

THRESHOLDS OF THE VISIBLE

ACTIVIST VIDEO, MILITANCY, AND PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS¹

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The six-month-long occupation of Oaxaca de Juárez (Oaxaca City) in 2006, the formation of a Peoples' Assembly (APPO), and the takeover of radio and television stations has been widely considered a nascent form of revolution or, as Bruno Bosteels puts it, a precarious meeting ground where “two major inflections of the commune . . . are taking shape in Mexico: one Marxist-Leninist, the other Indigenous subalternist.”² In Gustavo Esteva's view, “the analogy [between the Paris Commune and the Oaxaca Commune] . . . is pertinent but exaggerated.”³ Rather, “the influence of Zapatismo and of the Indigenous struggles for autonomy in Oaxaca along with the forms of consensus

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 - 2 Bruno Bosteels, “The Mexican Commune,” in *Communism in the 21st Century: Vol. 2. Whither Communism? The Challenges of the Past and the Present*, ed. Shannon Brincat (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014), 183.
 - 3 Gustavo Esteva, “The Oaxaca Commune and Mexico's Coming Insurrection,” *Antipode* 42, no. 4 (2010): 979.

governance that developed in rural municipalities since colonial times are key to understanding the APPO's most radical critiques of the present state and economic forms."⁴

Despite their differences, scholars and activists agree that the occupation of Oaxaca and formation of the APPO constituted a site of "prefigurative politics." The term is inspired by Carl Boggs, who once proposed that Marxism is confronted by the dilemma of how to combine the struggle for political power—"the instrumental," as he calls it—with "the prefigurative," which "expresses the ultimate ends of the revolutionary process itself: popular self-emancipation, collective social and authority relations, socialist democracy."⁵ The APPO did not pursue an instrumental struggle for state power, but it certainly signaled an open-ended process of experimenting with the enactment of horizontality, inspired not only by Marxism and anarchism, but also by feminism and the *comunalidad* form of self-governance practiced in Oaxaca's many autonomous municipalities.⁶ In the context of lasting settler colonial and capitalist forms of violence and dispossession, prefigurative politics entails new political subjects becoming visible to themselves and must be understood as a process subject to periodic evaluation and adjustment. Meanwhile, decolonial prefigurative politics entail a performance of equality in view of a future that has not yet arrived—an investment in futurity, or in the future as such.

Additionally, the Oaxaca Commune was one of the first widely video-recorded uprisings of the 21st century. The city of Oaxaca had already become a hub for countercultural artists and activists when Ojo de Agua Comunicación, an independent center for collaborative and community video in Indigenous languages, hosted Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas's (CLACPI) Eighth International Indigenous Film and Video

4 Esteva, 990.

5 Carl Boggs, "Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power," *Theory and Society* 4.3 (1977): 359. See also Hernán Ouviaña, "La política prefigurativa de los movimientos populares en América Latina. Hacia una nueva matriz de intelección para las ciencias sociales," *Acta Sociológica* 62 (2013): 82.

6 For more on the relation between *comunalidad* and *buen gobierno* (good government), see Freya Schiwy, *The Open Invitation: Activist Video, Mexico and the Politics of Affect* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2019), 63–92. On the APPO and the role of women, see Lynn Stephen, *We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

Festival (May 27–June 12, 2006).⁷ Only two days after the festival's closing, the governor of Oaxaca ordered the police to dissolve an encampment (*plantón*) of striking teachers (June 14), at which point the strike grew into a broad manifestation of discontent with the Mexican political system as a whole. With the formation of the APPO, and as the protests acquired massive proportions, more independent filmmakers and journalists from Mexico City and the United States flocked to Oaxaca. Ojo de Agua Comunicación renamed itself Mal de Ojo Televisión (EyeSore TV) and began serving as an Independent Media Center and movement archive, deeply sympathetic to the APPO and its prefigurative politics.⁸ Media activists gathered photographs and footage recorded in the streets, edited numerous videos, and distributed their compilations on occupied state television (COR-TV), the internet, through local screenings, and as inexpensive DVD compilations. Some helped train the women who occupied state television and radio, and some issued their films under the creative commons license. Mal de Ojo Televisión continued to operate under this name until 2008, nearly two years after repression of the APPO drove the movement underground.

While media activism must be understood as a socio-political practice, video is also a relation between screen, the pro-filmic, and the spectators. Thus, the videos made during and shortly after the Oaxaca Commune were motivated by an urgent need for independent news about the uprising, for accounts that would rectify the versions broadcast on mainstream media that were sympathetic to the government. The truth claims of activist video are grounded in what Scott Uzelman has called a “politics of truth,”⁹ a documentary style that is often expository, not experimental, and that claims an indexical relation between

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- 7 Laurel C. Smith, in “Mobilizing Indigenous Video: The Mexican Case,” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 5.1 (2006): 113–28, and Erica Cusi Wortham, in *Indigenous Media in Mexico: Culture, Community, and the State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), both elaborate on Ojo de Agua and the Mexican State’s Media Transfer Program. For a broader view of collaborative and community video in Mexico, see Freya Schiwy and Byrt Wammack Weber, eds., *Adjusting the Lens* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017).
- 8 Marco Estrada Saavedra, “Vox Populi. La difusión mediática de la protesta de las Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca,” in *Protesta Social*, ed. Marco Estrada Saavedra (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2012), 45–104.
- 9 Scott Uzelman, “Dangerous practices: ‘Determinism of technique’ in alternative media and their literature,” *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 7, no. 1 (2011): 23.

image and referent, seeking to present a truth more true than the one shown on television. If the APPO anticipated, without fully realizing, a possible future, a question arises: How can activist video, a genre committed to reflecting what occurs before the lens, make visible what has not yet arrived? This article advances a method for reading activist videos in terms of how stylistic choices help or hinder reflection on the not-quite-here-yet of prefigurative politics.

