

# Indigenismo and the Avant-garde: Jorge Sanjinés' Early Films and the National Project

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Jorge Sanjinés' 1960s films *Revolución* and *Ukamau* challenge the class and ethnic hierarchies of Bolivian society by casting the proletarian and indigenous masses as revolutionary liberators. The new national imaginary they evoke is tightly bound to the experimental cinematic techniques they employ, since their rejection of rationalist, realist aesthetics signals a partial undermining of the linear time of the modern nation. *Ukamau* both recalls and resists previous Bolivian indigenismo, which sought to co-opt the Indian into a national mestizo consciousness. Its exoticist portrayal of the Indian ultimately limits its political effectiveness, but textual and contextual analyses show subversive Indian agency leaking through.

Keywords: Bolivia, cinema, Jorge Sanjinés, indigenismo, ethnicity, avant-garde.

In 1963 the Bolivian filmmaker Jorge Sanjinés released his first independent short film, *Revolución*. Made out of fragments of footage filmed while making propaganda documentaries for the state lottery, and edited according to theoretical precepts of Soviet montage, *Revolución* was excitedly billed for a La Paz screening as 'Bolivia's first experimental film', at once a 'masterly ... poem' and a 'true social art' with a 'deeply national meaning' (Productoras Cinematográficas Luz y Sombra, 1964).<sup>1</sup> Sanjinés' subsequent short *¡Aysa! (Landslide!, 1965)*<sup>2</sup> and his debut feature *Ukamau (That's The Way It Is, 1966)*, both made under the auspices of the state filmmaking body the Instituto Cinematográfico Boliviano (ICB),<sup>3</sup> were similarly announced to claims of both artistic and political renovation. *Aysa* was proclaimed as part of 'a current of cinema that is advanced in conception, language and implications' (Presencia,

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- 1 My translations. Where non-English language texts are cited in the bibliography, translations are my own.
  - 2 I have been unable to view a copy of *¡Aysa!*. All references to it here are deduced from secondary sources.
  - 3 The ICB was established in 1953, shortly after the MNR seized power.

1965), while *Ukamau* was celebrated thirteen years after its initial release as a film with ‘excellent plastic qualities ... that remind us of filmmakers like Bresson and Dreyer ... [which] uncovers to us a new land, contemplated with love’ (Espinal, 1979).

Such announcements of aesthetic and political newness were central to what came to be known as the New Latin American Cinema, crystallised at the 1967 Viña del Mar Film Festival in Chile and at Mérida, Venezuela in 1968. For Sanjinés these meetings embraced a utopian desire to ‘put into practice the old Bolivarian dream’, to create a ‘cinema to go hand-in-hand with the process of liberation that was taking root in Latin America’ (García and Nuñez, 2004). The filmmakers of the New Latin American Cinema had no common position towards the various emancipatory mass political movements, inspired to varying degrees by Marxism and nationalism, that were shaking the oligarchic foundations of much of the continent at that time. The landmark Argentine film *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, directed by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas in 1968), for instance, militated from the left wing of Peronism. Conversely, Sanjinés and his *Ukamau* Group,<sup>4</sup> exiled in Peru and Ecuador following Hugo Bánzer’s 1971 rightwing military coup in Bolivia, were deeply critical of those countries’ national-revolutionary projects of the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Their films *El enemigo principal* (*The Principal Enemy*, Peru, 1973) and *¡Fuera de aquí!* (*Get Out of Here!*, Ecuador, 1977) aim to liberate the Indian masses ‘from below’ from imperialism’s ideological occupation of Latin America, and form the basis of a continent-wide campaign of grass-roots *concientización* [consciousness-raising]. This project, while questioning the concrete political aims of specific guerrilla groups, was more analogous to Che Guevara’s *foco* guerrilla warfare than to national-popular political movements.

*Revolución* and *Ukamau*, though, were made by a Sanjinés still under the influence of Bolivia’s own National Revolution, which was instigated in 1952 with the coming to power of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) and (arguably) ended with General René Barrientos’ rightwing coup of 1964. This article will ask to what extent these films – both made before the New Latin American Cinema had become a discernible continental tendency and before Che Guevara’s arrival in Bolivia in October 1966,<sup>6</sup> and both produced and/or distributed via state or state-supported institutions – might be considered as part of a national and revolutionary project. This is not to suggest that the

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4 This is the name adopted (and still used) by the filmmaking group led by Jorge Sanjinés, after the release and great popularity of the film *Ukamau* (Sanjinés, 1966).

5 In a 1977 interview Sanjinés described General Juan Velasco Alvarado’s Peruvian regime of 1968–1975, while admitting it had taken some progressive steps, as ‘a form of state capitalism that lacked genuine trust in democratic mass organisations and which became increasingly anti-communist’. (Sanjinés and *Ukamau* Group, 1989: 96). One of the opening scenes of *¡Fuera de aquí!* apparently contains a thinly-veiled jibe against the populist tactics of General Guillermo Rodríguez Lara’s Ecuadorian government of 1972–1976. A politician arrives in the indigenous community of Kalakala, incongruously decked out in a white suit, and barks empty promises of agrarian reform through his megaphone at the mystified Indian peasants. The angry villagers bury his car under a hail of stones, making him do the same three-day walk back to the city that they did when they voted for him.

