata was taken to Arabia by an Arab, his compadre, that’s how we know he wasn’t dead. Because Nicolas Zapata told me, ‘don’t believe what they’re saying about my father, that he’s dead, my father is alive and I’ll take you to him one day’.

I know everything. After the Revolution I studied a bit about military matters ... and it’s called ... it’s called ... a secret of war.

And so the history of the revolution remains somewhere between Mexico, Arabia, and Italy, while its myth remains in the performance and sentiment of the last veterans to tell the story. As Mosquera points out, these various responses, ‘apparently mutually exclusive, represent a web akin to the non–synchronicity Taboada associates with Mesoamerican remnant ways of knowing and remembering the past’. It is through ideals and sentiment of a Mexico profundo and the sensuous storytelling of the veterans, that los de abajo invert history and its hierarchies.

**Deceit and trickery**

Mosquera points out three temporal dimensions used by Taboada in his films: archival time, recollection time, and ‘conditional and utopian time’. The archive time shows a fluid and lived relationship to the past and the material traces of the past, the second includes manipulation through the politicised restaging of the past and the staging of interviews while the third time is the evocation of an unfinished Revolution. However, despite the resemblance of film to memory, the fragments, visual and aural elements, and the emotional reactions to it, McDougall stresses that film most commonly represents memory through codified signs, ‘the

---

external signs of remembering’, which operate quite differently to memory and differently to other textual representations of memory. Rather than an exploration of another’s memory, film explores these external signs, building on the ‘selective and ideological’ aspects of memory and adding further layers of ‘cultural convention’. Film uses such objects, as well as photographic images, ‘as if this were memory itself’.

As McDougall concludes, these ‘authentic’ signs of memory are edited within testimony and interviews ‘quite illegitimately as the memories of the speakers’. We can think of the movement from an interview or testimony with any of the subjects in any of the films and the sudden jump to archive footage or landscape as if these somehow approached the memory of the speaker.

McDougall here points to narrative as a problematic concept in films of memory. As fundamental in the governing of time, narrative makes possible memory and language, ‘objects have origins and futures’. While often relying purely on testimony, the relation between representing memory and ‘constructing the audience’s present experience’ has failed to be addressed in the ‘celebratory stance towards memory’ in which narrative authority has been abandoned: ‘the unattainable richness trapped inside the subject’s memories is supplanted by the addition of much illustrative material’. This is the same point Benjamin made on the celebration of veracity over authority.

Wahlberg’s work is crucial here for its significance in uniting film theory usually reserved for fictional cinema with documentary. The trace offers up the possibility of re–inscribing memory and history in a new quest for meaning in documentary.

The staging of and framing into different vestiges and images of the past provide effective means to transform a material indication of ‘this has been’ or ‘time passing’ into a representation of deeper symbolic and affective meaning. In this sense the temporal contingency of a vestige, imprint, or recorded sound in film may be invoked as the ‘assurance of an existence’.

Wahlberg explains how early cinema of the twenties and thirties may offer fresh ideas on how we distinguish cinema into scientific, documentary and fiction, as well as emphasizing the rhythmic and temporal nature of film. Analysing the work of amateur Dutch filmmaker J. C. Mol, whose experiments with optics and stop–frame films focused on the minute details of

---

604 David McDougall, ‘Films of Memory’, p. 35.
605 Malin Wahlberg, Documentary Time, p. 35.
blooming flowers, it becomes evident that sublime encounters with time was another of the drawcards of early cinema.\textsuperscript{606}

If we think of our films, images such as the moon through the mist, rain drops on windows, headlights through the darkness and slow–motion, are used suggestively to point to film’s sublime possibilities. They also allude to the mood and tone that the filmmaker wishes to convey about certain geographical and psychological landscapes. The shots of protest, revolt and manifestation simultaneously become representative of the particular and the general.

In films where memory and remembering are central, these signs function as a way of seducing us into a state of reminiscence and familiarizing the unfamiliar. It is as if these images particular to filmic perception are capable of opening up a pathway through our normal perception to the ‘optical unconscious’, bringing the faraway closer and distancing the immediate. Even in the case of events and peoples that we are distanced from geographically, temporally, and culturally, these objects and signs create a staging where contact can be made, and where pity and nostalgia can flourish.

As such, photographs, old footage or sound recordings take on the aura of the past and are presented as evidence of the passing of time, where their decay or out–dated nature becomes the proof and where ‘the past tense of a photograph may simultaneously suggest the not yet now of a future, the outcome of which we already know.’\textsuperscript{607} In The Last Zapatistas this is taken a step further as a contemporary image is altered to appear archival from which point it fades back to colour and its contemporary feel, evoking a sense of the past emerging in the present. Rather than a sense of a lost or betrayed past, all of a sudden the past becomes pregnant with possibility and future. This documentary construction Wahlberg calls a ‘chronofiction’, where the staging of time meets with a staging of history, memory, testimony and oblivion.\textsuperscript{608} While utilizing such archive material, documentary film simultaneously becomes an archival and memory object itself.

The ability afforded by photography to capture and categorise, to archive and compare, from criminals to natives, leads to this future projection. The photo can also reveal the malevolent features and forms of those who ‘would’ by nature tend to the criminal or savage. The revelations and details afforded by film and photos combined with their archival nature lead to ‘texts’ into which one can potentially read ‘a fear of crime equal to a fear of disease or mental

\textsuperscript{606} Malin Wahlberg, \textit{Documentary Time}, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{607} Malin Wahlberg, \textit{Documentary Time}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{608} Malin Wahlberg, \textit{Documentary Time}, pp. 42-43.
fragility, a manifestation of photography’s persistent threat that the photograph reflects the future of the viewer’. In this sense films ability to project back and forward opens up both hope and paranoia.

The films dive into the archive for material, they use old photographs of the protagonists to signal the moment of the event, as well as poetically using landscapes to signal the passing of time. They are then juxtaposed with their own contemporary footage to signal a then and now as well as suggesting the significance of the time in–between. Not only does this become suggestive of the ‘what was’ and ‘what is’, but also the ‘what might have been’ and ‘what might be’. The trace is always of the present and a transgression between past and present takes place once the trace is animated by knowledge and imagination. As Wahlberg points out, ‘the trace has less to do with transcendence or truth than with the activity of the viewer to imagine the past’.

The search for what we have forgotten or may be forgetting begins. Not surprisingly, the extremes of experience, trauma and reveries emerge. As Sutton warns, we must not confuse memory with its most common manifestations:

Even though, as we have seen, memory is a process or transaction always ongoing and only revealed by trauma and reverie, it is often too easy to cling to the idea that the latter make up what memory is. Trauma and reverie—the clying seduction of nostalgia—have come to dominate ideas of memory.

Here we find the pleasure of fear and pity that make up tragedy. Addressing the fallibility and slippages of memory are the so–called ‘signs of absence’, which ‘define memory by its true opposite, an embodied absence’. These shots of objects that are no longer where they were also correspond to the ‘dialectical images’ of Benjamin that realign the supposed order of memories and things. McDougall explains how these signs of absence lead us to the recognition that there is a knowing and representation of the past that is always beyond our grasp.

The embodied absence is also the presence of the absence that defines mimesis and points to a potential collapsing of self, other and object, and while documentary may be obsessed with memory, there always exists the opposite side of the coin, forgetting or erroneous memory. Here the aesthetic and existential side of memory in its fantastic manifestation has the

---

609 Damian Sutton, Photography, Cinema, Memory, p. 15.
610 Malin Wahlberg, Documentary Time, p. 58.
potential for the ‘therapeutic use of images’ according to Wahlberg, or its opposite; a negation of the past and potential to ‘screen out historical experience’.

The cathartic potential of tragedy thus seems to be echoed in the therapeutic potential of dialectical images, yet both these processes present the danger of falling into a vertiginous otherness and/or oblivion.

This leads to the further conclusion regarding the construction of history and memory, reminding us that ‘the trace of the past has less to do with essence than with a complex production of historical time, where narration and the reframing of media events rule out any preconception of the photograph as a window on the past’. Wahlberg concludes:

Documentary film complicates the discussion even further because this is a culture of representation where narrative imagination and a poetics of time blend with the objective of a social and historical quest. Hence, in important ways, documentary film would collapse the implied difference between the time of fictive and historical narratives.

The documentary quest, haunted by its struggle against time as well as its own history of contact, conquest, and colonialism, must be aware of its troubled relationship to representation. Through poetic enactment it will simultaneously soothe some memories while blocking others. As such, claims to ultimate truth will always evade it and questions of ethics arise.