Practitioners tend to reject the relevance of such a line of inquiry. When asked about aesthetics, activist filmmakers tend to say that they are interested in getting the message out, not in discussing cinematic style. In addition, while documentary generally capitalizes on unforeseen events, those creating concurrent and retrospective video documentaries in Oaxaca were not primarily in charge of the framing, the lighting, or the choice of camera angles and distances, but instead selected from materials digitally recorded by others. They assembled crowdsourced or found footage, and some of their films were edited quickly.¹⁰ Furthermore, the activists' cinematic training was uneven. Some had attended film school or had years of experience as independent filmmakers, while others did not.¹¹

Although the activist videos I am concerned with here resonate with what is sometimes referred to as "riot porn"¹² (raw footage of mass demonstrations and police repression from around the world available on YouTube), they are not purely observational. Some were assembled and distributed quickly, others more carefully and in hindsight; many include testimonies, additional interviews, and compelling soundtracks, and some opt for voice-over narration. Overwhelmingly, they are carefully edited in service of evidentiary truth and work hard at limiting ambiguity. Activist video shares many elements with fiction film, such as "the construction of character as ideal type; the use of poetic language, narration, or musical accompaniment to heighten emotional impact or create suspense; the deployment of embedded narratives or dramatic arcs; and the exaggeration of camera angles, camera distance, or editing rhythms," as Michael Renov had pointed out with respect to documentary film.¹³

10 In this essay, I use "film" and "video" synonymously.

11 For more on media activist groups in Oaxaca, see Schiwy, *The Open Invitation*.

12 Laurie Penny, *Riot Porn: Dispatches from a Dangerous Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011).

13 Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 22.

Digital recording and editing also offer unprecedented ease for manipulating colors and appearance, multiplying frames or inserting text, playing with the speed of recording and playback, and so forth.

Many viewers of activist video maintain that what is important about these films is their argument, a position that seems to be reinforced through activist video's predominant form. One might say that much like the Newsreel's urgent critiques of mainstream news in the 1960s United States, activist videos "call for an alternative to 'the limited and biased coverage' of the mass media," but recycle in unreconstructed form "the very effects that broadcast television had traditionally celebrated as its claim to journalistic superiority over the print media—immediacy, emotional impact, and accessibility."¹⁴ As activist videos tend to eschew innovative or experimental strategies that would draw attention to the audiovisual apparatus, their very form seems to support a viewing that does not ask about "what remains out of view."¹⁵

With Jacques Rancière, we might caution that this problem concerns not merely an opposition between modernist experimentalism and (social) realism. If prefigurative politics in Oaxaca entailed moments when marginalized or silenced actors articulated their relevance to themselves and thereby disrupted the existing system or count,¹⁶ activist video as media practice acted politically not in the sense of opening up modernist sensibilities or through the realist creativity of the political avant-garde, but because it reconfigured what art is and what art does.¹⁷ Rather than a relation between art and politics, which would imply a separation, media activism suggests the identity of art/work and social change. Even more than mainstream film, then, activist videos warrant careful textual analysis, however spontaneously or thoughtfully their footage may have been recorded, compiled, and edited.

14 Renov, *Subject of Documentary*, 11.

15 Michael Chanan, "Filming the Invisible," in *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives and Practices*, ed. Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 121–32, 123.

16 Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 30.

17 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 20–30.

TALKING HEADS AND THE POLITICS OF TRUTH

The uplifting feature-length *Un poquito de tanta verdad* (*A Little Bit of So Much Truth*) attests to the desire for a prefigurative politics as media practice.¹⁸ It chronicles the APPO's takeover of radio and television stations, highlighting the multiplicity of voices gaining access to open mics, the way that radio allows the movement to coordinate the defense of neighborhood barricades, and the women's collaborative administration of COR-TV and their emergence as new political actors. *Un poquito* argues that the movement was able to prevail for six months because of the independent media. The film's open-ended spiral structure—it begins with shots from the teacher's radio station and ends with Radio Plantón back on the air in spring of 2007—proposes a long horizon for social change that, like the Indigenous struggle for autonomy referenced in key testimonial sequences, cannot be stopped by momentary defeat. Directed and edited in 2007 by the US-based filmmaker Jill Irene Freidberg, co-produced with Mal de Ojo TV, and licensed as creative commons, this collaborative, not-for-profit video extends the media activism it treats on screen. The video harmoniously balances footage credited to eleven independent media collectives and independent filmmakers as well as eighteen individuals, still photos taken by activists in the streets, testimony, voice-over narration, and multiple interviews with well-known members of the APPO. With its crowd-sourced digital footage, *Un poquito* approximates Cuban filmmaker Jorge García Espinosa's dream of a future when art might become an "uncommitted" activity that is merely an expression of "mankind," where technology allows cinematic expression to be in the hands of anyone, no longer the privilege of the educated and affluent.¹⁹ The desire for horizontality, expressed as media practice, is a material and symbolic appropriation that is not without contradictions. The hand of the editor and director remains present, giving ultimate shape to the documentary. Even as the DVD is distributed on YouTube, it wrests audiovisual technology from its material and symbolic inscription into the history of modernity, which is a history of capitalism and colonialism. In this way, *Un poquito's* very indexical claim, a key element in the

18 *Un poquito de tanta verdad*, directed by Jill Irene Freidberg (2007; Oaxaca and Seattle: Mal de Ojo TV and Corrugated Films, DVD).