6 Sanjinés has linked his radicalisation as a leftist intellectual to Che Guevara’s presence (and assassination) in Bolivia in 1966–1967 (García and Nuñez, 2004).

films ideologically identify with the MNR or Barrientos regimes. Yet in the aftermath of the 1952 revolution but before the devastatingly repressive Bánzer dictatorship of 1971–1978, there was still a belief on the Marxist left, albeit fast-fading, that a new and more equal society was possible within the national framework developed by the MNR, even though the anti-unionist and relatively pro-US measures taken by post-1956 MNR governments had alienated large sectors of the left.<sup>7</sup>

This article takes into account that the notion of a ‘national’ cinema is a contested terrain. The recent Bolivian president and erstwhile film critic and historian Carlos Mesa rejects what he sees as the received view that the ‘New Bolivian Cinema’ began with *Ukamau*. Instead he traces the origins of a modern national cinema back to the creation in 1953 of the ICB, whose films ‘gradually built up that consciousness that was to explode in Sanjinés’ work’ (Mesa Gisbert, 1985: 51). He deftly periodises the independently produced *Revolución*, as well as *Ukamau* and all of Sanjinés’ subsequent films, within a post-1952 tradition whereby the inexorable historical time of national cinematic history progresses from the originary moment of the National Revolution. Sanjinés indeed acknowledged the practical benefits of the MNR’s investment in cinema, yet the ‘national’ character he frequently identified in his own films would seem to have a rather different implication; his calls for specifically Indian emancipation sit uneasily next to the post-1952 efforts to create an ethnically homogeneous national proletariat. In turn Sanjinés’ Marxist-indigenista vision, in which a privileged Indian class would lead all the national proletarian classes in an uprising against the imperialist enemy, was resisted by the radical indianismo that was gaining ground on the predominantly Aymara altiplano.<sup>8</sup> Indianismo’s principal ideologue, Fausto Reinaga, saw the Bolivian nation as a fictitious, colonised entity, entirely separate from the ‘Indian nation’, and considered Marxism as one more attempt to assimilate the Indian into the political and epistemological programmes of the colonised white-creole-mestizo minority (Reinaga, 1969).

The following discussion will analyse how *Revolución* and *Ukamau* respond to and renovate previous indigenista and revolutionary imaginings of the Bolivian nation. Anderson (1991: 47–65) argues that the origins of Latin American nationalisms lie in the elite imaginary of the ‘creole pioneers’, unlike the bottom-up European nationalisms that were propelled by the spread of print capitalism and mass literacy. If the national-revolutionary movements of the twentieth century can be seen as attempts to mobilise the popular classes as the imagined bedrock of the nation, the MNR’s populist project is often traced back to Bolivia’s defeat against Paraguay in the Chaco War of 1932–1935. The war mobilised and geographically united the rural and urban ‘national classes’ for the first time, enabling them to become politically aware of the

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7 Leftist nationalist historian René Zavaleta, for instance, gives a detailed account of the failings of the 1952–1964 project, but concludes that the gradual emergence of Bolivia’s ‘national classes’ (the mining and urban proletariat, and the indigenous peasantry) has created ‘the subjective basis’ from which the Bolivian people can ‘orientate itself within the continental insurrection’ (Zavaleta Mercado, 1967: 94).

8 Indianismo found its most radical expression in the Katarista movement, which emerged under the Bánzer dictatorship as an initially urban movement, and is led today by Felipe ‘El Mallku’ Quispe. See Sanjinés C. (2004), especially Chapter 4.

ruling classes' exploitation of the masses. This mobilisation facilitated the subsequent inter-ethnic alliances that would overthrow the oligarchic structures of society in 1952 (Dunkerley, 1984: 26–28). Eager to throw historical and intellectual weight behind its new revolutionary nationalism, the MNR began to rethink the nation via early twentieth century reformist Bolivian intellectuals such as Franz Tamayo (C. Sanjinés, 2004). Tamayo sought to overturn the positivist tradition, represented by thinkers such as Alcides Arguedas, that dismissed the Indian as a pre-modern being whose irredeemable barbarity could only hinder the advancing national project (Arguedas, 1936). Tamayo's democratisation of the national imaginary poses the mestizo as the foundational building block of the unified national subject, crediting the Independence movements to an ideal mestizo citizen who 'still thought like a Spaniard, but now felt like an Indian' (Tamayo, 1944: 169).

Reinaga's radical Indianist reading of indigenista writers such as Tamayo and the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui (and he may well have extended this to Sanjinés) argues that

they seek the integration of the Indian into their mongrel race [cholaje]; to de-Indianise the Indian to miscegenate him [acholarlo]; for the cholo sub-race to assimilate the Indian race . . . No indigenista wants the liberation of the Indian (Reinaga, 1969: 137–138; emphasis in original).<sup>9</sup>

Recent studies of indigenista culture, including art, literature and essays, in twentieth century Bolivia have viewed it as a rhetorical tool employed by the elite intellectual and political classes, often to create a homogenising, mestizo national imaginary. Javier Sanjinés argues that indigenismo's discourse of mestizaje aims to legitimate the Western logic of rationality and modernity, while disciplining and containing the potentially menacing Indian viscerality that exists within the modern nation by converting the Indian into 'an ideal image, an exalted spiritual figure' (C. Sanjinés, 2004: 36). Josefa Salmón likewise acknowledges the discursive authority that homogenising indigenismo stamps on its indigenous subject. But she also points out that the Indian presents a textual threat to the writer, since

there is also a flow from the most downtrodden groups towards the elite, . . . the author does not have complete control over the object of their discourse . . . [The Indian] escapes, becomes unknown or altered in the mirror of the author (Salmón, 1997: 18).

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9 In the Bolivian ethnic hierarchy the cholo occupies an indefinite 'in-between' space between the Indian and the mestizo. Often intended as a description of ethnicity (whiter than an Indian but more Indian than a mestizo), its use says as much about the speaker's stance as regards social hierarchy as it does about the person described. Used by someone 'higher' on the social scale it is often a derogatory way to refer to a 'dirty' racial mix, as opposed to the 'cleaner', whiter mestizo (Weismantel, 2001: 90–98). Reinaga's Indianist discourse apparently employs the term to cast a derogatory slant on all racial mixing.

*Revolución* and *Ukamau*, films made by an 'elite' filmmaking collective and via state or state-supported institutions, employ aesthetic techniques derived from European modernist and avant-garde traditions to chart the cultural and revolutionary 'authenticity' of their indigenous and subaltern protagonists. I argue here that while these films have often been analysed as seminal touchstones of a Bolivian 'national cinema', underlying their 'national' status is a curious set of ambiguities as regards the acceptance and refutation of both foreign aesthetics and the homogenising national mestizo ideal, and as regards accommodation with and rejection of officialdom. Their use of anti-naturalist aesthetic devices, such as montage and expressionistic photography, raises the possibility of an art of national liberation that engages the viewer on the irrational level of the unconscious, to a greater degree than Sanjinés' later films, which draw more strongly on realist techniques. I will discuss the degree to which the indigenous subjects of *Ukamau* are able, along the lines drawn out above by Salmón, to appropriate the 'national' framework within which they are inserted.

