

Jeff D. Himpele, **Circuits of Culture: Media, Politics, and Indigenous Identity in the Andes**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 240 pp., \$25.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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One part cultural geography, one part media ethnography, and one part film history, *Circuits of Culture: Media, Politics, and Indigenous Identity in the Andes* is the product of Jeff D. Himpele's 15-year research project on Bolivian film and television. In this in-depth investigation, Himpele conducts a simultaneously micro- and macro-level investigation of the circulation of mass culture within the borders of the various neighborhoods of one city in one nation-state — La Paz, Bolivia.

His project examines a number of interrelated questions. First, he examines how filmic culture circulates, as seen both from above (in part via interviews with the ultimate social mappers — local film distributors), and from inside (in part via ethnographic perspectives on the experience of film reception). He also examines representations of the national in Bolivian cinema and its changing representations in the national mediascape. As such, while the book is about the circulation of culture, it is also about national culture, specifically as it is circulated and experienced in Bolivia. To this end, Himpele takes great care to differentiate two competing impulses regarding national identity and representation in Bolivian mass-mediated culture: *indigenism* and *indigeneity*. Before going into greater detail about the structure and contents of the book, it is worthwhile to review these concepts.



Bolivia has, for many years, publicly celebrated its indigenous roots. Even for those without indigenous bloodlines, indigenous customs have served as the glue in the post-1952 collective national identity, serving the needs of those in power as national symbols even as actual rural indigenous people continue to be both marginalized and paternalized. This cataloguing and reifying of indigenous customs, for which Himpele uses the term *indigenism*, focuses on the static, the historic, the depoliticized preservation of customs in the name of preserving a collective Bolivian history while 'modern Bolivia' has moved forward. As a counterforce, Himpele points to *indigeneity*, a more living and more political movement. Instead of preserving indigenous customs, indigeneity is about actually putting power in the hands of the indigenous people of Bolivia. In the context of the media and of circuits of culture, for example, the difference between these two ideas is the gap between indigenous customs being catalogued and preserved on video (indigenism) vs. indigenous people making their own films, representing themselves in a way that reflects the concerns of indigenous people living in the present as opposed to a fixed point in the past, and even owning and running the means of production and distribution. Himpele refers to this latter case not only as indigeneity, but also, and more specifically, as indigenizing the circuits of culture that are the subject of his book.

The book consists of four main parts. In Part I, Himpele conducts an in-depth ethnography of what he calls the circuits of culture in La Paz: how the circulation of film follows (shifting) cultural splits among an economically heterogeneous population. In this section, he first engages in theorizing about the circulation of culture as itself a constituent of culture, and he discusses with film distributors their “urban imaginary” or capitalism-driven social mapping of the city. While both films and publics are mobile, the act of a film screening, where the two meet, is when the audience’s position in the urban imagination becomes fixable for one moment in time. In a particularly interesting Chapter 2, Himpele explains exactly *how* the current shape of circuits of film through the theaters and street vendors of La Paz was inscribed historically, and how these networks of film venues reinscribe social patterns rooted in experiences of colonialism and Bolivian nationalist efforts. While exploring the role mass media have played in the construction and support of national identity, he makes a point to note the role it hasn’t played. Particularly in poorer neighborhoods, Himpele addresses elements of non-mediated culture competing for people’s attention, such as social rituals, festivals, and even gossip with friends at the theater while multiple films are playing. This, Himpele says, is in part an example of audiences resisting foreign cinema by valuing other things through their attention, yet he resists the ease of this simple conclusion. His main point here is that “traffic through this cinema infrastructure reinforces spatial continuity but temporal discontinuity” (p. 85) within La Paz. In other words, the meetings of these films and audiences in individual film screenings are part of a narrative and a circuit of uneven national progress, with some audiences literally “behind” others.

In Part II, Himpele delves into the history and content of Bolivian film, mostly a product of his extensive research in the national Bolivian film archives and interviews with influential filmmakers in Bolivian film history. Without a domestic market equipped to recoup investments, the history of Bolivian film tends on one hand toward the social documentary, often government- (domestic or foreign) financed in part and distributed as a prelude to foreign cinema showing in the commercial theaters of La Paz. On the other hand are (again, often government-supported) narrative films designed, like the social documentaries, to build an image of an apolitical but brave indigenous culture. Chapter 3 outlines a history of this indigenism in Bolivian cinema, while Chapter 4 engages in a history of a counter-circuit: revolutionary films, primarily arising in the 1950s and 1960s, some of which were banned from national distribution. Together, the two chapters of Part II investigate how Bolivian cinema passing through La Paz has navigated (and, in most cases, propagated) indigenism as part of (or, in some cases, in opposition to) the popular national project.