As Sutton explains, three options remain open: repetition, betrayal, or the ‘consistent invocation to the ignorance of truths that may yet be revealed’.

What we see in The Last Zapatistas, according to Mosquera, is ‘a paradoxical but militant politics of memory (and of documentary)’, that doesn’t propose a new truth nor an historical relativism, but rather creates ‘a third zone of contact among memory traditions that directly interpellates the state and its corporate and mediatized machinery’.

I would also suggest that alongside clever choices and manipulation by Taboada there is an intimacy that embraces the viewer of the film. This leads to the last point in regard to the film: the role of the viewer and the gains of the subject.

---

612 Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p. 118.
613 Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p. 133.
614 Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p. 149.
Fascination

Technology is always accompanied with claims of how it will embrace new/unknown/unheard voices and the introduction of mimetic machines onto the stage of colonial encounter provides us with the great moment of the primitive in modernity. What Taussig illuminates here is ‘the white man’s fascination with their fascination’.617 While the camera bolstered the sense of the scientific endeavour of early contact, the sense of the magic of technology manifested itself most strongly in the phonograph. Using the case of adventurer R. O. Marsh and his 1924 search for White Indians amongst the Cuna, a story linked to geopolitical struggles surrounding the Panama Canal, Taussig emphasises how photography become emblematic, ‘to verify the existence of the scientific attitude as much as the existence of that which was photographed’.618 In the case of Brazil and the Amazon Luciana Martins also suggests that in photography, films and maps ‘these media were not only representing a country in the process of transformation, but in different ways were part and parcel of that same transformation’.619

However, the camera quickly became used to capture the moments of technologies magical appearance in nature and amongst natives. In Nanook of the North by Robert Flaherty, Nanook the Inuit hunter is filmed listening to a phonograph and attempting to eat the record (the film was completely orchestrated by Flaherty), and in Werner Herzog’s Fitzcarraldo, the opera of Europe is blasted through the valleys of Peru as the protagonist dreams of building a opera house in the middle of the Amazon (Herzog is also well known for manipulating the subjects in his documentaries). Here Western fascination with the magic of technology is taken to the peripheries of civilisation where it is tested out. Martins points out the barely disguised pleasure of the American explorers in the Amazon with their ‘magic’ equipment and their disappointment when the natives don’t respond to it with fascination.620 As if the primitive in modernity needs the validation of the primitive, the bewilderment of the natives amuses and comforts us and our fascination grows with their fascination.

At the turn of the twentieth century, few of these men operating cameras or phonographs truly understood how they really worked and so they held a deep if unacknowledged mystery. At the turn of the twenty-first century this mystery has engulfed almost every interaction and moment of our lives, and not only in the West. The relentless movement from awe and

617 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 198.
618 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity, p. 199.
fascination at the newness of digital technology to its everyday use and normalisation creates this mystery. To take this technology to the colonial frontiers is to reinstall the mimetic faculty, ‘as mystery in the art of mechanical reproduction, reinvigorating the primitivism implicit in technology’s wildest dreams, therewith creating a surfeit of mimetic power’.621 This is where the idea of the Nervous System comes in, ‘because the interpreting self is itself grafted into the object of study’.622

Anthropologist Jay Ruby raises the question or problem of voice, authority, and authorship in documentary film and visual anthropology and the solutions of cooperative, collaborative, and subject–generated films.623 He splits the field into two distinct approaches, the ‘Dziga Vertov style’ in which the filmmaker’s vision and expression is foregrounded (this is the most common), and the ‘Robert Flaherty style’ in which collaboration between filmmaker and subject is encouraged in the spirit of traditional ethnography, ‘to give a “voice to the voiceless”’. In this sense, it becomes a political act in support of the oppressed and those without access to media outlets. The role of the specialist filmmaker imparting his skills or sharing his artistic concerns with the oppressed is challenged, as, Ruby points out, ‘the right to represent is assumed to be the right to control one’s cultural identity in the world arena’.624

Coupled with a sense of the ‘tradition of the victim’, and whether making films about human suffering does anything at all, Ruby illustrates cases in which marginalised communities have ‘starred’ in major productions, yet there is, ‘little evidence that their economic and social conditions have markedly improved’, and the only visible gain was ‘to advance the careers of their [the film’s] makers’.625 Mosquera also questions whether projects designed to empower the most marginalised and make them the central protagonists in their own representation make them ‘more disposable than ever’.626 Ruby questions the impact of politically or socially directed cinema and suggests the ‘impotence’ of such films. ‘Regardless of Lenin’s oft–quoted statement, film may not be a cost–effective tool for social and political change’.627

---

623 Nichols takes the question of how to represent certain groups further by asking how to represent the body, See Bill Nichols, ‘History, Myth, and Narrative in Documentary’, *Film Quarterly*, 41:1, 1987, pp. 9–20.
625 Jay Ruby, ‘Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside’, p. 52.
627 Jay Ruby, ‘Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside’, p. 52.
Ruby describes a ‘paradigmatic shift’ in the last thirty years between filmer and filmed. The end of the era when documentary was viewed as fact is seen to begin with the end of the colonial era, where ‘people formally the object of our gaze’ began to challenge the idea of who could represent who. The second factor was that through the social sciences, with ideas of cultural relativism, the diminishing power of Positivist models and more self–reflexive mode of investigation were emphasised. Thirdly, he describes the development of new media and literary genres that challenged ideas of fiction and non–fiction, ‘documentaries were recognized as an articulation of a point of view–not a window into reality’.

The result has been a responsibility of the documentarian not to feign objectivity or claim truth, but rather to renegotiate the relationship between author, subject and viewer. The promise of cinéma vérité that people would be able to tell their own particular filmic stories, represent themselves, and enact their own staging of reality was quickly clouded, according to Ruby, as the ‘voice of god’ authority simply moved onto the screen, as ‘talking heads ‘evolved into the next cliché. Victims’ stories became ‘jaded, predictable performance of a victim of the “disaster of the day”.

Dominant modes of filmmaking remain, and those seeking to enter the system of funding and distribution must be aware that they are making a product to be consumed. As Freya Schiwy points out in the context of Latin America where visual media has altered traditional patterns of cultural transmission of power and the concept of ‘the lettered city’, ‘the creation of an audiovisual global marketplace does not render irrelevant the structures of power/knowledge/technology that came into being with the colonial experience.’

In this sense, even film made within a minority culture and by ‘one of their own’ may be seen to be corrupted by the system and field in which it operates. From this paradox there is no escape; as markets are created for minority genres that generate new profits filmmakers must accept certain limitations in their approaches and the making of products. In the case of our four films, The Last Zapatistas and A Place Called Chiapas have enjoyed budgets and production values which enable them to screen as feature length documentaries, while Acteal:

---

628 Jay Ruby, ‘Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside’, p. 53.
630 Jay Ruby, ‘Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside’, p. 54.
10 years and Sowing Justice, made within the communities, would target the activist, NGO, and human rights audience, as well as their own communities.633

Whose illusion?

As Ruby concluded in 1991, ‘the image revolution so many of us assumed would emerge has thus far eluded us’, and, worse than missed opportunity, ‘the dream may turn into a nightmare’. Greater access to the media and technology also presupposes greater exposure to the ‘cultural centralization’ of Western television and film.634 ‘Diversity is ‘mainstreamed’, that is, it has the appearance of minority representation without seriously challenging anything’.635 Like quicksand, the more you struggle the deeper you go.