## Fragmenting the National Myth

The explicit referent of the ten-minute black-and-white short *Revolución* is the 1952 Revolution, which saw the MNR sweep to power on a popular coalition of left-wing intellectuals, revolutionary workers' groups and indigenous peasants anxious to be free from the semi-feudal system of land tenure that had persisted since Independence. Yet made in the years of the left's growing disillusionment with President Víctor Paz Estenssoro's decreasingly revolutionary MNR government, this was far from simple flag-waving for the regime. Unlike the majority of Bolivia's cinematic output of the period – propaganda newsreels made by ICB – *Revolución* is subtle and ambiguous, and can be read as an implicit critique of the foundering revolutionary process (Plate 1).



Plate 1. *Revolución* (1963)

The ICB served primarily to produce newsreels promoting and consolidating the revolution across a population that was both geographically dispersed and largely illiterate in the official language. For the MNR's revolutionary government:

The importance of cinema, in our present transition towards development, lies in its ability to link ideas with realities, its didactic and documentary messages reaching every stratum of our nation. (Quoted in Rivadeneira Prada, 1994: 19).

The MNR's first presidential term from 1952 to 1956 saw unprecedented state investment in cinema as Paz Estenssoro looked to the propagandistic allure of the image to maintain a grip on the fragile network of pacts between the many conflicting political groupings and associations that kept his party in power. They reconstructed the revolution a posteriori as a coherent march forward to national progress, overlooking the almost accidental fashion in which the MNR took power and instituted reforms; as a result, with the passage of time the mythical signifier 'Revolución' became increasingly severed from any recognisable referent.<sup>10</sup> For Mesa 'the word "Revolution" ... became common currency; its endless repetition came to devalue the deeper meanings it had acquired during the first two years of basic reform' (Mesa Gisbert, 1985: 53). The newsreels were a tool of ideological nation-building that aimed to tackle Bolivia's 'social thinness' by recasting the revolutionary nation from above as 'a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time'.<sup>11</sup> The post-1952 nation was to be 'imagined' in the minds of the ICB's viewers as a coherent body of like-minded individuals moving together in transition towards development in the safe guiding hands of the MNR. Their bombastic voice-overs and linear narrative structures were designed to create an unquestioning revolutionary spirit in their spectators (Mesa Gisbert, 1985: 52).

It was this spectatorial passivity that *Revolución* sought to uproot. A 1960 article written by the young Jorge Sanjinés is seeped in the liberatory rhetoric of the European avant-garde; his dismissal of theatre's artificial barrier between stage and audience has clearly Brechtian overtones:

On the stage we see unfolding before us the drama of people alien to our subjective point-of-view; we are spectators who feel sorry or happy for them, but we do not see through their eyes, we do not feel what they feel. Since we do not take part in their lives on a subjective level, we are capable only of distanced contemplation. (Sanjinés, 1960)

In contrast cinema, Sanjinés proclaims, can stir the viewer to a visceral participation with the images, its capacity for spatial and temporal manipulation creating 'the impression of seeing events from within, as if we were surrounded by the characters

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10 For Córdova, the ICB newsreels strove to 'counterpoise a unitary image of the Revolution to the chaotic internecine struggles within the left, right and centre members of the MNR coalition' (2002: 193).

11 Anderson (1991: 26), borrowing from Walter Benjamin.

in the film' (Sanjinés, 1960: original emphasis). Brecht's dissatisfaction with classical theatre – 'Empathy alone may stimulate a wish to imitate a hero, but it can hardly create the capacity' (Brecht, 1964: 247) – mingles with Walter Benjamin's belief in the cameraman's ability to extend our comprehension of the world, 'penetrat[ing] deeply into [reality's] web. [...] The picture] of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law'.<sup>12</sup>

Underlying this visceral artistic language was the grammar of montage, whereby 'through the juxtaposition of two distinct and separate frames we can extract a new concept that was not present in either of them' (Sanjinés, 1960). Both the shot-to-shot relations and the entire narrative structure of *Revolución* are charged with the theoretical principles of Kuleshov and Eisenstein, both avidly read by Sanjinés while studying in Chile. The film's initial sequence shows images of poverty, exploitation and humiliation: a man crawls out of a mineshaft; a family sifts through rubbish in search of food. A man walks past the camera carrying a large package on his back; cut to another three men, carrying even larger loads. Another man bears an even larger burden still; the pattern continues through a further three shots edited together in similar style. The next two shots show ragged, poverty-stricken men and children looking pitifully towards the camera; then a beggar hobbles up to a smartly dressed man in a shop doorway. To see a man carrying a huge package on his back through the streets of La Paz is an everyday occurrence. Yet by rapidly cutting together five such images, then following them with a shot of a beggar humiliating himself before a rich paceño [resident of La Paz], the editor exploits their symbolic potential: the poor and desperate are destined to shoulder the burden of the rich, whose wealth is dependent upon their poverty. As with Kuleshov's psychological building-blocks, the viewer's emotional reaction to successive shots depends not only on the image itself but on the preceding one, which remains imprinted in the viewer's mind.<sup>13</sup> For Sanjinés, by mentally assembling the images the viewer has seen them 'from within': the camera has created a heightened involvement with and understanding of reality.

The film picks up pace as a shot of two children sleeping rough on the street cuts to a carpenter hard at work in a workshop. In the background we suddenly notice a row of coffins on a shelf above his head; next there is a cut to a close-up of the coffins. The camera pans slowly across them and we realise from their size that they must be children's coffins, the martyrs of a cruelly unequal social system; the camera lingers on the golden crosses embellished on the front. A stark cut then throws us back to close-ups of the children's faces from the previous sequence. A cut back to the workshop scene shows two children carrying a tiny coffin outside, perhaps bearing a baby that has died of starvation: society's devotion to the cross has evidently done little to help its poor.

