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Finding one's own voice as an indigenous filmmaker

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Introduction

Filmmaking from a Marginal Position

“Se c’è qualcosa di raccontare, parla forte, in modo che se ascolta da prima a l’ultima fila.”

(Mimmo Cuticchio in *L’Urlo del Mostro*)

At a panel on Indigenous Cinema at the Berlinale 2012, New Zealand producer Catherine Fitzgerald observed:

It is very important for an Indigenous filmmaker to find his/her own voice and make a difference. It is all about coming back to one’s roots. Any exchange of dialogue is consciously uttered because it is something rooted within my ethnicity. Many people don’t think about it but for an Indigenous filmmaker, it is a cultural and, in fact, a political act. (Berlinale Talent Press)¹

Fitzgerald’s remark stresses both the cultural and political implications of finding a ‘Voice’ as an Indigenous filmmaker. This research indeed examines ‘Voice’ from an aesthetic and cultural perspective, but also considers its ideological and political aspects. In the field of film as performing art, ‘Voice’ is generally considered to refer to the narrative and aesthetic choices made by filmmakers to express their vision, whereas in the field of post-colonial studies ‘Voice’ is regarded as the gaining of access to discourse, to self-representation and thus to a subject position. In this introduction I will elaborate on the different meanings and connotations of ‘Voice’ and their importance and implications for Indigenous Cinema. As Fitzgerald already notes these two different meanings of ‘Voice’ are important with regard to Indigenous Cinema.

¹ See the website: <http://www.talentpress.org/story/81/4281.html>

The Storyteller's Voice

When I started studying at the Netherlands Film Academy, I considered filmmaking a form of storytelling and for my thesis film, I decided to make a documentary about a storytelling tradition.² On a trip to Sicily I had encountered the tradition of puppeteers who perform the story of Charlemagne and his knights.³ At that time the puppet play tradition was under severe stress as in the last decades its function had been replaced by television. Encountering this living storytelling tradition and its struggle to survive led me to make the documentary film *Una nave per tornare* (1998). For this film I interviewed, among others, the renowned puppeteer Mimmo Cuticchio. While researching and shooting my thesis project, I had the chance to listen to his ideas and to learn more about storytelling in general. Voice and orality are of course intrinsic to this form of storytelling and in this respect Cuticchio's insistence on the use of Sicilian dialect and on the articulation and expression of a vernacular language and tradition are comparable to efforts made among Indigenous writers and artists to document, preserve and promote the survival of Indigenous languages.

As a puppeteer Cuticchio tried to adapt stories from a different historical and cultural realm for a contemporary audience. He consequently sought and highlighted the elements of the story that seemed recognizable across time and space. Most of these elements concerned human emotions, such as love, anger, need for revenge, or pride. At a certain moment in *Una nave per tornare*, Cuticchio discusses with his pupils a scene between the characters Beltrame and Galiacella. Galiacella is a Sarecen female warrior. She has fallen in love with the Christian warrior (thus her enemy) Ruggiero di Risa. But Ruggiero's brother, Beltrame, also likes Galiacella. Blinded by his love for her, he is convinced that she would have preferred him as a spouse and decides to confess his feelings. Cuticchio discusses with his pupils the scene in which Beltrame will confess his feelings to Galiacella. Galiacella rejects Beltrame and he consequently takes vengeance by betraying both Galiacella and his brother to the enemy. Cuticchio observes that this is an intimate event and should be presented as such. He states: "these human emotions like love and treason are not discussed in the open on the street, for everyone to witness." Cuticchio further observes that something like a crime of passion, perpetrated by a character blinded by love and hate, is not specific to a particular

² I was also influenced by different films at the time which presented puppeteer traditions as a metaphor for life and cinema. For example the films *The Puppetmaster* (Hsiao Hsien Hou 1993) and *Lifetimes* (Zhang Yimou 1994).

³ For an overview of the different aspects of this tradition, see, for example, the monograph of Pasqualino (1989).

time or culture. Crimes of passion have happened throughout the world, throughout history. Cuticchio explains that the audience should be given insight into the motivations of the character to commit such atrocities in order to understand the character as a human being instead of perceiving him as a monster. The reflections of Cuticchio with regard to the performance of the puppet play are very similar to reflections and considerations when writing a screenplay, or directing a film.