Visual anthropologist David McDougall examines the conundrum of anthropological and ethnographic filmmakers in making texts dealing with the politics and ethics of representation. While filmmakers have attempted to engage more with the indigenous voice critics have continued to see this move as mere appropriation. The external and internal criticism of filmmakers has raised ‘fundamental doubts about the possibility of cultural description’, while the awareness of such issues can paradoxically lead to ‘decidedly condescending and moralistic ethnocentrism’.636

While Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques the idea of testimonial along the lines of speaking for/about, representing and re–presenting while famously asking, can the subaltern speak?, Beverley sees its possibility to claim the authority of orality over or alongside written literature due to the presence of the voice. Depending on the use of rumour and storytelling, oral cultures operate, ‘according to a fluid dynamic of anonymity, improvisation, and transitivity. It not only is oral; it also depends on orality and communal structures’637. While the testimonial way is problematic in the sense that it can become a textual construct in which the voice is portrayed as authoritative and authentic, it does at least present a voice to which one can feel

---

a degree of solidarity.638 If one contends that although ‘we’ may be of the elite, yet do not intend to serve that elite, then testimonial offers a form of dialogue where before it did not exist. Beverley explains:

What happens in testimonio is not only the conversion of an ‘other’ into an ideological signifier, but also the confrontation through the text of one person (the interlocutor and through his or her function the reader) with another at the level of a possible solidarity and unity, a unity in which differences will be respected and ‘contradictions among the people’ worked out.639

The ethnographic and anthropological elements of documentary film are, according to McDougall, ‘on the verge of the surreal’ as they attempt to ‘neutralize [...] the “coefficient of weirdness” through the rationale of cultural translation’. It is the experience of paradox in the surreal that ‘must be grasped to generate new perceptions’. Within some ethnographic films these paradoxes are presented in the simultaneous representation of two separate cultures whose meanings are ‘embodied in one image’. In this image two different cultures seem to appropriate the other in the ‘simultaneous perception of two different frames of reference, in boundaries crossed’.640

McDougall’s argument revolves around the question of whose story it is. He asks how we can ultimately distinguish who has inscribed themselves and left their trace, and in which way, on a film, and what the film may mean to the various people who made it come about.641 The question of narrative and introducing indigenous or subaltern narratives leads one to ask whether it is used to tell a particularly indigenous story or used merely as a device in its wider narrative structure and strategy. At this point the question of the subject’s ‘voice’ and the film’s ‘voice’ becomes relevant: who is using who, and whose story is it? McDougall answers by claiming that, ‘in an absolute sense, all texts are used in this way are subordinated to the text of the author’, although in film, ‘more unencoded information can be said to ‘leak’ from the images’.642

As indigenous films echo Hollywood narratives, or Hollywood parodies the indigenous people, as the voice—of—god appropriates the authority of the subject, or the subject the narrator, the

---


641 David McDougall, ‘Whose Story Is It?’, p. 3.

642 David McDougall, ‘Whose Story Is It?’, p. 5.
questions of authenticity must move beyond the idea that form or content hold the answer. As we have seen, form moves back and forth as styles and fashions prevail, while content is subject to the vagaries of veracity or the paternalism of well-intentioned producers. While attempts at collaborative filmmaking find their limitations, and in an industry in which massive imbalances of power exist, the answers must be looked for in these ‘leaks’ or gaps. Examples of productive academic, cultural and political collaboration between indigenous communities and outsiders can be seen, for example, in the work of Jan and Diane Rus with the Taller Tzotzil publishing project,\(^643\) which Thomas Benjamin credits as being a driving force behind the Zapatista uprising.\(^644\)

As we have seen in the history of the mimetic faculty, whether between text and reality, in the civilising dialectic and colonialism, and in the mimetic machine the camera; such relations of power and hierarchy can and will spin off in unpredictable ways. Addressing the meaning that film as a particular material affords a text McDougall writes:

> If a film is a reflection of an encounter between filmmaker and subject, it must be seen to some degree as produced by the subject [...] The shape of the text may be said to take on the characteristics of the subject by virtue of ‘exposure’ to it, like a photographic plate.\(^645\)

Whose story and whose images it is, on the one hand is answered by the idea that film can never be completely owned or produced by the filmmaker. This shared ownership is strengthened when the film has particular political, cultural or symbolic meaning to the subject and when the process of making the film becomes of symbolic importance.\(^646\) When the subject has some control over what is and isn’t shown, the material can have ‘political and ritual purposes’ not completely clear to all viewers: ‘they are part of a continuing process of cultural reinforcement and contestation. They have themselves become emblems’.\(^647\)

The film and the filmmaker are being appropriated by the subjects as much as, if not more than, the other way around. Here paradoxically:

---


\(^645\) David McDougall, ‘Whose Story Is It?’, p. 6.

\(^646\) For an anthropological overview of how individuals and groups use media such as film for social transformation, see Maureen Mahon, ‘The Visible Evidence of Cultural Producers’, Annual Review of Anthropology, 29, 2000, pp. 467-492, and Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz (Eds), Visualizing Anthropology, Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005.

\(^647\) David McDougall, ‘Whose Story Is It?’, p. 7.
The film is no longer outside the situation it describes, nor has it merely been expanded through self–reflexivity or acknowledgement of its fuller meanings. It is inside someone else’s story.648

The tactic, displayed by the veterans in The Last Zapatistas, which seems to best evade the dead–end options on offer, is what Taussig refers to as the suturing of sense and sensuousness. The art of storytelling thus trumps the story, and the sentiment trumps the ideas, yet the story and the ideas paradoxically emerge stronger than before, energised by the struggle. It is here alone that the event avoids repetition or betrayal, and becoming revelation of truth. These are the leaks and gaps created through mimetic movements, and in the instance of this film, the collaboration manifests itself through the relationship between the filmmaker and the veterans, and through their ability to create a story together, recognizing the limitations of each other, as well as the possibilities of using and abusing each other. Just as the strength of their story is in the sense and sensuousness, the power of the film is in this suturing of sense and sensuousness. The trick becomes knowing when and how to identify and recognise fear, pity and tragedy.

The performance becomes the ultimate and penultimate performance, the last epic stand before death. What we get is not memory, but the poetry, narrativisation and art of memory, conditioned by history, oppression and resistance. Memory enters into every aspect of the body, mind, and soul, leaving its scars, wounds and imprint. It creates habit and is created from habit, and manifests itself in unconscious and involuntary movements, thoughts and actions. The testimony we hear and see is therefore a specific and particular manifestation of memory, yet it can direct us towards the sentiment and sensuousness.

This leads us to the final chapter, and the realisation of the bittersweet beauty, violence and tragedy that haunts contact, conquest and collaboration. This raises the always present question of justice in regard to actors, victims, and witnesses to both events and their subsequent re-presentation on film.

Emiliano Zapata and the Laguna Miramar

Four hours on the back of a truck along a winding dirt road half washed away. The first hour is a delight; everyone is smiling while they get bumped along. The second hour is sedate as people search for something to sit on or lean against. By the third hour we are getting deep in the jungle, there is nowhere to sit as the truck fills with people and logs. Everyone is constantly ducking the branches that threaten to take your head off. The fourth hour is a nightmare, I am destroyed, covered in dust, spiders are crawling all over me.

Just before arriving in Emiliano Zapata we pass San Quintín. ‘Son todos cabrones, violan a las mujeres’, the driver tells me. They are all bastards, they rape women. In the town there is a huge military base. Where every other building would struggle to call itself a hut the base is incredibly out of place. The strategic value of such a base is questionable, no invading army would be stupid enough to come along the road I just travelled, so it must be something to do with ‘internal issues’. In Emiliano Zapata a restaurant has been set up with the aid, as a sign proclaims, of the European Union. The town has been here for ‘un buen rato’ or ‘muchos años’, a good time or many years, no one seems to know or they aren’t too fussed either way. The kids are running around and fishing all day, I ask them why they aren’t in school as I saw the school on the way in. They tell me that they don’t have a teacher because they ran him off, they don’t know why. They look happy.

A sixteen-year-old boy comes to talk to me. He can’t understand where Australia is, he asks if it is further than Querétaro. He wants to know if there is work in Australia or if we all have to go ‘north’ as well. I try unsuccessfully to explain the visa and passport situation and the fact that there is no bus there, but I can see on his face that it makes no sense. Here everyone has to go ‘north’ to look for work. Only the elderly and the very young stay. The boy hopes to leave soon for the ‘north’. He is a Zapatista he tells me, he goes every now and then to meetings in La Realidad. There is a lot of distrust and conflict amongst the communities as well as distrust of
outsiders. The Zapatista towns fear that they are spies of the government. Here there is no money. He was too young to remember the uprising of the Zapatistas but he has the DVD.

‘An American girl was gang raped by a bunch from San Quintin while staying here’, the locals tell me as I put up my hammock beside the lake. Some tourism students and their teacher from San Cristóbal are doing a day trip/research but leave early, as they are too scared to stay. They leave quickly as the sun begins to set, barely saying goodbye, as if some premonition tells them that they are looking at a dead man or a fool.

That night an old man takes me fishing with his two young boys. We paddle back and forth across the immense lake checking the nets that they have left out. The two young boys sleep most of the time at the front of the boat and we barely say a word. The crystal clear water of the day has turned into a black marble, reflecting every known and unknown star and constellation from millions of years ago and for millions of years to come. Everything has dissolved. The past and the future are laid bare and there is nothing there but space. We catch one fish that we later have for breakfast.