The logical effect of these images might be, along Kuleshov's lines, 'poor children + coffins = children dying'. Yet the cumulative effect of both sequences described thus far links these infants' tragedy to the wealthy bourgeoisie whose burden they are forced to bear. The petty-bourgeois carpenter, perhaps, is profiting from this social injustice:

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12 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), in Benjamin (1970: 235–236).

13 See Sanjinés' essay 'Sobre el cortometraje', in Gamboa (1999: 28–33).

he too is partly responsible for the perpetuation of class oppression. Beyond Kuleshov's mere 'unrolling [of] an idea', these images' specific referents (beggar, coffin, cross) have engendered abstract and emotive concepts (class, economic and religious oppression) that 'arise from the collision between independent shots' (Eisenstein, 1929: 49). For Eisenstein juxtaposing shots through montage bestows upon them an abstract, symbolic quality that only becomes apparent through the spectator's reflective engagement, a 'liberation of the whole action from the definition of time and space' (1929: 58). The imagined passive spectators are transforming into an engaged, class-conscious, and potentially radical mass, their rational understanding of their own predicaments translates into an abstract, emotive urge to act against oppression.

So far, so in keeping with the 'national meaning' of the ICB newsreels, their cheering masses celebrating the heroic victory over pre-revolutionary Bolivia's oligarchy. *Revolución's* third sequence cuts from the child coffin-bearers to a populist politician addressing the assembled hordes in a city square: the leader dominates the foreground screen-right as the masses loom below. This is cross-cut with low-angle shots of the politician from the crowd's point-of-view, and close-ups of individual onlookers, staring or cheering at his words. In levelling itself with both the politician and the multitude, the camera identifies us with both perspectives: the leader incorporates the people into the all-embracing national myth. The following sequences show the popular uprising violently repressed; then the revolutionary martyrdom of heroic prisoners shot dead by firing-squads and mourned in street processions. A factory-siren acts as a rallying call for the rising of the proletariat as workers gaze off-screen in hope of a better society ahead, their faces lit up by the solidarity of revolution. Men in suits seize arms and urban guerrilla warfare commences. The fighters stand, rifles poised, ready to usher in a new era.

If this uprising is intended to evoke the Bolivian one of 1952, the film's final images sully its triumphalist sheen. We return to images, almost identical to those of the initial sequence, of poor, barefooted children as they gaze uncomprehendingly at the camera; correspondingly the music reverts from an upbeat drum rhythm to the mournful guitar music of the film's opening. Yet we do not see these images in the same light as before: filtered through the whole popular and political process of the previous twelve years, the cumulation of images hints that the 'top-down' rebellion inspired by the politician in the unquestioning masses (the National Revolution) is no longer enough. In retrospect the politician looks impotent; the 'new era' has failed to address the needs of the poor and the people must take control of their own destiny. Just as Eisenstein's montage urges the spectator to participate psychologically and emotionally in the assembly of images and meanings, Sanjinés' viewers must be conscious and committed agents of liberation. They would not merely witness a revolution, but they would, through the intellectual labour unleashed by montage, experience and feel the abstract notion of revolution 'in a free accumulation of associative material' (Eisenstein, 1929: 61). This is not the *fait accompli* of 'The (National) Revolution', but the concept, the ongoing aim, the ideology of 'Revolution'.

*Revolución*, with its symbolic cinematography and editing, compels the viewer to engage in an altogether new evaluation of post-Revolutionary Bolivia, and its implications go far beyond the 1952 uprising. Sanjinés' plot summary of the film makes not a single reference to historical circumstance, glossing its argument in abstract humanistic terms as 'the unavoidable need for armed struggle to put right the wrongs of the present



and to guarantee the future of those barefooted children' (Sanjinés and Grupo Ukamau, 1979: 237–247).<sup>14</sup> As director of the ICB from 1964 to 1966, Sanjinés would go on to make such conformist documentaries as *Realizaciones*, a celebration of a Barrientos-backed social housing project for peasants. Yet he was never a straightforward institutional filmmaker, forever treading a fine line between stooping to the national project and calling for international anti-imperialist insurrection. Young MNR activists viewing *Revolución* in intellectual circles enthusiastically embraced the film; yet a nervous Paz Estenssoro opted to ban it in 1963 (Sánchez, 1999: 80–81). Whether this was motivated mainly by its concrete critique of post-1952 Bolivian politics or its (perhaps more dangerous) ideological call to arms is unclear; but post-1968 screenings in Latin American and European festivals certainly read the film as an internationalist insurrectionary invective. The film's open narrative structure, allowing its meaning to be separated from the specific context of the 1952 Revolution and applied forwards to the continental revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s, led it to be considered a precursor to the New Latin American Cinema (see Córdova, 2002: 202).

While Sanjinés' primary aims were national in scope, then, his films' aesthetics enabled readings that transcended the national sphere. *Revolución* was screened in Bolivia to some 30,000 people in mining areas, factories and universities,<sup>15</sup> while elite spaces such as the Cine Scala in La Paz were appropriated for intellectual audiences.<sup>16</sup> The director later likened his project – using cinema to consolidate the revolutionary sentiment of a geographically dispersed, largely illiterate and linguistically diverse population – to that of Soviet filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin, whose cinematographic train was 'able to film, process and edit the films that he made on his voyage around the liberated country'.<sup>17</sup> That *Revolución* is silent, and that much of *Ukamau's* impact derives from its striking visual and rhythmic qualities, suggest an undermining of what Shohat and Stam call the Eurocentric 'fetish of writing'<sup>18</sup> – a privileging of the

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14 When screening their films in Ecuador in 1975, Sanjinés noticed that indigenous audiences ignored national specificities, concentrating instead on their wider political implications. After seeing *Revolución*, one peasant remarked, 'You don't need to know Quechua or Spanish, or be an Evangelist or a Catholic, to realise that what we saw in the film is the misery of someone who lives on the edge ... The politician talks and talks and he can't take up the rifle ... but the factory workers walk away from their lathes and go around uniting themselves to fight with sticks and iron bars! ... It's like a photograph of Ecuador!' (Sanjinés and Ukamau Group, 1989: 55–56). Since Sanjinés and Ukamau Group (1989) is an abridged translation of Sanjinés and Grupo Ukamau (1979), the published translations are cited where available. All other translations from Sanjinés and Ukamau Group (1979) are my own.