19 Julio García Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema," in *New Latin American Cinema*, Vol. 1, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 72.

formation of modern/colonial vision, becomes both the grounds for and the limit of its political intervention.

The spreading and invasive management of time in the service of capital and science provoked a desire for presence whereby indexical signs acquired new prestige, as Mary Ann Doane has shown.²⁰ In both an ontological and a semiotic sense, the index seems to endow the past, but also the present, with presence.²¹ This esteem for indexical images—whether perceived as a trace of what was formerly there, engraved on film’s chemical emulsion, or as a pointing toward the referent (now!, there!, but not here)—has informed cinema’s colonial gaze in general. Their allure informs the Eurocentric freezing of Others in a timeless past, against which Western selves have fantasized themselves as modern, rational, and progressing.²² As cinema transformed movement into an indexical sign, it also opened up to a desire for the uncontrolled. As Doane writes, “making represented movement (the signifier of time) indexical weds time to contingency.”²³ Cinema’s promise to catch the unguarded moment, in turn, has underwritten Native and other critical viewers’ ability to see the profilmic subject looking back at us. The index here paradoxically registers the profilmic and at the same time calls this register into question. The third eye of cinema reveals the racist claims of cinematic vision, as Fatimah Tobing Rony has elaborated.²⁴ Collaborative and community film and video in Indigenous languages have inscribed Indigenous subjects into the present and into historicity by appropriating these very audiovisual indexical claims to presence.²⁵

Un poquito similarly makes present new political subjects—housewives, feminists, Indigenous activists, and others—but leaves little room for the contingent to work its dual potential, to both

20 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 221.

21 *Ibid.*, 219–20.

22 Freya Schiwy, “The End of the Lettered City,” in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Jens Anderman, Benjamin Bollig, Lorraine Leu, Daniel Mosquera, Rory O’Byrne, and David M. J. Wood (London: Routledge, 2017).

23 Doane, *Emergence*, 219.

24 Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

25 Schiwy, “The End of the Lettered City.” See also Michelle H. Raheja’s careful exploration of the tensions and possibilities of “visual sovereignty” in *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).

affirm and question the identity of the image and the profilmic. Repeatedly, *Un poquito*'s sourced footage constructs the APPO's peoples as social actors in long shot. Bearing colorful giant puppets, protestors file past the now famous graffiti that helped transform the public space of the city into one dominated by the old and new media of activists and artists. Marching crowds are seen over and over again in this activist documentary, uncontainable by the frame. The long shot in *Un poquito* is never held extensively, however; it is not a long take. Using much of the same footage previously sourced in other videos from the Oaxaca uprising, *Un poquito* rather repeats a series of bodily acts, configuring assemblies in the streets and plazas through repetition, amplifying the performance of "we the peoples."²⁶ The profilmic thus extends to the screen(s) and beyond as *Un poquito*'s images issue an open-ended invitation to sympathetic viewers to participate in prefigurative politics—whether we view the video in 2007 or 2019.

The invitation is convincing because the film's indexical claim for many of us resonates with the personal experience of having participated in protest marches. We believe that the video offers a record of what occurred, an event revived in our viewing. As Philip Rosen has pointed out, such a Bazinian understanding of indexical images (the image as trace of a profilmic past made present for the viewer) is based on a pact between viewer and image that disavows the gap between a signifier and its referent. Here "the referential credibility of indexicality assumes something absent from any immediate perception: a different *when* than that of the spectator. Since this different 'when' cannot be immediately present, it must be 'filled in,' 'inferred,' 'provided' by the subject."²⁷ This pact between viewer and image, if we believe Rosen, denies "time passing"—the different temporal moments of image production and image perception—so as not "to deal with the continual onset of the *future*, which holds material death."²⁸ In Rosen's view, indexical claims cannot point toward the future, but rather close off futurity.

26 Judith Butler, "We the People': Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly," in *What Is a People?*, ed. Alain Badiou, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Georges Didi-Huberman, Sadri Khiari, and Jacques Rancière (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 54–55.

27 Philip Rosen, "History of the Image, Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 51, emphasis original.

28 *Ibid.*, 56, emphasis original.



Frame grab of protest art in *Un poquito de tanta verdad*, 2007, directed by Jill Irene Freidberg.