Dissolves

At this point, nearing the conclusion of the thesis, I feel a strong desire to let things dissolve the way they did that night in the lake: to accelerate the circumnavigation and the mimetic movements between text and reality, to transgress the border between the self and the other, let fact and fiction blur, and get swept away in a ‘reverse contact time’. Strangely enough, I remember that night on the lake and its magical, cleansing and cathartic feel, but not as much as I remember the evening a few months later when I typed up my notes back in Australia. And once again, as I address those notes, as I approach the end of the thesis, there seems to be something especially curative about that night, but more especially so in the writing of it and about it. It is as if the copy or mimesis of the experience is more powerful than the original, and each time I copy it or readdress it, it becomes more powerful.

This to me is the power of mimesis, the curative and cathartic way of approaching a certain kind of Dionysian madness and/or otherness. Surely it is not just from a lovely evening fishing, but rather it stems from the entire staging that illustrates to me the aesthetic of terror in which stories of violence, rape, economic exploitation and resistance all coalesce. In this way I would like to let the fieldnotes, histories, and film all dissolve and merge into one another, yet I will hold back just a bit longer, for just as the temptation reaches its climax I can see the
image of the privileged nomad standing once more before me. This is the moment in which the danger of imposing my own desires and interpretations onto the actions and thoughts of others is strongest, the point at which quest potentially trips over into conquest. It is the moment, I would suggest, at which one should trip oneself up and disrupt one’s own narrative.

La Realidad

The truck arrives to San Quintín an hour late but it doesn’t. It is the ‘hora del gobierno’ here, the time of the government, otherwise known as daylight savings and affectionately known as the ‘hour of Fox’, in honour of the former president. Towns in the jungle accept or not the time change depending on their allegiance to the government, you can start at one town, go twenty minutes down the road and lose an hour, then another twenty minutes and be back where you started. The non–government time is known as the ‘hora vieja’, the old time, a time innocent of government meddling and corruption. The driver tells me that La Realidad is ugly and asks why I am going there. I forget what I answered.

La Realidad is a small village of wooden huts and dirt roads with a small stream running through the middle where the women wash their clothes. There is no plaza but the centre of the town has a small grassed area with the public buildings and school surrounding it and a giant tree in the middle. The school and other public buildings are covered in murals celebrating the Zapatista uprising in 1994. There are pictures of Che, Zapata, and Marcos as well as the dates of important moments in the revolution painted in bright colours everywhere. The kids play a game of soldiers using wooden sticks as imaginary guns under the gaze of these revolutionaries. They are re–enacting the Uprising with surprising accuracy. Many of the militants used sticks in 1994 because they didn’t have enough guns for everyone.

I meet the Junta who allow me to stay. They tell me that they will come and find me later on to talk about the town. I meet the driver from the other day who had taken me to Emiliano Zapata. His family moved to La Realidad in the 1980s. His father spoke three languages but he only speaks Spanish. There is a couple from Chile who have been living there for six months. They have been given a piece of land to work but tell me of the difficulties in being accepted in the community. Bit by bit people are starting to talk to them. For months the children called the girl a witch and ran away but now some are becoming curious. They tell me of the people who come here, usually from Spain, Italy and the Basque country. There is graffiti on the wall, ‘turismo es terrorismo’. The older men in the town gradually become curious and begin to talk.
They speak about the drought eight years ago and about the price of coffee, beef, and corn.
Everyone mentions how the town has reached its limits. There is no more space.

As the sun sets smoke drifts through the mountains, the burning off of the maize creating a ring of fire around the jungle, steadily penetrating further and further towards the centre. The kids go home to eat and the sounds of babies crying and dogs barking are both comforting and melancholic, suggesting the warmth of family and home yet also the isolation of the town.
Later on fireworks echo through the valleys like canons. The Junta never got back to me.

Reversals and recognitions

For the European revolutionaries who have travelled half way around the world to leave their anti–tourism graffiti on the wall, for the Chileans whose sense of solidarity has left them isolated in a jungle town, and for myself, the privileged nomad; we all find ourselves allowed to stay yet left outside. It is as if we are on a different time setting to the Chiapanecos, either an hour early or an hour late. Acosta concludes that such Zapatista silence makes visible:

‘what had no business being seen’ in Latin American disciplinary practice: namely, the weakness and ultimately conservative nature of the persistent appeal to translation and transculturation as the grounds for subaltern politics.649

Aristotle’s tragedy depends on two moments: recognition and reversal. Recognition is ‘a change from ignorance to knowledge’, while reversal involves ‘a change to the opposite in the actions being performed’.650 In other words, actions result in the opposite of what was expected or intended. The context for these recognitions and reversals is the oblivion from which the Zapatistas and Las Abejas seek to escape and can be traced back to the conquest of Chiapas. Jan de Vos speaks of those years and the events, ‘which provoked in the victims a trauma of such magnitude that it still persist in their descendants’.651

In the context of a larger ‘social awakening’ of indigenous Mexicans, as we have seen, there has been a multitude of responses to the uprising from different communities and divisions that extend to individual families. This awakening can also extend to those from outside Chiapas, as the quincentenary of European arrival in the Americas illustrated. Alongside such moments of recognition, there are also moments of reversal, highlighted by the way in which

650 Aristotle, Poetics, p. 18.
651 Jan de Vos quoted in Carlos Tello Díaz, La Rebelión, p. 38.
texts have become mimetically incorporated into reality in Chiapas. Whether political, religious, legal, fictional, or academic, the texts that have entered from outside, with the intention of improving or teaching the indigenous peoples of the state, have always resulted in unintended outcomes. What we then have is the staging of colonialism and the civilizing dialectic in which the ‘noble savage’ is always to be improved, yet always seems to deceive the patronising patron.

These films exemplify different ways in which various actors have attempted to portray the events as they were. This intention towards realism, information, and objectivity has been shown to create gaps, deceits and illusions despite –and often because of– its best intentions. What becomes evident is that questions of memory, justice and violence become more complicated the more we try to pin them down, and as practical and pragmatic as stated aims appear in the films, they always reveal a deeper level of desire for catharsis, healing and even communion with the gods. The power of the image to either cure or steal souls becomes apparent, and at every moment that a rational and ‘objective’ theory or explanation emerges, the meaning seems to escape from an unnoticed crack or gap.

The question remains then, what to do? One can either dissolve into a knowing world of deceit and illusion with all its cathartic potential, or try and apply the mimetic faculty to the acceleration of a kind of Hadron Collider in an attempt to find the God particle. To address this I will once more turn to Benjamin and his Theses on the Philosophy of History:

VI – To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the subduer of the Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. 652

We have seen already the way indigenous rebellions have attempted to wrestle back control of tradition and its communication, not through representing it ‘the way it really was’, but through sentiment inspired myth. Mere repetition or imitation becomes betrayal; it is rather through loyalty to sentiment and the sensuousness of the mimetic faculty that one can evade becoming ‘a tool of the ruling classes’.

The memory that flashes up at the moment of danger is the dialectical image, when the mimetic faculty can slide into imitation and the quest converts into conquest, for mimesis is a two-way street. To not do so can see the best of intentions descend into tragic parody. Here is where deception and deceit, the illusion and betrayal one expects to find, manifest themselves. The ‘noble savage’ emerges from a nightmare; from the haunting of past contact and misrecognition it becomes a reality in a misinformed logic. From this misrecognised contact, tragedy becomes the only narrative, a narrative that becomes cyclical and all encompassing, feeding off itself. Here Benjamin explains once more:

IX – A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. 653

The angel of history bears witness to the injustices of the world, as the event and tragedy only become so when they are recognised as such. In this case the angel becomes the narrator of man’s tragedy and despite his desire to make amends, ‘awaken the dead’, he is blown towards the future by progress, helpless, burdened by all that he has seen. In this case, the filmmaker resembles the angel, the rolling camera gathering up the never–ending stream of images that record a single catastrophe or tragedy.