15 See Huleu, Ramonet and Toubiana (1974).

16 We should not assume that audiences attending such screenings would necessarily be 'progressive' or leftwing. ¡Aysa!, produced by the ICB, was first screened in Bolivia in June 1965, alongside the ICB documentary *El nuevo soldado*, celebrating the collaboration between the Bolivian Army and the US-funded 'Civic Action' programme. See *Presencia* (1965).

17 Sanjinés and Grupo Ukamau (1979: 40). See also Sanjinés (1978: 18).

18 They refer to Martin Lienhart's assertion that the European colonisers of the Americas 'turned écriture into a form of possession, "sanctified" by the religion of the book in whose name it was undertaken' (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 68).

'learned', scientific, written culture implicit in the authoritative, rational voice-overs of the ICB newsreels. Whereas many of Sanjinés' later films attempted to incorporate indigenous narrative forms into the very grammar of film language,<sup>19</sup> *Ukamau* and *Revolución* employ irrationalist techniques imported from the European avant-garde and modernism. In bypassing the linguistic hierarchies inherent in the written tradition of the nation, these democratising aesthetics (as well as the abstracted theme of class and racial oppression) seemed well suited to a subordinated national population that lived by oral and visual culture. Yet they are not uncomplicatedly 'national', since those same aesthetic and thematic concerns appealed to a wider contingency of Latin American peasants and European intellectuals. Moreover *Ukamau*, spoken mostly in Aymara, in a sense captures the indigenous language as part of Bolivia's national heritage; but at the same time it expands the boundaries of linguistic identification into Peru, while often excluding non-Aymara speaking sectors of the 'national' audience.<sup>20</sup>

### *Towards a Popular Indigenous Melodrama*

Even so, in his institutional role as head of the ICB, Sanjinés attempted to foment the simultaneous emergence of nationalism and social consciousness. As Fanon (a key ideological reference for the emerging New Latin American Cinema) wrote in 1961:

It is only when men and women are included on a vast scale in enlightened and fruitful work that form and body are given to that consciousness. Then the flag and the palace where sits the government cease to be the symbols of the nation. The nation deserts these brightly lit, empty shells and takes shelter in the country, where it is given life and dynamic power. (Fanon, 2001: 164–165)

*Ukamau* perhaps sought to convert the brightly lit, empty shell of the ICB into a vehicle of radical consciousness, trying to steer the drifting national revolution towards the shelter of the country. Sanjinés' films, both during and after his time at the ICB, would consistently proclaim that the 'life and dynamic power' of Bolivia resided in the mining proletariat (*¡Aysa!; El coraje del pueblo/The Courage of the People*, 1971) and the indigenous peasantry (*Ukamau; Yawar Mallku/Blood of the Condor*, 1969).

*Revolución* and *Ukamau* anticipate the New Latin American Cinema's inspiration in 1920s–1930s European experimentalism, in Brecht and Benjamin's belief in 'the hidden dialectic between avant-garde art and the utopian hope for an emancipatory

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19 Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the *Ukamau* Group experimented with techniques such as sequence shots and removing suspense from their plots, in an attempt to adapt film form to Andean cultural structures. These techniques sought to locate the films within an integral, unbroken and reflexive space (as opposed to the fragmented space of the Western cinematic and pictorial traditions) that would interact with its collective indigenous protagonists. See Sanjinés (1989).

20 The critic for the La Paz daily *La Razón* noted that in a 1979 Sanjinés retrospective *Ukamau* was screened without Spanish subtitles. See Gamboa (1999: 139–141).

mass culture' (Willemen, 1991: 11). I will now address the contradictions inherent in this dialectic. If *Revolución* was problematic in treating the masses as homogeneous, *Ukamau* endows the aestheticised Aymara with the mythical status of national saviours. Echoing Mariátegui, *Ukamau* injects the aesthetics of the European avant-garde into indigenous Andean culture, harnessing the former's irrationalism to undermine the universalising mythology of bourgeois Western rationalist thought. Mariátegui's cultural hybridity sought to transcend the absolutism of monocultural thought, presenting Marxism and Andean cosmovisions as contrasting mythologies out of which the new Peruvian national myth might be built.<sup>21</sup> Sanjinés was to grow deeply dissatisfied with the real impact that *Ukamau's* imported avant-garde aesthetics could have in creating a genuinely emancipatory mass culture; though Barrientos saw sufficient subversive content in *Ukamau* to sack Sanjinés from his institutional post and (eventually) to dissolve the ICB.

*Ukamau's* aesthetics uphold some of the colonial epistemological assumptions underlying the MNR's myth of a common national destiny, expressed through the (limited) post-1952 agrarian reform.<sup>22</sup> Yet on another level these same non-realist aesthetics, together with the film's denunciation of the white/mestizo minority's oppression of the indigenous, urge us to rethink the Indian's subordinate role in the national imaginary. The film's story revolves around Andrés Mayta, an Aymara Indian from an ayllu [indigenous community] on the Isla del Sol, the legendary homeland of the Inca Empire on Lake Titicaca (Plate 2). One day when Mayta is away in nearby Copacabana, his wife Sabina is assaulted and raped by the local mestizo trader Rosendo Ramos, on whom the ayllu depends to sell its produce. Mayta returns to find Sabina lying on the floor outside their home, and she is able to tell Mayta her aggressor's name before she dies. A year passes by and despite the community's meetings to decide how to deal with the crime, Mayta says nothing, and continues to live his everyday life. One day as Ramos is leaving the community, Mayta ambushes him and exacts his revenge, killing his wife's murderer with his bare hands. The narrative symbolism could scarcely be clearer: the greedy and socially-mobile mestizo Ramos rapes and murders the indigenous community; the inevitable response is violent uprising and the death of the oppressor.<sup>23</sup> Sanjinés (1968: 29) cast Ramos as 'the coloniser', representing the 'creole-mestizo-Western culture' clashing with 'Indian culture'. The

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21 See Mariátegui (1959), especially 'Arte, revolución y decadencia' (18–22). See also Mariátegui (1968, first published 1928) and D'Allemand (2001: 25–57).