At a different moment in the documentary Cuticchio rehearses for his theatre play *L'Urlo del Monstruo*, a modern theatre play which includes elements of the puppeteer tradition. Here, Cuticchio makes his father appear as the mythological character with eight heads, *Il Mago Demorgene*.⁴ Cuticchio reproaches this father figure for probably coming along to critique him, just as he did at his very first independent puppet play. Cuticchio recalls how his father, Giacomo Cuticchio, arrived late and chose to sit on the very last bench at the back of the room. After a couple of minutes the father stood up and shouted loudly: "Speak up boy! Here in the back we can't hear a thing!", and Cuticchio felt like he wanted to disappear from the face of the earth. Through the puppeteer's voice, the head of Demorgene answers: "Come on, of course not. Live your life, tell your stories, only remember that if you have something to tell, you should do it loud and clearly so that they can hear you from the first to the very last row". This fragment is also the last scene of the documentary film *Una nave per tornare*. In the film it is both a reflection on the conflict between generations, a subject that has been present throughout my work, as well as a reflection on the importance of having a strong voice for the art of storytelling. The reaction of *cuntista* Giacomo Cuticchio to his son's first independent puppet play seems to refer above all to literally speaking loud and clearly when addressing an audience.⁵ Nevertheless, this statement can also be taken in a figurative sense, expressing thus the general need for storytellers to convey their message to an audience. This alternative meaning is akin to the understanding of 'Voice' in a figurative sense, as a means to express oneself both artistically and politically. When expressing oneself it is important to find the appropriate way to reach the intended audience. While film conventions are different to those of the puppet play, the reflection on why a story should be told in a certain way is very similar.⁶ Like the puppeteer, a filmmaker

⁴ According to Pasqualino 1989 the name Demorgene is possibly derived from the term Demogorgon, stemming from late antiquity as a reference to the supreme being or possibly also a corruption or equivalent of *demiurge* (the creator of the material world according to Platonic philosophy).

⁵ Sicilian traditional storyteller and puppet player.

⁶ Film scholar Peter Verstraten examines whether cinema is essentially narrative in his contribution 'Between Attraction and Story, Rethinking Narrativity in Cinema' (2009). His answer to this question is twofold: yes and no. Verstraten states that because of the movement of film through time, there is an inherent narrative element.

has to decide on how to develop certain characters, how to place them in a scene, and with what other means to tell the story. The cinematic choices regarding how to tell a particular story represent what many filmmakers call 'Voice'. In this research I want to focus on the 'Voice' of the screenwriter and director in marginalized circumstances. While I am interested in the filmmaker's 'Voice' in marginal conditions in general, because of my own cultural positioning I will focus mainly on Indigenous Cinema.

The Filmmaker's 'Voice'

Storytelling is in origin an oral practice. Around the world people have told each other stories through oral tradition long before the existence of other mediums. In this sense storytelling is intrinsically connected to speech and voice. As Giacomo Cuticchio pointed out, a story has to be told loud and clearly to be heard and understood, and this depends of course on the voice of the *cuntista* - or storyteller. The analogy between film and storytelling is expressed in a large quantity of literature on films and filmmaking, as testified by the many books on cinema that incorporate the term storytelling in the title.⁷ Whereas the puppeteer and *cuntista* use their physical voice to convey a story, but also to add drama and suspense, filmmakers use cinematic devices such as staging, cinematography, art direction, and sound as means of artistic expression. It may, therefore, be of no surprise that in different film training and education institutions throughout the world, filmmakers are encouraged to develop their own 'Voice'. Important film training institutions such as the Sundance Film Lab or the Binger Filmlab state clearly that they are committed to supporting filmmakers with a particular own 'Voice'. Also the Film Program of The University of Southern California states that the school is committed to the development of an own 'Voice'.⁸ Obviously 'Voice' in this

He observes that although cinema also consists of elements that are non-narrative, such as spectacle, these elements tend to be embedded in an overarching narrative structure. Even when this narrative element is absent, Verstraten argues, an audience might read a certain amount of narrativity into a film. Particularly narrative cinema, such as feature films, short fiction films and feature documentaries can be considered a form of storytelling.

⁷ See, for example: Robert Mc Kee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997), Kristin Thompson's *Storytelling in Film and Television* (2003), or Sheila Curran Bernard's *Documentary Storytelling* (2004).