A noticeable cut might signal a gap between sign and referent that could interrupt the orientation toward the past assumed in the Bazinian indexical pact. The cut, as Doane puts it succinctly, constitutes “the mechanism whereby temporality becomes a product of the apparatus, repudiating the role of cinema as a record of a time outside itself.”²⁹ Instead of pretending to open a window upon the event, such a cut signals a difference between what is happening in the street, on the one hand, and the video about the event, on the other. Yet, unlike Sergei Eisenstein’s montage of attractions³⁰ or the now iconic sequences in some of Latin America’s militant cinema of the 1960s and 70s (think of the slaughterhouse scene in *La hora de los hornos* [*Hour of the Furnaces*] or the collage of found, censored Hollywood embraces in *Memorias del subdesarrollo* [*Memories of Underdevelopment*]), among

29 Doane, *Emergence*, 224.

30 Sergei Eisenstein, “The Montage of Film Attractions,” in *S. M. Eisenstein: Selected Works. Vol. 1: Writings, 1922–34*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: British Film Institute, 1988), 39–112.

many others),³¹ *Un poquito's* cuts do not draw attention to the apparatus. As the video shuttles from the streets to anonymous testimony to commentary, interventions accumulate in a coherent, mutually enforcing narrative, disavowing the very selection the frame imposes. The cuts appear naturalized, except in the juxtaposition of testimonial footage and mainstream television, where they function in service of the video's evidentiary discourse. The video's indexical claim to represent what happened is opposed to television's misleading but equally indexical claims. If, as Doane argues, the uncontrolled—and thus, newness and potentiality—might be glimpsed in the long take,³² the cut also works against the indexical image's potential for the undetermined, for what is not yet bound by narrative, for the always-new that is so dear to modernity and to speculative capitalism and that also allows for the return of the gaze, as noted above.

Un poquito, in any case, leaves little to chance. When it lends visibility to new political subjects—the women occupying COR-TV, unnamed protestors commenting and assuming a position from which to speak, assemblies of speakers and listeners grounded in *comunalidad* (Oaxaca's Indigenous forms of autonomous governance)—their appearance as interruption and claim on equality is tightly controlled. *Un poquito* neither holds the long shot, which might extend its ability to register chance, nor does it allow for cuts to work their self-reflexive effects. Instead, the video invites us to read its images as unproblematically “true.” *Un poquito's* carefully selected and edited footage makes these actors legible within an already existing, burdened field of vision. Political subjectification on these terms can only occur on the same plane of visibility that cinema helped enable. While media practice overall begins to shake up the system of what cinema is and does, the video's cinematic form curtails the not-quite-here-yet of the APPO's prefigurative politics.

If “the archive is always a wager on the future: a future screening, a future interpretation,”³³ *Un poquito's* wager on what the Oaxaca Commune “will have meant,” at least on the level of visual form,

31 *La hora de los hornos*, directed by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (1968; Argentina: Grupo Cine Liberación), DVD; *Memorias del subdesarrollo*, directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (1968; Cuba: ICAIC), DVD.

32 Doane, *Emergence*, 208.

33 *Ibid.*, 221.

reiterates what is already there. The problem becomes most glaring in the film's powerful retrospective interviews with well-known activists that further tilt the video's stylistic effect against its narrative. Commenting with hindsight, select individuals here appear as part of the movement, yet are singularly endowed with an ability to reflect, abstract, and convey the ultimate meaning and impact of the events. As Sergio de Castro has argued, the ongoing presence of narrating authorities who offer explanations on screen ("talking heads") bestows them with an additional weight off screen. They come to represent the intellectuals of a movement that insists that there are no leaders.³⁴ Their relevance is the result of the video's overall invitation to view its images as indexical traces. Although the APPO was certainly complex and contained multiple, even conflicting positions (even hierarchical organizations took part, and there was no consensus regarding a desire to organize without leaders), the video's indexical claim and continuity editing encourage viewing the named commentators as the "true" representatives of a polyvocal movement that, according to *Un poquito's* narrative, was striving for horizontality. In this way, the film clearly risks contradicting the notion of a politics without representation, rendering invisible the idea of an organization that is not one but rather "a movement of movements," as Esteva had initially put it.³⁵

We might object that an indexical inscription and perception of activist video is anachronistic, since activist videos are primarily digitally recorded and edited, and not based on analog technologies. After all, if cinematic movement conceals analog fragments due to the persistence of vision, the digital image conceals continuous strings of code. Yet, because indexicality is the product of a relation between spectators and images and because it is grounded in our desire for the proximity of sign and referent—of past and present—and because it also functions as a pointer, indexicality does not vanish with digital media.³⁶ If anything, digitally based activist videos such as *Un poquito* raise the issue of indexicality with renewed urgency.

34 Sergio de Castro Sánchez, "Anarchism and Libertarian Currents," trans. Capital Terminus Collective, last modified October 9, 2009, <http://libcom.org/library/anarchism-libertarian-currents-the-oaxaca-insurrectionary-movement>.

35 Gustavo Esteva, "Nuevas apuestas," unpublished manuscript (2009), 1.

36 Doane, *Emergence*, 230.

RETRO-VANGUARDIA AND THE ENDS OF ART

Filed in 8-mm and with a duration of one minute forty-nine seconds, Bruno Varela's *Raspas*³⁷ appears to take a different approach from that of most other activist videos: Through Varela's "painting directly over the developed film,"³⁸ his analog video mimics the two-dimensional graffiti through which the Oaxaca Uprising became internationally visible.³⁹ Varela, who also collaborated with Mal de Ojo TV, forms part of a resurgence of low-budget video art in Mexico, a "*retro-vanguardia*" in Jesse Lerner's words, that contrasts with the boom in high-production-value Mexican cinema.⁴⁰ Created and disseminated during the Oaxaca uprising in 2006, *Raspas* renders images of blue-colored snow cones on a burning hot summer. As Lerner notes, the video's social commentary becomes evident in the combination of sound and image. While an extreme close-up of a bicycle and spokes—juxtaposed with hands working to assemble a frozen treat—calls attention to precarious labor, the campaign slogan "Working Hard for a Better Future Mexico" gives way to the distorted sound effect of grating ice. The short film ends with a brief, blurry long shot of several men in the street, one picking up a hissing tear-gas canister and running, apparently in order to throw the canister back at the police forces that remain off frame. The sound of labor transforms and binds the snow-cone-making to the making of resistance.