In Part III, Himpele adds another circuit to the mix: that of television, which was licensed for commercial color broadcast in the mid-1980s. Television emerged at the same time as major structural changes in Bolivia, as the state-led, nationalist economic model gave way to neoliberal impulses of privatization, consumerism, and free trade. In both chapters of this section, Himpele addresses one specific television show called *Open Tribunal of the People*. On the program, a charismatic host named Carlos Palenque listened as poor indigenous guests told of their problems ranging from domestic to legal, and promised them help, usually from social workers employed (and, as Himpele notes, underpaid) by the program. Palenque eventually became a potent political force as he formed a political party advocating for indigenous power, which came close to winning the presidency; his close colleagues and family also won important political office. More than simply a popular show, Himpele examines the program as a unique

example in Bolivia of indigenous Bolivians portrayed as active protagonists rather than folkloric, apolitical icons, at the same time as the urban indigenous middle class was growing. He also problematizes this read of Palenque's soothing and often less-than-substantial quick fixes, simultaneously viewing the show as a site of reinscribing power relations, particularly the patron-client political relations that dominated Bolivian politics for years. The *Open Tribunal* is investigated in Chapter 5 as a cultural entity, but, in a particularly important trajectory, Chapter 6 retraces the connections between the show as a cultural entity and the reality it purports to represent, the "indexical bonds" between cultural production and actual life.

In the concluding chapter, Himpele draws together his writings regarding the circulation of culture and indigenism vs. indigeneity in Bolivian national culture — specifically, in La Paz — as he discusses a new movement of indigenous videos. In these, indigenous filmmakers represent themselves in videos modeled both on Western standards of production quality and cinematography, and on traditional indigenous values. For instance, one author speaks of rejecting dictatorial scripts in deference to communal decision-making, and elements in many storylines may be confusing to viewers without an indigenous cultural background. These films, while portraying indigenism-esque imagery of indigenous rituals, are an example of indigeneity, and indigenizing circuits of culture. Appropriation of Western visual language, says Himpele (and filmmakers), is not assimilation, but a stand for indigeneity in the face of paternalistic indigenism. Here, the indigenous filmmaking community show themselves to be modern citizens, alive, and not frozen in a picturesque folkloric ritual in the Altiplano.

Himpele achieves in this work a simultaneously macro- and micro-level investigation of a phenomenon that also exists on both levels. Cultural products simultaneously move through internationally and nationally linked circuits as they make their own very personal appearances in the lives of audiences, the same program or film appearing in a number of guises as it traverses circuits of culture. Himpele, in this book, has given us an exceptionally full picture of the Bolivian mediascape. Each part could constitute a full book topic in and of itself, and each would be rich. Yet it is together that they make the strongest contribution to the literature on cultural flows. The book paints a remarkably whole portrait of cultural circulation rooted in one city: the shape of the circuits of culture and how they were formed; the shape of the national filmic media of all types and the ways in which it reflects and forms national identity; and the changing roles of indigenism and indigeneity in the national circulation of culture. The theoretical background of nationalist interests and cinema is particularly compelling, as are analyses of why the Bolivian film industry emerged in the way it did. Himpele's utilization and mixing of filmic, geographic, cultural, and social theory are particularly strong. He blends a number of literatures (along with a number of areas of study) to approach his topic from as many angles as possible.

Despite the breadth and depth of the book, there are some missing analyses. For example, the emerging filmmakers of indigenous Bolivia mentioned in the conclusion add an important example of self-representation by indigenous peoples, despite their small scale, and it would have been particularly informative to have seen more discussion of the actual cultural flows of these films. Himpele mentions a few obscure time slots for the films on Bolivian television and alludes to the limitation of video sales to only certain types of people (in the interest of having social connection supersede capitalist concerns in the drive for distribution), but this section would have benefited from a deeper analysis, or explanation, of the limited circulation of these films, particularly given the focus of the rest of the book on circulation.

More engagement with literature on networks of culture would also be welcome here, as circuits and networks appear similar but not exactly the same. At times, Himpele uses the words interchangeably, but for the most part, does not address networks and instead explores the concept of circuits in depth. A clarification of the differences and similarities between the two concepts would be helpful. Additionally, though Himpele explains why he has left radio out of his analysis, a more constant acknowledgment of its role in supporting or mitigating his conclusions throughout the book would have been helpful.

The book also might have benefited from an exploration of the absence of an intra-Andean circuit of film. In other words, while the Bolivian circuit of culture is not large or rich enough to recoup investments in film, it would be interesting to hear Himpele's take on the absence of any development of a market amongst Andean nations, such as Bolivia, Peru, Chile, or Ecuador. The answer likely has to do with the very nationalist delineations Himpele is describing here, and as such, it would probably be quite illuminating. What Himpele did write, however, is a succinct yet in-depth exploration of nationality and cinema in a nation producing relatively little of the latter, a nation where representations of indigenous people have constantly walked the line between dangerous and safe, celebratory and patronizing, and tended to benefit the non-indigenous middle and upper classes over the rural indigenous population, even as these same rural indigenous were celebrated in Bolivian film.

In summary, this book delves deeply into issues of nationalism, representation, and circuits/circulation of culture in one nation with limited domestic production. As one of the few in-depth investigations of film and television in Bolivia that has thus far been written, *Circuits of Culture* stands out not only for its contributions to our understanding of the circulation of culture, but also for its contributions to the study of mass culture in the Andes. This eminently readable book manages to tie together a very thorough micro-level and macro-level investigation of the paths of culture. It stands as a worthwhile addition to the existing literature surrounding questions of power, representation, and identity in the circulation of media products.