22 The Barrientos regime upheld this imagined national community even as it violently repressed organised labour, consolidating a peasant support base through a peasant-military pact. See Rivera Cusicanqui (1984, part 3). Yet for all his opposition to the Indians' cooptation into Barrientos' national alliance Sanjinés notably avoids reference to the emerging Katarista movement, which strongly resisted the peasant-military pact (see note 8 above).

23 However as an Aymara-speaker whose wife wears the pollera [skirt] characteristic of cholos, Ramos might well have been disdained as a cholo or indio by his social 'superiors'. In casting its villains as cholos, *Ukamau* seems to work along the rigid creole-Indian binary that cements Bolivian racism and naturalises mythical biological hierarchies. See note 9 above, and Weismantel (2001: xxviii–xxxix).



Plate 2. Vicente Verner as Mayta in *Ukamau* (1966)

film, more crudely than any of his others, poses Bolivian society as totally polarised, categorising the indigenous population as virtuous, pre-Hispanic, uncorrupted and threatened by imperialism; whilst the white/creole/mestizo side of the dichotomy is exploitative, corrupted by the West, and in league with imperialism to extinguish the Indian race. Indians are idealised for their ‘impermeability to Western culture’; it is in their untouched moral strength that Sanjinés sees the basis from which to renovate the Bolivian nation. ‘When the Indian people rises up, its folklore will take on a dynamic quality, creating a new culture’ (Sanjinés, 1968: 33).

The racial binaries underpinning *Ukamau*’s narrative depict the indigenous as structurally separate from, and exploited by, the ‘modern’ nation. The cinematography both reflects and exaggerates the natural qualities of the landscape, converting the setting into a symbolic landscape expressing and shaping the lives of its inhabitants. The characters’ fates are, until the final scene, seemingly inscribed into the expressionist *mise-en-scène* that paints them as telluric beings unrelated to modernity. Slow, sweeping, establishing long-shots pan and track across the austere scenery; the naturally harsh, high-contrast light of the altiplano is stylised and translated into a metaphor for the Indians’ stoical resistance to their conditions. Sabina’s funeral march is shot in twilight with a low-level camera in extreme long-shot, so that the thin strip of dark land along which the silhouetted mourners trudge, single-file, is dominated by the vast, dark, clouded, menacing skies overhead. The swirling wind and slow, foreboding wind instruments playing on the soundtrack foreshadow the vengeance to come. Likewise the indoor scenes of the village leaders’ meetings are illuminated with

expressive low-key, high-contrast lighting, casting the Indians' deep-set features into small patches of bright light against heavy shadows, as if to announce the obscure and arcane nature of their millennial wisdom. Here the diegetic light of the candle or fire is most often supplemented with a dim fill-light to distinguish the characters' faces. Yet at the moment of greatest dramatic intensity, a close-up on the right side of Mayta's face as he grapples with the moral conundrum of whether to reveal the identity of Sabina's murderer, this latter light disappears, leaving the hero's face almost indiscernible, morally ambiguous, in the flickering candlelight.

Like the protagonists of melodrama, *Ukamau's* Indian protagonists appear to be at the mercy of their fate, unaware of the greater forces at work upon their lives. In classical Hollywood melodrama, protagonists' emotions were expressed not through the eloquent, lettered perorations of 'higher' narrative forms, but through visual and aural excess (for instance, the deeply expressive landscapes imported from German expressionism). As Córdova points out, it is the excess in *Ukamau's* cinematography and editing that acts as a surrogate for the characters' incapacity for self-expression;<sup>24</sup> the heightened and often dissonant music, also imposed from beyond the diegesis, adds to the tension. The camera feminises the powerless Indian as it repeatedly closes in on a powerless Sabina in dramatic close-ups, casting her as emblematic of an impotent race in contrast with the dominant, masculine gaze of the omniscient viewer. There are traces of the positivist indigenismo of Alcides Arguedas' (1919) novel *Raza de bronce* [Race of Bronze], depicting the indigenous as destined to suffer, their primaevial culture set in stone, the relic of a distant past to be 'understood' by an enlightened present. Mesa Gisbert (1985: 84–86) characteristically canonises *Ukamau* within a developing national indigenista tradition, asserting that it merely 'analyse[s] and reth[inks] ... the Indian problem through a new lens', working towards a perfection of 'what Arguedas' indigenismo discovered in a misguided way ... and what the [1952] Revolution substantially altered'.

But *Ukamau's* visceral visual references back to Arguedas often contradict rather than revise his earlier 'discoveries'. Unlike Arguedas (1936), *Ukamau* does not conclude that the Indian's status as a 'natural', illiterate being obstructs his integration into the written tradition of the (creole) nation.<sup>25</sup> The film's political inflection, and its ultimate denunciation of the rape and exploitation of the Indian, would seem to have greater resonance with the indigenismo of the post-Chaco War era, in which the environmentally-rooted Indian became a symbol of national virtue and authenticity in the face of transnational capital and the anti-national oligarchy (Salmón, 1997: 93–110). In Franz Tamayo, argues Javier Sanjinés, the telluric Indian is no longer a picturesque museum piece or a pre-modern leftover, but now the muscular, irrational 'body' whose shoulders would bear the rational mestizo intellect. This hybrid being, a

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24 She identifies *Ukamau's* partial reproduction of melodramatic narrative in the triangular formation of male villain/female victim/male rescuer, and in the progression of the schema happiness/innocence-transgression-suffering-slow, tortuous build-up to revenge. (Córdova, 2002: 206).