In a video straddling art and activism, one of the chief concerns of *Raspas* is film technology. Lerner suggests that as "in Brechtian theater, the spectator never forgets that what they are viewing is the product of work, artifice, apparatuses, and not a transparent and neutral window onto the real."⁴¹ Varela's short film "registers" informal labor and social protest, yet it also mirrors, audiovisually, the creativity of informal vendors who turn found material objects into income and children's treats,

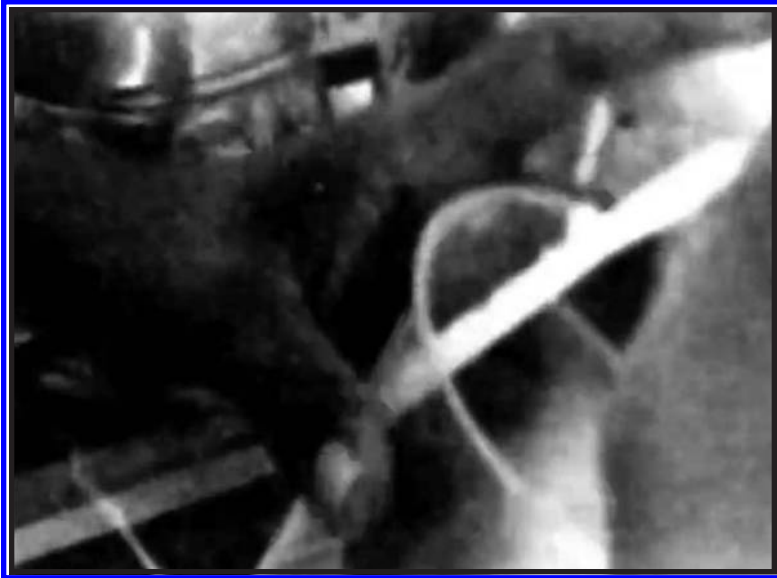
37 *Raspas*, directed by Bruno Varela (2006; Oaxaca City). Accessed September 12, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/24859723>. *Raspas* refers to a shaved ice dessert.

38 Jesse Lerner, "Cine povera," in *(Ready)Media: Hacia una arqueología de los medios y la invención en México*, ed. Karla Jasso and Daniel Garza Usabiaga (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, Laboratorio Arte Alameda, and Conaculta, 2012), 269.

39 Louis Nevaer, *Protest Graffiti: Mexico Oaxaca* (New York: Mark Batty, 2009); Iván Arenas, "Rearticulating the Social: Spatial Practices, Collective Subjects, and Oaxaca's Art of Protest" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011).

40 Lerner, "Cine," 264.

41 *Ibid.*, 263.



Frame grab of hands making frozen treats, *Raspas*, 2006, directed by Bruno Varela.



Frame grab of man seizing teargas canister, *Raspas*, 2006, directed by Bruno Varela.

the same creative spirit that underlies the formation of the APPO. The short draws attention to both manual and audiovisual labor—to making, process, and protest, to a social reality that could be otherwise.

Once again, the short derives its force as a commentary about the Oaxaca uprising from indexicality. The image of the protestor leaning down to seize the teargas canister, pitching forward as he prepares to throw, can barely be recognized. Yet labor, protest, and the video itself appear individualized; *Raspas* does not draw attention to the APPO's decolonial thrust. The blurriness of the image instead speaks to our effort to invest it with a referent—the Oaxaca Commune—and at once seems to guarantee the image's origin in activist recording. *Raspas* thus invokes both dimensions of indexicality: the promise of contingency noted by Doane, as well as the distance between signifier and referent, the very gap evoked by Rosen. *Raspas's* form, then, invites, perhaps requires, a supplementary commentary on what it leaves out, asking viewers to see and hear the familiar in a new way.

We could say that whereas *Un poquito* contributes to the breakdown of the boundaries between art and not-art (in Julio García Espinosa's sense), *Raspas* maintains what Jacques Rancière has called "the aesthetic regime of the arts." According to Rancière, it is the critic's informed narrative that allows the aesthetic regime to operate fully; informed narrative about an artwork uncovers existing and adds new semantic layers of its own, helping in this way to constitute art at such.⁴²

My analysis notwithstanding, *Un poquito* appears to reject the need for critical analysis and explanation of hidden meanings, relying instead on collective production and clear communication: While contingency may point to futurity, and the gap between signifier and referent to telos, newness does not guarantee a decolonial, prefigurative politics. After all, as Doane notes, contingency and newness are foundational to capitalist modernity. If global finance capitalism hinges on stock market gamble and chance, "the isolation of contingency as embodying the pure form of an aspiration, a utopian desire, ignores the extent to which the structuring of contingency, as precisely asystematic, became the paradoxical basis of social stability in modernity."⁴³