Here memory is memory of wrongdoing, of injustice, but it is also intricately weaved together with the idea of hope in the form of justice. Slavoj Žižek asks whether this angel could be the

perpetrator of Benjamin’s ‘divine violence’ through his ‘wild intervention’. And if divine violence is the intervention of the angel, who blown by the gusts of progress, can only swoop down desperately to strike before being caught once again by the wind, Žižek concludes:

Couldn’t the entire history of humanity be seen as a growing normalisation of injustice [...]? Somewhere, in the sphere of the ‘divine’, perhaps these injustices are not forgotten. They are accumulated, the wrongs are registered, the tension grows more and more unbearable, till divine violence explodes in a retaliatory destructive rage.

It refuses deeper meaning; it is a sign, ultimately, of injustice and impotence, impotence of the act and impotence of God. While ‘mythic violence’ establishes law, ‘divine violence’ is law destroying and nothing more. It serves neither king nor god Žižek points out. Similarly, the actions of the filmmaker, swooping down to pluck out a story and narrative from the ceaseless piling up of images, refuse ‘deeper meaning’ yet momentarily shake up the illusion of normality with its own illusion.

This normalisation of injustice is mimesis (mis)interpreted as imitation, a betrayal. It is the daily news with its disaster story of the day, the official report into atrocities with its recommendations and rulings, the activist documentary with its plot of oppression, adversity and the overcoming spirit of the people, all which remind us that the world goes on as normal. These repetitions of accepted patterns that shock, amuse, and deceive, but always remain in the realm of the cinema of attractions: an illusion which everyone recognises.

**Punishment, forgiveness, forgetting**

Žižek asks if Benjamin’s divine violence points towards ‘explosions of resentment’ where, ‘resentment has nothing to do with the slave morality. It stands rather for refusal to ‘normalise’ the crime, to make it part of the ordinary/explicable/accountable flow of things, to integrate it into a consistent and meaningful life–narrative’. This is the point where justice becomes tricky, how are we to respond to acts of violence or catastrophes which resist meaning, which cannot be incorporated into the usual flow of things? Events such as the massacre in Acteal perhaps, can never be fully addressed by the ‘triad of punishment

---

(revenge), forgiveness and forgetting’.\(^{657}\) While punishment may be liberating, ‘an eye for an eye’, in such cases an adequate punishment cannot be dealt out, while ‘the ‘merciful’ logic of ‘forgive, but not forget’ is, on the contrary, much more oppressive’.\(^{658}\) Also, such acts cannot readily be forgiven or forgotten. Where such events cannot be ‘normalised’ there is nothing available but resentment, and justice served by these ‘explosions of resentment’.

Our duty is to act according to the logic of justice and punish crime: \textit{not} to do so entails the true blasphemy of elevating oneself to the level of God, of acting with his authority’. Authentic resentment is the only authentic stance when we are dealing with a crime of such monstrosity.\(^{659}\)

In the case of Las Abejas, however, what we have is a demand for punishment through the courts as well as the elevation of their dead to the level of saints. As Benjamin pointed out, even the dead will not be safe, and thus they must be made safe.

This refusal of meaning and refusal to be incorporated or normalised, these explosions of divine violence, lead us once more back to mimesis and its dialectic of assimilation and differentiation. Žižek explains:

What Nietzsche and Freud share is the idea that justice as equality is founded on envy – on the envy of the Other who has what we do not have, and enjoys it. The demand for justice is thus ultimately the demand that the excessive enjoyment of the Other should be curtailed [...]. Since it is not possible to impose equal \textit{jouissance}, what is imposed instead to be equally shared is \textit{prohibition}. Today, in our allegedly permissive society, however, this asceticism assumes the form of its opposite, a generalised superego injunction, the command ‘Enjoy’!\(^{660}\)

Žižek starts with notions of good and evil and their associations with, respectively, sacrifice and the communal, egotism and the individual. He switches things around to posit that the true opposite of egotism is envy and that the ‘death–drive’ is the true evil. Thus, we see how sacrifice and self–sacrifice become the main danger, while egotism becomes a harmless self–interest too occupied with itself to worry about the Other. Envy on the other hand produces fascination and absorption in the Other. This is where desire comes in, desire which is always

---


\(^{659}\) Slavoj Žižek, \textit{Violence}, p. 164.

\(^{660}\) Slavoj Žižek, \textit{Violence}, p. 76.
'desire of the Other’, desire for him, desire to be desired, and desire for what he has. What I would add to this equation is now a desire for the suffering and sacrifice of the Other.

So desire and envy are conditional on the Other and thus become key ingredients in the concept of justice as equality. We have already seen in the civilising/savagery dialectic how this fascination and absorption in the Other can have disastrous results. If we begin to see these as a result of envy, which seems evident in the praise and glorification of indigenous peoples from the earliest contact through to contemporary times in the form of the noble savage, we can see more clearly how the mimetic patterns reveal to us much more than the savage trying to imitate the civilised. It is rather quite the opposite. In these moments and events we begin to see the hopes and desires, the traumas and illusions of those who assumed superiority.

The relationship to the Other or neighbour is a spatial relationship here defined by proximity: ‘the proximity of the thing which, no matter how far away it is physically, it is always by definition “too close”.’ So what happens, in a moment in time where all the talk is of universal justice and human rights, multiculturalism and so forth, and yet our relationship with the Other and our concepts of justice are based on envy and sacrifice? To complicate things a little bit more, we should look at language itself, the tool which is typically hyped as the key to conflict resolution (how can one approach conflict resolution without ‘talking’). Language is violent:

Human communication in its most basic, constitutive dimension does not involve a space of egalitarian intersubjectivity [...] every ‘really existing’ space of discourse is ultimately grounded in a violent imposition of a Master–Signifier which is stricto sensu ‘irrational’.

So language, and in this case film, is not the tool of egalitarian justice either. The ‘master–signifier’ is the point in discourse where someone must take a decision to end the conversation. To have the last word and put the full stop. As such, the emphasis on telling must be counterbalanced by the showing. The limitations of voice have been clearly stated in regards to the subaltern, what remains is the possibilities and potentialities of showing, the realm in which mimesis is master.

661 Slavoj Žižek, Violence, p. 74.
662 Slavoj Žižek, Violence, p. 38.
663 Slavoj Žižek, Violence, p. 53.
The filmmakers find themselves in an ethical dilemma, deciding when to say cut and what to edit. Vengeance and resentment seem to manifest themselves in an action that attempts to slice out a story from a reality that defies comprehension.

**Justice through performance**

The massacre in Acteal leads us to the final film and the documentation of tradition and performance of memory. In June 2009 the community of Las Abejas, victim of the massacre in 1997, travel to Mexico City to present documents to the Supreme Court expressing their concern over the imminent release of the perpetrators of the atrocity.

In the film *Sowing Justice ... From Acteal: Las Abejas before the Supreme Court of the Nation*, contact is initiated between two distinct worlds; that of the Indigenous peoples of Acteal, and that of the Mexican nation. The victims of the Acteal massacre are the initiators and they state their motive in the first instant. In front of the sculpture erected to the memory of the victims of Acteal and other acts of global injustices, a man explains to us:

> After more than 11 years of impunity of the Acteal massacre it is very upsetting, as if there was no government in our country. The motive of the journey to Mexico City and the Supreme Court is to find out why they put more faith in the murderers than the victims.

A family wonders along the road in silence, passing by a towering sculpture in front of the village. The first portrayal of memory is thus simultaneously presented sculpturally and orally. The sculpture, titled, ‘A Sculptural Outcry’, is a writhing mass of entangled bodies, heads, arms and legs, which form a tower of human suffering which extends to the heavens: a totality of human injustice and pain. The shot cuts back and forth from the speaker to the sculpture. The souls of these victims in the sculpture cry out in silent agony as the representative of the village gives voice to them and the motivation of the journey to be made to Mexico City. The victims of the massacre have been given a frozen and silent sculptural form at the entrance to the village, which metamorphoses into life once more through the voice of the survivors and the journey to be made.

The journey to Mexico City has a clear beginning middle and conclusion. This quest to carry their word to the Supreme Court of the nation is clearly defined and successfully carried out by film’s end, resulting in a resolution and an end to the action. This quest involves a moment of
ritualistic contact between the community and the power of the Mexican government and its towering institutions. Along this journey, fear and pity are invoked through the testimony of the victims of the massacre and the evident struggle they undertake in order to deliver their message.

The tension that sustains this narrative of the journey is the material and existential invocations of memory. The film, through testimony and stylistic methods, plays with memory that is of the past yet manifested in the present and projecting into the future. Memory is shown as something that necessarily needs to be animated through word and action, symbolically and physically. It is something that is always at the point of being forgotten and something that constantly battles for veracity.