25 Paz Soldán (2003: 73–94) gives a valuable analysis of Arguedas' (1936) *Pueblo enfermo*.

corporeal metaphor for the national imaginary, would carry Bolivia towards progress and modernity (Sanjinés C., 2004: 54–61). Yet if Tamayo's vision broadly defines the MNR's conceptualisation of Revolutionary Bolivia, *Ukamau's* denouement presents a different, more radical vision: here the muscular Indian acquires the intellect too, rising up against the colonised cholos, mestizos and creoles to create the new nation (almost) on his own terms. Arguedas' telluric mythology of the Indian is in one sense continued, but in another, through a series of ruptures and revisions, it is turned on its head.

We might argue, too, that it was precisely *Ukamau's* imported experimental expressionist aesthetics, 'copied en-masse from glossy record sleeves . . . sold in the industrialised world as much as in Andean communities' (Harris, 1985: 35), that allowed the film access to national production, distribution and publicity infrastructures, enabling its political message to be inserted into the 'national' imaginary. Before *Ukamau's* release the mainstream press, doubtless expecting an Arguedian elegy to a lost Indian past, had no qualms in publishing folkloric publicity stills of Indians; after the premiere angry and disappointed journalists accused Sanjinés and his colleagues of being 'unpatriotic, denigrators of the country' (León Frías, 1979: 87). Sanjinés has commented that it was largely the film's 'unchristian' ending that displeased members of the Barrientos regime, who would have been satisfied had Ramos died by falling from a precipice (Pérez, undated: 55).

The film's use of montage reflects Sanjinés' interest, shared with Benjamin and Mariátegui alike, in cinema's ability to harness the creative, associative and analytic powers of the unconscious. Early in the film when Mayta visits Copacabana he enters a mask-maker's shop; the camera pans across the grotesque carnival masks on sale. A track in to medium close-up shows him turn towards the camera, trying on a white death mask. This shot cuts to a near graphic match of Ramos as he turns towards the camera in medium close-up, in the scene that will eventually lead to his rape of Sabina. The mask shot is brief and the cut away to Ramos unexpected; the use of a cut rather than a fade or dissolve in the transition to the next scene underlines the symbolic association between the two shots (a presage of evil, an omen of revenge . . .?) Henceforth these two scenes are cross-cut until Mayta returns to find his wife dying outside their home; the link between them is sustained on a symbolic level (an image of knives on sale in Copacabana market cuts to the beginning of the rape scene) as well as a narrative one. As Ramos and Sabina square up to one another before their struggle, ominous 'extreme-close-ups' of a pair of eyes, a mouth, the side of a face, are quickly edited together, reminding us of a shot earlier in the scene from Ramos' point-of-view as he watches the bare lower legs of Sabina while she walks away from him. The speed of the cutting abstracts the eyes and mouth from their owners' bodies. The rapid movement between them, recalling Sanjinés' use of montage in *Revolución*, intensifies our involvement in the scene.

Similarly, the scene of Mayta's final revenge over Ramos begins with an extreme long-shot of the two characters from a gratingly high angle, before cutting to a close-up of their bare-knuckle fight (Plate 3). As the struggle intensifies the shots become shorter: at first each image of the fight is chronologically related to the next; but as the climax approaches, logical narrative progression dissolves. As Mayta conclusively smashes Ramos' head against the ground the villain's head becomes that of Sabina: the earlier scene of her rape and murder, absent until now from the film's narrative, is



**Plate 3.** Mayta wreaks revenge on Ramos in *Ukamau* (1966)

fleetingly edited in. The trauma that was withheld and repressed can now finally become revealed in a cathartic uprising; suddenly the equation is no longer simply ‘abusive Ramos + angry Mayta = revenge’, but a more abstract ‘white/mestizo rape of Indians + raising of Indian consciousness = Indian insurrection’. As discussed by Benjamin, the rhythm of the editing prevents the viewer from lingering on and contemplating any one image. Unable to ‘abandon himself to his associations’ (Benjamin, 1970: 231) he is propelled into an oneiric, heightened presence of mind, incorporating the irrational workings of his unconscious into his ‘logical’ and linear knowledge of the plot. In rejecting rationalism in its portrayal of the Indian, *Ukamau* reflects Mariátegui’s proposal that realist art, rather than an index to an absolute truth, is a politically-inflected cult of knowledge that upholds bourgeois capitalist systems of government, no more valid or ‘truthful’, say, than the systems of ancestral belief around which indigenous cultures and social systems revolve (D’Allemand, 2001).

In this sense *Ukamau* also evokes melodrama’s roots in late seventeenth-century popular theatre, which was granted access to elite exhibition spaces only on condition that dialogue be excluded, thereby maintaining the purity of ‘true theatre’. Performance style and *mise-en-scène* thus usurped the spoken word as the key to

identification with its protagonists; popular theatre became opposed to rationalist bourgeois cultural forms with their elevation of the cerebral and repression of the emotional. The 1920s avant-garde of the likes of Breton and Buñuel converted the emotional and the irrational into political statement, as opposed to the merely reactive (even commercial) strategies of the seventeenth-century popular dramatists. *Ukamau* applies direct political statement back to melodrama, embracing the European avant-garde's hopes of aesthetic liberation. It injects these aspirations into Latin American melodrama's historical function as a popular drama of recognition: at once a stratagem by which the lower classes were able to reflect themselves in an increasingly commercialised mass culture, and a family-based mediation between the everyday experience of the masses and the monumental time of history, of the national narrative that passes them by.<sup>26</sup> By expressing the oppression and rebellion of the indigenous peoples of Bolivia allegorically through Andrés and Sabina, *Ukamau* perhaps seeks to draw the indigenous viewer into a personalised appreciation of their historical role in the relentless progress of the nation. At the same time the heady, rhythmic montage described above, particularly in the climactic revenge scene, seeks to convert the personalised identification of expressionist melodrama into a generalised, communal desire to take up arms. 'You'll pay for this', the government minister muttered to Sanjinés under his breath at the premiere of *Ukamau*, 'You're rousing the Indians!' (Pérez, 1971: 55).