42 Jacques Rancière, *El destino de las imágenes* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2011), 99–101.

43 Doane, *Emergence*, 230.

THRESHOLDS OF THE VISIBLE AND THE FUTURE ANTERIOR

It seems that activist videos most effectively amplify the not-quite-here-yet of the Oaxaca Commune where they balance on the threshold of the visible. Consider *Ya cayó* (*He Has Already Fallen*), which chronicles the events in Oaxaca from May 22 to June 16, 2006, the moment when the teachers' strike broadened into a social movement.⁴⁴ Like *Raspas*, this Mal de Ojo TV video was released during the uprising, and like *Un poquito*, it speaks back to the Mexican mass-media duopoly—Televisa and TV Azteca—that portrayed the teachers' strike as a disturbance of civil order and the protests as irrational violence. *Ya cayó*, too, juxtaposes mainstream media images with footage from the streets. While on television the government denied the casualties inflicted during the repression, *Ya cayó*'s activist-recorded shots show a private helicopter circling above the city with a gunman firing teargas grenades at the crowds and protestors running, their bleeding wounds disproving the official narratives. Where the mass media speak of vandalizing youth, *Ya cayó* presents the discourse of a broad social movement that includes the elderly.

The precarious quality of the images seems to confirm the video's narrative. When *Ya cayó* opens onto grainy, handheld nighttime shots, the unfocused image drawing attention to the diegetic sound of teargas canisters hissing, the footage makes a claim on authenticity: these images were recorded by activists in the streets, not by professionals. Again, this claim to indexicality is not inherent in the image or in the relationship between the image and the referent; it is the result of our response and investment as viewers. This is what Rosen calls a "subjective investment in the image," but it is not by that token a simple investment in "the image precisely as 'objectivity.'"⁴⁵ Rather than invoking a naïve affirmation of video images as windows on the truth, *Ya cayó* insists that we recognize the existence of "true" images and the relevance of a social perspective. In this way, the video invites us to read its intertitles and testimonies as lending narrative strength to its indexical claims. After all, it matters whether you are looking on the crowds in the streets from a helicopter or fighting collectively for a decent life—indeed, for survival as such.

Ya cayó's subjective evidentiary realism is complemented

44 *Ya cayó*, directed by Mal de Ojo TV (2006; Oaxaca City: Mal de Ojo TV), DVD.

45 Rosen, "History of the Image," 46.



Frame grab from *Ya cayó*, 2007, directed by Mal de Ojo TV, Oaxaca.

with a different stylistic strategy. The video opens with a colorful photomontage: Mal de Ojo TV's logo is joined with a graffiti of Benito Juárez, Mexico's president from 1861 to 1872. His portrait is rendered as an accordion splice⁴⁶ reproduced as a graffiti stencil beside yellow spray paint on a window announcing "ya cayó." A national hero, born in a Zapotec community in Oaxaca, Benito Juárez is here being reclaimed as an irreverent punk, first by the graffiti artists and then by the video makers. The logo subtly ridicules the pompous post-revolutionary Mexican state, but also points to a more recent past: Mexico City's marginalized punks, the sons and daughters of Indigenous migrants to the city, who in the 1980s began to organize and who became the object of Sarah Minter's experimental, neorealist-inspired video art.

Instead of the no-future nihilism of Europe's punk movement in the 1980s, *Ya cayó's* irreverent Benito Juárez links up more closely with the Mexican *punkeros'* desire to break out of a confined world, the very "striving to exit"⁴⁷ that the APPO revived. A computer-generated

46 Thanks to Judith Rodenbeck for finding the term that denotes this kind of collage.

47 Lerner, "Subcultures, Marginal Media, and the Underground: The Punk Videos of Sarah Minter," in *Ojo en rotación. Sarah Minter. Imágenes en movimiento 1981–2015*, ed. Ekatarina Álvarez Romero (Mexico City: Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo and UNAM, 2015), 136.

subtitle calls on viewers not to hate but to liberate the media, expanding this desire geographically by modulating Indymedia Italy's web-page with its very similar logo.⁴⁸ Drawing attention to the ease with which digital video can be manipulated, Mal de Ojo TV's editor briefly tints some of the images sourced for *Ya cayó* in the process of postproduction. To sum up, the video references Oaxaca's pervasive street art; the appropriation of venerable historical leader figures; the 1980s punk movement against "la realidad y la pobreza" (reality and poverty);⁴⁹ the transnational, globalized space of anti-systemic protest; and the sheer malleability of digital video—and thus by extension of reality—while at the same time underlining the importance of an embodied perspective and of media activism as a crowdsourced and collaborative practice.



Frame grab from *Un poquito de tanta verdad*, 2007, directed by Jill Irene Freidberg.

Perhaps most forcefully, *Ya cayó* amplifies a future anterior through multiple visual and performative invocations of the phrase “ya cayó” (“he has already fallen”). The spray-painted words, “ya cayó” that give this video its title are an iconic audiovisual statement, reiterated in a sequence reused in many activist documentaries about Oaxaca: the low-angle shot of three young boys sitting on a truck, leaning out toward the camera, gesturing with their thumbs down and chanting,

48 The Indymedia Italy site states, “Don’t Hate the Media! *Become* the Media!” John D. H. Downing, “The Independent Media Center Movement and the Anarchist Socialist Tradition,” in *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World*, ed. Nick Couldry and James Curran (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 254.