While exposing this process of remembering, the film also becomes an archive of the journey, with a sense that the filming of such an event will become a document of significance for the participants just as much as it may be for outsiders. As they attempt to make their word heard in Mexico City, the film will act as proof to others and to themselves that they carried out their duty to continue and keep alive the memory of their dead. As such, the film becomes something of an offering to the dead, a physical proof against forgetting.

As the words of the representative end, the journey begins. The trucks carrying the inhabitants of the village pull out onto the road, leaving the sculpture behind and beginning the pilgrimage to the other Mexico of power and authority. In these first few shots, memory has transformed from the solid and concrete into the voice and movement of the survivors, brought to life once more by the quest for justice. Here we see the movement between what Jens Andermann describes as monumental and itinerant memory: the monumental re–emplaces and sutures memory in landscape, while itinerant memory in the form of journey and film, and captured on film, ‘holds a possibility of overcoming melancholy and eternal repetition.’664 There is a powerful paradox at work here, of a people so intimately rooted in place and tradition, yet so naturally travelling and being modern.

And so the memory of the victims transforms into the journey to Mexico City. First by truck, then by coach, the group is shown cheerily bumping along the highways, crossing half the country. They are silent throughout the journey, all we hear is a lively soundtrack of modern and traditional music spurring us and them along. They pass military checkpoints and film

---

clandestinely as a soldier searches the bus. Passing mountains, lakes and towns, through sunlight, rain, and night, the wind rips through the bus, as the children play and the adults marvel at the scenery.

The bus trip seems inordinately long for such a short film. It seems that every stop and start, every moment of change along the way, has been shown. It reminds us that this film is not merely activist but documents the journey of a group of families who revel in the enjoyment of this journey. This sequence seems more like a family holiday movie than anything else, like a breath of fresh air and respite from the serious business of the trip.

Finally, they emerge from the bus, the shirts and slacks that the men wore when they boarded have been replaced by their traditional dress and they hold a wooden cross. It is as if their arrival in Mexico City, a place so distant geographically and culturally, has manifested in them their oldest and most conspicuous habits and customs. The memory of the victims is animated by tradition that is simultaneously reinforced through memory of the event.

We land in Mexico City in a press conference held by the community. Film crews and the flashes from cameras remind us of the nature of the press conference as event, something to be remembered and archived. The procession of people entering the room solemnly, both from the community and outsiders, identified by their respective dress, speaks of the ritual of the event. The president of the Las Abejas community, Sebastián, starts by stating the motives of the journey.

We decided to come here to Mexico City to give our word because we want them to know that the Supreme Court, in any moment, could declare innocent and free the 14 paramilitaries who participated in the Acteal massacre.

Memory, word, and movement are once again tied together, the memory of the dead manifests itself in the words of the survivors, whom enact this memory and animate it through the act of the journey.

The shots of the testimony that takes place frame the speakers’ head and the microphone they speak into. The act of speaking here takes over as a solitary event. For a moment, as the victims recount their stories, we become oblivious to what may be happening in or around the conference room. We see only the speaker’s head, they are alone in this most intimate of moments.
As Virginia, a representative of the women of Acteal, speaks the camera focuses on her mouth alone. Her tongue and mouth alone create the words we hear. As the prior head shot contracts into this tight shot the mouth and the act of speaking become disembodied even from the speaker herself. Her words once more focus on the power and the word and the shot shows us the instrument of this word creation. ‘We are not going to remain silent with fear. The majority of those who died were women, some pregnant. We have the right to say that we do not accept violence’. As she speaks of the women, the camera moves to the young girls, women and babies in the audience, then outside on the street, to mothers carrying babies who would not have been born at the time of the massacre.

It is at this moment that the transmission of memory through documentary is revealed in its most powerful aspect. The commemoration of the dead women becomes linked to the survivors, they illustrate to us what those who died may have been like: they become the living image of the dead. At the same time, the babies, yet to be born at the moment of the event, shows us the time malleability of documentary film. As we see the young girls we may think of the dead children and the age that they would have now, as we see the young mothers with their children and hear the accounts of the atrocity, we may imagine the innocence of the mothers and their children in the moments before they were butchered. And as we hear the fears of the community, that the perpetrators may be released, we may think about the fear with which these children will grow up. In this moment of testimony, animated by the images, the past, present and future intersect and shoot backwards and forwards. The ‘what has been’, the ‘what could be’, and the ‘what might have been’, coalesce.

Following on from the testimonies of several survivors, we are presented with several of the children, Zenaida, Efraín, and Gerónimo, now teenagers, who were injured during the massacre. They are presented one by one on the stage, their injuries pointed out as they stand passively:

[Zenaida] cannot see the way, she is blind, she has no father or mother. Come here [Efraín]. He wasn’t born like with his jaw like this. Neither was he [Gerónimo] with his hand like this, he has no fingers on his hand. How is he going to work and find food?

The three children and their respective injuries have an eerie reference to the aspects of memory and testimony in the film. Zenaida is blind, and thus cannot bear witness, Efraín has a mutilated jaw, thus impeding the ability to speak and give his word, while Gerónimo has a mutilated hand, limiting his ability to work and therefore continue customs and traditions.
Once again, the memory of the event is projected forward into a future disabled and mutilated by the past. It is the scars of the children that become the most visible trace of what happened, and what will not happen as a result. The scars speak of the passing of time; they illustrate the delays and miscarriages of justice that the others speak of. The way that the children are presented on stage, silent as their wounds are pointed out, convert them into the physical memory of the massacre. As children they symbolically represent the lost innocence of the ‘before the massacre’, the sheer violence of the event and the disabled present and future.

From the scars of the massacre we move to the truth of the massacre. From the earlier testimonies, to the open wounds, the film now presents us with the truth claims to memory and the reliability of the senses. Whether the speakers doubt their own memory or whether they feel that others do, we hear testimony that needs to reconfirm its own validity and truthfulness. At this point the very veracity of memory is at stake.

Mariano Pérez (survivor): It is true that the incarcerated came to kill, they are not innocent. They burnt houses, they displaced the people, and robbed our possessions, after all this they came to kill us.

Antonio (survivor): The truth is that there is no justice, already 11 years and 4 months have passed, there is no justice, they have treated us like animals. It seems that there is no government, they do not attend to justice in Acteal.

Maria (survivor): They must investigate because it is not a lie what we say. What hurts me is the four women who were pregnant, they opened their stomachs. What blame did the babies have? Is it a lie what we say? Well it is true that they came to kill us and that they mistreated the women.

Vicente (survivor): I am a victim of the massacre and witness of what happened in Acteal. Well we came here to declare, because we saw it with our two eyes. For that reason we came here. Everything that the compañeros said is true. We didn’t come to sow lies. We saw it clearly, I, from below the dead. I came out stained with the blood of the compañeros who died in that moment.

Agustín (survivor): All that has been said is true, it is not a lie. Here, I give my word. I am the catechist of Acteal. I saw how many people died and how many assassins there were. I was in a creek and saw how they passed over me. Because of that it is true that they came to kill.
The testimonies now begin to operate on the level of repetition, dependent on ideas of veracity and acknowledgement. The tone of the testimony in the film makes it quite evident that this accentuation of the truthfulness of testimony is fruit of frustration and a deep belief in the injustice of the judicial system. The testimony here does not waiver or betray any doubt. The testimony is a confirmation of the senses and of memory: what the eyes see, the mind remembers and the words spoken are the truth. In the testimony of the community, the truth of the event finds its counterweight in the truth of the government’s corruption and the systems injustice.

The final phase of the press conference defers to the outside experts, the human rights and church delegates. Here the memory of the event and subsequent process of justice or injustice is verified from the outside. Not only does a process of verification take place, but also the justification for remembering becomes directly linked to justice.

Edgar Cortéz (Red nacional de organismos civiles de derechos humanos): We have heard now on numerous occasions that the integrants of the organization Las Abejas have come to the Supreme Court to demand justice. Without a doubt, a reclamation completely necessary and indispensable and legitimate.

Pablo Roma (coordinator for peace): It is necessary that we hear the truth and punish those responsible, say no to impunity, and demonstrate clearly that the massacres must not be repeated.

An emphasis is also placed on the naming of the material and intellectual perpetrators of the massacre. Bishop Samuel Ruiz reads out the names of the intellectual perpetrators, including generals and politicians up to the former president of the country. As such, the massacre becomes part of Mexican history, above any local or regional status. It becomes part of the pantheon of national injustices and what would later be seen to be another desperate strategy by a government with next to no credibility.