The partial rejection of rational, linear narrative as a guiding principle is also the key to the film's indigenista aesthetic. García Pabón (2001) argues that *Ukamau*'s narrative structure partially incorporates Andean cultural parameters:

The importance the film's narrative gives to expectancy does not derive from an idealistic mythology of Indians, which would portray them as being impenetrable and taciturn while expecting who knows what destiny, but rather waiting represents an important element in Sanjinés' whole aesthetic project, which tries to understand and transmit the experience of Aymara time.

This may overstate the extent to which *Ukamau* avoids a stereotypical depiction of its indigenous protagonists, but it does point out a crucial continuity between *Ukamau* and the sociologically more insightful *La nación clandestina* (1989). With *La nación* Sanjinés rejects outright the notion of temporal-historical progress enshrined in Western philosophy, striving instead to create a narrative structure originating in the Andean spatio-temporal concept of the cyclical restitution of a past utopia.<sup>27</sup> *Ukamau*, with its expressionistic photography and emotive montage, lacks the later film's

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26 Martín-Barbero (2003: 151–162) discusses the popular, often subversive roots of European and Latin American melodrama.

27 See Estermann (1998, chapter 6) for a comprehensive discussion of the notions of cyclical time and restitution of utopias in Andean pacha. See Sanjinés (1989) and note 19 above, on the development of this aesthetic. See Rivera Cusicanqui (1990), García Pabón (2001) and Ruffinelli (2003) for discussions of *La nación*'s aesthetics in relation to Andean philosophy.



engagement with Andean philosophy. But like *La nación*, it has a slow, measured rhythm and pace that relies relatively little on the cause-and-effect narrative structure of classical Hollywood (or mainstream Latin American) cinema, whose system of continuity editing splits diegetic time into fragments, reassembling them according to the laws of dramatic tension but under the banner of reality.

As such, *Ukamau* is more reminiscent of the heterogeneous indigenismo identified by Antonio Cornejo Polar in the writings of the Peruvian José María Arguedas, whose novels infused Quechua thought patterns and knowledge structures into the written Spanish language. Cornejo Polar valorises an indigenismo that self-consciously injects indigenous elements into the fabric of foreign or dominant forms and idioms (Spanish/Hollywood/European avant-garde), as do Sanjinés' films, over one that tries to 'authentically' translate, reproduce or falsify indigenous narrative forms or speech patterns directly into the dominant language. A heterogeneous indigenismo rejects realism's search for authentic, mimetic depiction, instead finding aesthetic and political creativity in the collision between Hispanic and indigenous cultures. Such expressions display 'a different kind of authenticity, more complex, that derives from the . . . assimilation of certain forms that belong to the referent. Underlying these forms is a subtle artistic process that is clearly as, or more, important than realism' (Cornejo Polar, 1982: 85). The cultural forms of the (indigenous) 'referent' erupt through and deform the dominant language (Spanish), disabling the latter's authoritative claim to 'know' the colonial Other. *Ukamau*, 'written' in a baroque fusion of realist, avant-garde, melodramatic and indigenista cinematic idioms, seems to revel in its heterogeneity, its political will to simply tell the story of the Indians' repression and rebellion constantly compromised by an auteurist impulse to exploit the expressive potential of cinema's artifice.

## Breaking Through the Text

Revolución, with its rapid-fire editing and rhythmic seduction, privileges its director's formal and political design over a profound cultural analysis of its referent. *Ukamau*, too, is highly stylised and its aesthetic treatment of the Indians and the altiplano, imported from European traditions as much as borrowed from indigenous culture itself, tends to drown out its protagonists with authorial symbolism. As Jorge Sanjinés noted:

In our first films we used a language that was culturally inappropriate to our people; . . . we realised that our work was only appreciated by the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois strata of our country, not by the peasants and workers with whom we wished to communicate (Sanjinés, 1978: 20).

Javier Sanjinés (2004: 54–62) notes that Franz Tamayo's eulogies of the irrational Indian element in his mestizo national imaginary derives not from a study of Andean philosophies, but from his readings of Schopenhauer and nineteenth-century German irrationalism. On these terms we might conclude that *Ukamau*, like Tamayo, can only explain the Indian from the outside, making him into 'something useful for constructing

modernity' (Sanjinés C., 2004: 62); it can only think its Aymara subjects from the epistemological framework of the European-educated intellectual. For all that it subverts the MNR's imagined homogeneous peasant-worker national class, or Barrientos' harmonious relationship between the Indian peasantry and the state, by its very nature it cannot but present the Indian as a latent force waiting to be awakened by the vanguard revolutionary in order to progress towards victory. It fails to break down the hierarchical division of revolutionary labour whereby knowledge, analysis and understanding are the preserve of the outsider while the Indian contributes his resolute will, his noble courage, his reflexive knowledge of his environment. It still entertains the possibility that a 'truly' revolutionary nation might be a suitable backdrop for the Indian struggle.

Even so, by locating their irrationalist formal structures outside of the disciplinary political mythologies of eternal revolutionary progress and the national ideal of *mezizaje*, *Revolución* and *Ukamau* prepare the ground for a new, transnational field of artistic and political struggle that exceeds the repressive epistemological frontiers of nationhood that had characterised Sanjinés' indigenista forebears. Their specific production and distribution conditions, of course, enabled them to feed back into oppositional national political agendas; but their aesthetics, particularly those of the later film, enable meaning to be abstracted to the generalised plane of continental, indigenous and international struggle. If *Ukamau*'s imported irrationalist aesthetics are unable to create a 'genuinely' emancipatory mass culture, their attempts to harness the unconscious for political means at least hint at an alternative to the teleological, universalising mythology of the linear national story narrated on Western terms. As Indians and cholos continue to flock to Sanjinés retrospectives in Bolivia, these films still form part of an alternative collective memory of those 'left behind' by the rhetoric of modernity and progress.

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