49 Sarah Minter, “A vuelo de pájaro, el vídeo en México: Sus inicios y su contexto,” in *Vídeo en Latinoamérica. Una historia crítica*, ed. L. Baigorri (Madrid: AECID, 2008), 162.

“ya cayó, Ulises ya cayó.” What is curious about the sequence and the chant is that Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, the governor of Oaxaca responsible for brutally repressing the APPO, never stepped down, serving out his term until 2010. The chant then obviously refers not to Ruiz Ortiz’s fall, but to his loss of legitimacy. The use of the preterite tense (“cayó”) hints at an alternative reality where the governor no longer represents a legitimate government, or even an acceptable form of democracy. The chant invokes the past as a future that, in a sense, has already arrived. The multiple articulations of “ya cayó” thus open up possibilities beyond the terrain of the visible, extending the open, creative process that unfolds in the street. The iconic footage of the boys chanting is complemented by footage of the many street graffiti transformations of the “real” governor who has “already fallen” (been transformed) into a devilish cartoon character. Together, the chant, gesture, graffiti, and video images invoke a reality equally subject to transformation, even as the video holds on to indexicality and to an unambiguous narrative argument.

An invitation to perceive video as a combination of crowdsourced art in the hands of all, truth appeal, and experimentalism is being extended in other Mal de Ojo TV productions, as well, even in the much more somber *Compromiso Cumplido* (*True to My Pledge*), directed by Roberto Olivares.⁵⁰ Like *Un poquito*, Olivares’s film was edited after the protests had ended and was distributed locally and internationally through informal social movement networks.⁵¹ This seventy-minute documentary focuses on the violent repression of the protestors and the impunity of government forces. Olivares, who has long worked with Ojo de Agua Comunicación and Mal de Ojo TV, presents the Oaxacan movement in this film as an open-ended constitutive force that cannot be contained by political reform, even as it is met with the full force of state violence. *Compromiso* also contains one of the most compelling indexical sequences in Oaxaca’s activist archive: the terrible footage of Indymedia reporter Bradley Will recording his own death on the barricades of Calicanto on the outskirts of Oaxaca City.

The sequence is a stunning example of political memory invoked through audiovisual intertextuality, for Will’s 2006 footage of distant

50 *Compromiso Cumplido* (*True to My Pledge*), directed by Roberto Olivares (Oaxaca City: Mal de Ojo TV, 2007), DVD.

51 *Compromiso* can be purchased for eight euros at <https://www.traficantes.net/dvd/compromiso-cumplido> (accessed April 28, 2017). I obtained a DVD copy in the offices of Ojo de Agua Comunicación in Oaxaca in 2010.

gunmen standing on a street corner, with one of them pointing a revolver at him, resemble the end of Part One of Patricio Guzmán's *La batalla de Chile* (*The Battle of Chile*), where in 1973 Leonardo Henrickson, from a similar distance and camera angle, recorded his own death at the hands of a soldier standing on a street corner in Santiago de Chile.⁵² Guzmán prolongs the temporal duration of Henrickson's assassination by adding a cinematic iris, a freeze-frame, and voice-over narration. Signaling the gap between signifier and referent, Guzmán invites viewers to "see" a profilmic reality, the ultimate contingency, while reminding us that it is the film as apparatus that brings the past, though never fully, into the viewer's present. Olivares, in *Compromiso*, sources the full six minutes of Will's recording. The digital color footage and Will's own voice are occasionally cut to an interview with a fellow protestor who witnessed the events: one visible narrator and the other "there," invisible but audible, holding the camera. However, in this instance the retrospective commentary does not call our attention to the apparatus but rather complements Will's footage and audio. It is his camera alone that matters, because it promises access to the real. The long takes invite us to maintain a Bazinian pact whereby we read the images as the ultimate trace of life as it ceases to exist, even as death itself can only be pointed at. Only the camera remains, sideways, looking into the distance.

The parallel between the US citizen and Indymedia reporter Bradley Will and the Argentine cameraman Leonardo Henrickson, who formed part of Guzmán's film crew, marks Will—as well as the director of *Compromiso*, Roberto Olivares—as being part of a genealogy of committed militant cinematographers. For some viewers, the sadness and outrage over the military coup, which ended democratically elected socialism in 1973 Chile, reverberates with the memory of the student massacre at Tlatelolco in 1968 Mexico, and spills over into the 2006 bloody repression of the APPO in Oaxaca. Uncannily, and despite stylistic differences, the scene intensifies our emotional response, as *Compromiso* extends the space and time of the Oaxaca Uprising.⁵³

Compromiso haunts viewers with its testimonies of abuse, murder, and suffering. However, while it layers the past into the viewing pres-

52 *La batalla de Chile* (*The Battle of Chile*), Part 1, directed by Patricio Guzmán (1975; Chile, France: Equipo Tercer Año. Distr. Icarus Films), DVD.