From the press conference and the profound statement linking those highest in the national government to the lowest of acts, we come back out onto the street. Surrounded by the towering grey monstrosities of Mexico City’s skyscrapers, the indigenous men from Acteal, in their traditional dress, read the newspaper. The camera peers over their shoulder to reveal that they are reading an article about the press conference from the day before with an accompanying photo of themselves on the stage.
In a split second we have moved from the moment of the press conference being acted out before our eyes to the historicity and ‘pastness’ of the very same event. In this manner, documentary has the ability to project the present into the past in the blink of an eye. In one moment we seem to be present in the moment of the press conference, as if it was occurring before our very eyes, distorted as it may be by editing and changes in angles and focus, but in the next instance the press conference is in a newspaper we read, an event, worthy of reporting and of the past. This presence in the newspaper signals the veracity but also the finality of the event. The photo of the press conference in the paper, juxtaposed to the footage we have just seen, seems to jolt us from the rhythm of the film.

The finality and concrete stability of the photo seems to contrast immensely with film footage that seems to exist in a continuous present, emanating from a past and moving towards a future. In the film, when we jump from one shot to the next, or even one day to the next, it often feels as if we have merely turned around and shifted our gaze elsewhere. The shock of seeing the photo in the paper disrupts the illusion of being present where the movie camera is present, almost, paradoxically, making us question if we really saw what we just saw.

Here we see one of the differences between film and photography. Film, despite edits and jumps, operates on an almost seamless level of continuity and ‘presentness’ while photos speak immediately of the past and ‘pastness’. As we see the newspaper article we hear a voice over: ‘We have come to Mexico City to declare what we saw with our own eyes’.

The act of seeing, and as well as the photographic and filmic archive, reinforce memory which likewise animates the archive. A procession through the streets of Mexico City begins: banners, crosses, a Mexican flag, as well as a mock coffin are carried along. The memory of the massacre is pounded into the grey streets of Mexico City as they parade along, the camera focuses on the feet stepping out the walk and the coffin dragged along the ground. The heavy steps reminiscent of a funeral procession: weighed down by the dead and the solemnity of the occasion.

The hand held camera attests to the unstaged nature of the event. As the group arrives at the entrance to the heavily guarded and fortified Courts, the camera is there at the front as the representatives of the community present their documents to the officials. The officials leaf through the pages of documents and stamp them in a ritual of authority. The march then continues. They stop for a press conference:
We, the civil society, Las Abejas, come from the sacred land of the martyrs of Acteal so that the ministers see with their own eyes our injured survivors and hear our true word which carries the blood of the day of the massacre. For this, we demand that today we have an audience.

Returning to the Supreme Court a shrine of flowers has been set up and the catechist marks the occasion:

Now we are in Mexico in front of the Supreme Court. We are going to talk to God, we are here because we want justice. What we say is true, it is not a lie, that is why we are fasting ...

As he prays, the camera pans across small crosses bearing the names of the victims, attended by the women who light incense and candles. The representative begins once again:

To the men and women of the Supreme Court, we know that the lawyers and defenders of the paramilitaries have solicited you to obtain liberty for the paramilitaries. We have heard rumors that they are preparing a resolution to concede liberty to the twelve paramilitaries. If you are the maximum representatives of justice in this country, firstly, before making a resolution based on the papers of the lawyers who don’t even know the truth of Acteal, listen to our word, the word of the victims and survivors who are witnesses of what happened in Acteal the 22nd December 1997. Do not liberate the paramilitaries, especially the twelve whose names have been mentioned ...

As he reads the names they appear on the screen, the film makers reinforcing the words of the witnesses with graphics, he continues:

If really you want to help Mexico triumph in justice and defeat impunity in the case of Acteal, decide, we have been witness to many public functionaries who have accomplices of the paramilitaries, from simple soldiers and police to high state and federal functionaries, civil and military. We hope that you act on your conscience.
With these a small group of the representatives enter the court, passing through a labyrinth of barricades that protect the building. While they are inside, a representative from Atenco (the site of another atrocity)\(^{665}\) presents herself in an act of solidarity with the people of Acteal:

Brothers of Acteal, eleven years after the massacre, so brutal and cowardly, ordered by the government, we come to give you a greeting and tell you that here we are, we are indignant, we are from Atenco, we also have suffered a repression so brutal and cowardly by these authorities, who are called authorities when they are not. Not a step back compeñeros! Acteal vive, la lucha sigue!

With this moment of solidarity and the successful entrance into the Supreme Court, where their documents are handed in and their case heard, the journey comes to an end. As the camera moves around the temporary shrine set up by the community, the community representative concludes the film and the journey:

Now we are going to go back, thanks to God for protecting our path and for the days here, we have presented our documents and the responsibility for justice is now in the hands of the Supreme Court. Here we leave the seeds of justice, God willing our demands bear fruit.

The journey is concluded; the film has circled from the monumentality of the sculpture to the itinerancy of the journey and film and back again to the monumentality of a finished journey and an ended film.

\(\text{Katharsis / conclusion}\)

Vengeance has been demanded and the duty of the community has been fulfilled. God’s will has been acted on. Here a complete cosmology is explained and acted upon and nothing remains outside of the narrative. The fear and pity experienced are confronted directly and clearly, moments of recognition and reversal are recognised for what they are and nothing more. The event is placed back within the cycle of life and death and order is restored through duty.

The potentially traumatic event thus moves through the mimetic staging where the tendencies to excess are acted out. The haunting ideas of deceit, illusion and deception are confronted through showing: the scars and traumas are presented back for all to see. The gaps, where memory and imagination manifest themselves, here become subject to the particular concept of duty of the community and place. Through a clearly understood narrative, acted out to its natural conclusion, the kathartic moment is reached when they can turn around and go home.

Here, where they seemingly remain subject to the vagaries and despairs of the Mexican legal system, where we are left in the dark to the final outcomes, they happily and hopefully turn back. As Radstone points out in a warning against universalising and transcultural trends:

> Some memories get stuck and won’t be easily forgotten. Without attending to the locatedness of memory, as well as its movements, theories of transnational and transcultural memory, with their focus on memory’s high–speed (often digital) travel around the globe, risk eliding such memories from view, precisely because of their locatedness and immobility.666

For me this film does to ideas of travelling memory what The Last Zapatistas did with ideas of official memory. It emphasises the constructedness and desire to universalise and appropriate other people’s suffering and memory. What the film points out, which is so often forgotten, is that at the end of the day we must each go home.

In concluding the thesis I suggest the years of 1992 and 2010 stand out as exceptionally important markers and moments of commemoration. While the quincentenary of Columbus may not have excited those outside of the Americas, the breaking up of the Soviet Union in the preceding years made the Zapatista uprising resonate on a local as well as global scale. This history–making event not only triggered a re–evaluation of indigenous rights, but at a time of general political dissolution, of (neo)colonialism and history itself. Add in the infancy and explosion of the Internet, mobile phone and other digital equipment such as the camera, as well as the apocalyptic overtones of climate change, and this period begins to look like one of extreme hope and despair. All the elements to create a tragic condition; greatness and ruin, fear and pity, reversal and recognition, conquest and colonialism, are there with a digital and global twist that makes everything that came before seem ancient, antiquated and mythical.

The themes of the nation, neo–colonialism, modernity, identity/ethnicity, and the popular have been highlighted as having particular relevance to cultural studies in Latin America, but

---

666 Susannah Radstone, ‘What Place Is This?’, p. 115.
alongside the abovementioned incidents and developments they are issues that are important in every corner of the globe, and as such it is not difficult to understand how a tiny uprising in Chiapas could capture the imagination.

In *A Place called Chiapas* we saw the story of a dislocated traveller, searching out other dislocated peoples, i.e. Marcos, refugees, foreign visitors to Chiapas, and at the end of the day everything remains dislocated and at worst appropriated. This quick hit of swashbuckling empathising packaged up in a funky dress has all the necessary coolness to be a hit in the contemporary trauma economy, yet it leaves one sweaty and with a headache. It has all the pleasure and pain, and beauty and beastliness of the aesthetic of terror, as well as all the promise of the confessional, but in asking and answering the question about the agency of the indigenous Chiapanecos, it shuts down any possibility of truly reflecting on the question. Like the missionaries of old it enters the jungle already expecting deceit and illusion and therefore uses its own filmic methods of deceit and illusion to protect itself. It initiates the next phase of the civilising dialectic, this time not of the real world but of the image world, and what it mines out it uses for cathartic purposes. What this points to is the power of the image, for curing or otherwise, and the reason that many are still wary of the photo stealing their soul (through surveillance cameras).