53 See Schiwy, *The Open Invitation*, for a discussion of how activist videos mobilize affect.

ent, the film also opens up toward the future. It begins with a performance: as the handheld camera pans over black crosses lying on the ground, a male voice-over recites a poem. Then a different voice off-screen pronounces the names of the victims, and a crowd chants “*ni perdón ni olvido*.” *Compromiso* in this way invokes what Chanan calls a “zone of invisibility,”⁵⁴ the murder of twenty-three people by state and paramilitary thugs during the repression of the protests, events that the cameras could not capture. This opening sequence highlights the performative quality of the uprising as a mode of creativity that transcends death. If activist video itself is also a performance—a here and now in every viewing, rather than a representation of what was—we can understand the recited poetry and images as a continuity that links the act of video recording, the handing over of footage to a trusted archive, the collaborative production of the video, the audiovisual text, and finally its distribution and reception into one chain of multi-sited artistic practice, reaching into a still unknown future viewing and doing. The performative aspects of the uprising thus continue as powerful interventions that point toward potentiality even as they denounce an insufferable present. At the same time, because the film focuses on state violence and impunity, it is perhaps not surprising that it also relies so heavily on the evidentiary mode.

Olivares stitches together interviews with those arrested and wounded during the repression and activist footage from the streets. Some of this footage is grainy, with low lighting, while other footage is digital and in high resolution; some shots are handheld and jerky, others more stable. Like *Ya cayó* and *Un poquito*, *Compromiso*'s crowd-sourced images become part of an indexical claim, their unevenness guaranteeing—urging us to believe in—their authenticity, and thus the film's grounding in a collective media practice. Olivares also sources television footage of the governor addressing the people. While Ruiz Ortiz maintains that the conflict will be solved through dialogue, not violence, the documentary cuts to the crowdsourced footage of the helicopter also seen in *Ya cayó*. Zooming in, the camera reveals a policeman firing at the protestors in the streets. Another cut shows a protestor holding up bullets to the camera, proving the use of live ammunition while, the protestor explains, “we don't have anything.” The address to the camera is direct. As we look into the young man's

54 Chanan, “Filming the Invisible,” 126.

eyes, we share his distress and outrage, both over the violence and over the governor's lying on television. This stark appeal to the evidentiary mode is not so much undermined as it is complemented by digitally altered footage of the helicopter, which suddenly appears to fall from the sky. Like the noticeable cut in a long shot, this moment suspends the video's evidentiary claim, altering our relation with the indexical. Instead of an audiovisual fantasy of a past moment made present, or the promise of unguarded contingency and newness, the digitally altered shot reminds us of video's artifice and at once opens up toward the future, to what could be. Like the chant "ya cayó," this sequence envisions, if briefly, another reality.

Through on-screen commentary, *Compromiso*, like *Un poquito*, highlights the profilmic, performative aspects of protest in Oaxaca more consistently than post-production experimentalism. Several well-known activists interviewed for the film strive to fill in what the camera cannot show: the movement from the outset exhibits a tendency to create and go beyond the existing order all together. About eleven minutes into the video, a speaker explains that the call for the governor's resignation is also the call for a new kind of democracy. Graffiti on a bed sheet demands the fall of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (still in power in Oaxaca in 2006), and the film cuts to footage of a small hot-air balloon with the spray-painted words "fascists" floating toward the sky. While Flavio Sosa Villavicencio (New Left of Oaxaca) asserts that "the people see him [the governor] as a symbol of the already antiquated and want to dispose of him," Marcos Leyva Madrid (EDUCA/Alternative Education Services) insists, "It's not just that we want him to leave, or resign, or that we don't like him or that he has certain attitudes. Rather, what is fundamentally at stake is the struggle and transformation of the Oaxacan political system." The commentaries assure that we read performance and video together as part of this "struggle and transformation," as an ongoing process, a verb rather than a noun, even though this film, too, is subject to Sergio de Castro's critique of talking heads.

During *Compromiso*'s closing sequence, the band Bazookeros performs the rap chronicle "25 de noviembre," concluding that the teacher's *plantón* has been replaced by a federal police *plantón*. In the face of murder and rampant human rights abuses, *Compromiso*'s forceful denunciation of impunity through audiovisual "evidence" appeals to the rules of an existing legal system, but also indicts this system as

another fantasy of justice. Although the assassins are known, they continue to patrol the streets, with and without uniform. The documentary title—*Compromiso Cumplido* (*True to My Pledge*)—is ironic. This tragic use of irony denounces the mainstream media, Ruiz Ortiz’s failure to represent the will of the people, and a legal system that is a farce. If the governor’s words “*compromiso cumplido*” ring cynical for activists, the video’s irony does not invite resignation, but insists that what appears unequivocal and “real” must be questioned. Irony, like the helicopter falling from the sky, also signals the possibility of a different reality. Again, Olivares delicately keeps the future open.

Even as we are mindful that meaning cannot be pinned down unequivocally—arising as it does in a film’s relations of production and projection, as well as in each instance of its viewing—activist videos warrant stylistic inquiry. In view of recent articulations of the Commune and prefigurative politics, video art activism takes the risk of reclaiming the aesthetic regime of the arts and its privileges. The politics of truth and indexicality in activist videos can reveal contradictions between narrative and style, and, on the other hand, invite viewers to see what is there rather than open up to a desire for what could be. As I have suggested, video activism (the production, distribution, and viewing of videos) prolongs decolonial prefigurative politics through crowdsourcing, collaborative production, creative commons licensing, and the creation of spaces for new political subjects to become visible to each other as such. Stylistically, activist videos best amplify such futurity when they balance on the very threshold of the visible, mimicking graffiti and performance protest.