Such a power is reinforced in *Acteal: 10 years* as the community use film to communicate directly with God and push the case of the victims’ martyrdom. I suggest this film subverts much of the debate about indigenous or subaltern agency, not because such questions are unimportant, but because it shows that such communities are often well in front of the debate and acting in ways that we as outsiders and experts would never imagine. As Poole points out, the indigenous label has been defended by many as a way of strengthening vulnerable cultural, national and ethnic identities. Yet, as she suggests, such classification ‘ends up defending an essentialist or primordial notion of identity that comes perilously close to older ideas of racial essences’. My conclusion would be that such work should be approached as avant–garde cinema rather than the often condescending and patronising label of indigenous film/media. In this case the audience seems to be way behind, still giggling at the primitives using technology, as new and great ways of thinking about and using film are happening right under our nose.

In *The Last Zapatistas*, notions of authentic or official memory are shown to encompass simultaneously remembrance, forgetting and embellishment. It travels not as ‘truth’ but as

---

sentiment, and laughs at the one-dimensional way in which memory is so often portrayed in documentary through impoverished signs of replacement. Instead it embraces the sentiment of the storyteller with their epic and dignified embellishments. What can be learned from such a film is not so much the authenticity, veracity or fragility of memory, but the joyous complexity of memory enacted through storytelling. Most importantly the storytelling, although inequality of some sort always exists, should take place between respected parties – in this case through the assumed roles of grandparent and grandchild. This film, to my mind, managers to best embraces the ideas of collaborative filmmaking and storytelling by creating and nurturing such a relationship between insider and outsider, the observant filmmaker and the cared for participant. As such it producers the most powerful example of contact, encounter and mimetic play both on and off screen.

In *Sowing Justice* they travel with their memory, however, at every point they create a monument of some kind. They leave behind the statue in Acteal, in Mexico City they create a temporary shrine/monument to the dead, as well as their documents, and then return home without further ado. They show the importance of emplacement in memory and paradoxically reinforce this by making a portable film that serves as a release. Las Abejas have turned inwards and have become intensely localised due to the massacre in Acteal, yet in doing so their memory has also travelled globally. They seem to have captured the spirit of proximity and intoxication, and thus communion with the cosmos, that Benjamin suggested. As such they embrace the tragic paradox as well as the photographic paradox.

Perhaps cinema is the perfect tool for embracing paradoxes such as the incommunicability of experience, constructive and destructive violence, envy and justice. In *One–way Street* Benjamin examines the way people ‘whom nothing moves anymore, nothing touches, learn in the cinema how to cry again’. The simultaneous distance and proximity of the film allows for an experience that has otherwise been lost. This is caused by a suspension of belief or an embrace of the mimetic play and illusion of cinema that allows for contact in a space in which memory and imagination can roam free.

What must ultimately be recognised, in this tragic theatre, is the awareness of the two–way street. It is not only ‘them’ copying us, but rather a constant mirroring, in which the civilising/savagery dialectic continues to be played out. If duty is to be performed, then it must be dependent on belief; and the reason why we could feel something for the characters of a

668 Walter Benjamin, ‘One-Way Street’, p. 98.
film can be explained by Žižek’s comments on beliefs which function at a distance where the ‘guarantor is always deferred, displaced, never present in persona’.669

Here the ‘guarantor’ can be on the screen, the character who believes and remembers, and in the case of the indigenous victims in the films on Acteal, the image of the ‘primitive Other’ manifests itself completely. It would seem like the ‘primitive Other’ on screen, ‘guarantor’ of memory and beliefs, is the one who makes possible our own ability to believe and remember. One way or another, the violence of the cinematic experience, the surgical precision of the cameraman who manipulates our optical unconscious, has an ability to reconnect us with experience and experience of the Other. The recognition of this tragedy, as well as moments of epic and comedy, if embraced by a mimetic faculty that constantly trips itself up, could be the best way to escape from the haunting ghosts that continue to roam Chiapas and the Western imagination.

Coming to the end of this circumnavigation, what becomes clear to me is the need to move beyond ideas that limit film production and consumption to basic tools for ideas of identity construction. The figure of the privileged nomad sits beside the images that ceaselessly move around the globe in a visual economy. In this economy, while global and complex, images are produced and consumed in radically different and local ways. Ultimately each film only comes into the world when it is seen in a specific place, at a specific time, and by specific people.

As we have seen, film can be a way of identity construction and resistance to oppressive culture, yet it is just as likely to be employed to move past the immediate oppressor and connect directly with the gods and the universe. In terms of justice this points to heavenly resolution rather than earthly. At the same time film can be used as a weapon of conquest, where the Other can be consumed on film. What is illustrated here is the tricks that cinema must use in order to conquer the Other. It is not mere taunts and accusations that do the job, but rather cleverly disguised movements in which the filmmaker reaches out with a helping hand. What is clear is that there is nothing inherently good or bad about making or consuming film, it can be equally constructive and destructive to peoples and communities.

This points to the legacy of conquest and quest in Mexico and cinema respectively. What becomes apparent is the way history has made cinema and vice versa. The legacy of questing, conquering, and the classification of peoples and places is built into the very celluloid and digital fabric of documentary film. To me this makes film a tragic medium. The aesthetic of

---

669 Slavoj Žižek, Violence, p. 83.
terror in which beauty and horror mutually sustain each other, as well as the fateful condition in which all representation simultaneously presents a dehumanising classification and a profound intimacy, leaves an inescapable paradox. Recognition of this paradox is not often enough made.

Finally, the act of storytelling rounds off the journey. What becomes evident is that a good story needs both sweeping grandeur and specific intimacies. This relates to contact and collaboration, where the mimetic inclinations of both people and film can be allowed to flourish, aware of the legacies and paradoxes that exist, yet unrestrained by false essentialising conclusions or earthly limitations.
Bibliography


trans. Stafford Poole, In defense of the Indians; the defense of the Most Reverend Lord, Don Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, of the Order of Preachers, late Bishop of Chiapas, against the persecutors and slanderers of the peoples of the New World discovered across the seas, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974.


Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Acteal: Entre el duelo y la lucha, San Cristóbal de las Casas: Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 1998.
Camino a la massacre. Informe especial sobre Chenalhó, San Cristóbal de las Casas: Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 1997.

De la memoria a la esperanza, San Cristóbal de las Casas: Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 2000.

La situación actual de derechos humanos en Chiapas. Reporte especial para Mary Robinson, Alta Comisionada de derechos humanos de la ONU, San Cristóbal de las Casas: Centro de derechos humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, 1999.


Thomas Elsaessar, Malte Hagener, Film Theory: an introduction through the senses, New York: Routledge, 2010.


Enrique Florescano, Memoria Mexicana, Mexico: Taurus, 2005.

Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, London: Allen Lane, 1977


Resistencia y utopía: Memorial de agravios y crónica de revueltas y profecías acaecidas en la provincia de Chiapas durante los últimos quinientos años de su historia, México: Ediciones Era, 2002 [1985].


‘The Other in Chamula Tzotzil Cosmology and History: Reflections of a Kansan in Chiapas’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 8, 4, 1993, pp. 443–475.


E. McAnany and K. Wilkenson (Eds), Mass Media and Free Trade. NAFTA and the Cultural Industries, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.


Carlos Montemayor, Los Pueblos Indios de México: Evolución Histórica de su concepción y realidad social, México: Debolsillo 2008


‘What Place Is This? Transcultural Memory and the Locations of Memory Studies’, *Parallax*, 17:4, 2011, pp. 109–123.


Jean Rouch, ‘On the Vicissitudes of the Self: The Possessed Dancer, the Magician, the Sorcerer,


Jaime Schlittler Álvarez, Etnogénesis y Martirio. La masacre de Acteal y su relación con la construcción de la identidad de la Sociedad Civil Las Abejas, Research Thesis submitted for the title of, Licenciado en Ciencias de la Comunicación en la Universidad Iberoamericana, 2008


**Filmography**


*Sembrando Justicia ... Desde Acteal: Las Abejas ante la Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación* (Sowing Justice ... From Acteal: Las Abejas before the Supreme Court of the Nation), Director unknown, Sociedad Civil Las Abejas, 2009.