⁸ Shari Frilot, Senior Programmer at Sundance Film Festival: "I look for originality, whether it is in the form the film takes, the narrative structure it realizes, in the characters that develop, or the tone or texture it manages to create. I look for originality in voice - I look for new voices, old voices with new things to say, and voices we don't seem to get to hear enough from."

(http://www.indiewire.com/article/filmmaker_toolkit_meet_the_sundance_film_festival_programmers_in_their_own_voice/)

context refers to the ways in which a filmmaker expresses his/her vision through the use of cinematic elements. Ken Dancyger, scriptwriter and Assistant Professor in scriptwriting at New York University, elaborates extensively on the filmmaker's 'Voice' in his book *Global Scriptwriting* (2001). Dancyger considers 'Voice' to be the expression of a writer's or director's attitude towards life. Dancyger explains that specific genres enable a writer or director more easily to express 'Voice' than others. He distinguishes documentary, fables, non-linear narratives, satire and experimental narratives. In his book *Alternative Scriptwriting* Dancyger states with regard to 'Voice':

Clearly, much of what we are calling voice in film is under the control of the director. The relative realism of color scheme, the lighting contrast ratios, the set design, the casting, the balance of ambient sounds to dialogue, and the final editing pattern are beyond the realm of the writer. Still it is possible to construct a script that emphasizes the narrative voice at the level of story.

(Dancyger 2007: 314)

This is to say, 'Voice' resides both in the narrative aspects, as well as the aesthetic choices of the film. Dancyger's reflections on 'Voice' also make clear that in cinema several 'Voices' can be present at the same time, as a film is mostly the result of different participating agents, such as the screenwriter, the director, but also the director of photography, the music composer, and many others. 'Voice' is extremely important in the development of emerging filmmakers and is generally considered to be what distinguishes a particular filmmaker. For example, during script-development labs the recurring and most important question asked to writer-directors is: Why do you want to tell this particular story? And how does this story relate to your own personal experience?

With regard to the 'Voice' of the filmmaker there is a field of tension between film theory and film practice. It has become common in contemporary theory to avoid a search for an authorial intention or an authorial voice. Literary theory has declared the 'death of the

Judith Weston, a prominent tutor for directors, actors and screenwriters at the Binger: "I want the directors to be more connected to actors, more connected to characters and more connected to their own inner voice."
(<http://www.binger.nl/advisors/7683>)

On the website of USC cinematic arts we find a telling interview with Oscar winning writer Aaron Sorkin: "Sorkin commented on how fortunate he felt to have worked in theatre, television and feature films. He told the students that the most important thing that they can learn in film school is how to tell stories in their own voice."
(<http://cinema.usc.edu/news/article.cfm?id=11660>)

author' as an originating source of meaning.⁹ Nevertheless, film criticism and film practice still tend to consider the author very much at the centre of film production and appreciation. In his internet contribution *Academics vs. Critics* film theorist David Bordwell explores this disruption between film criticism and scholarly research and states:¹⁰

Probably there is no prospect of rapprochement with the hardcore seminar culture that insists on opaque prose, ponderous play with theoretical catchwords, and distance from the creative process of filmmaking. But the gulf between cinephile criticism and academic research isn't absolute. Some notions of authorship, genre, and national cinemas are common to most serious inquiry into films. Although the two camps treat these ideas somewhat differently, interests can sometimes intersect.

(Bordwell 2012, webpage Filmcomment)

Bordwell consequently characterizes the approach within film criticism towards the author as follows:

For both Kehr and McBride, the breaking point is academics' rejection of auteurism, which is more than a fruitful way to understand a career and interpret films. It is, as Kehr puts it, "perhaps the simplest, most empirically satisfying way of connecting an audience to a work of art: through a human figure." (ibid.)

But Bordwell also adds a nuance to this apparently unbridgeable divide:

At the same time, not all film scholars believe the author is dead, subscribe to semiology, disdain popular filmmaking, or smother living work under a blanket of Grand Theory. (ibid.)

While the disengagement with the author has been an important development within film theory, as it has opened up for different readings of the filmic text, for the practice of filmmaking the authorial 'Voice' and intent continues to be of crucial importance. In the realm of filmmaking, the personal drive and the 'Voice' of the author remain key aspects of

⁹ In his essay 'Death of the Author' (1967) Roland Barthes argues against the prevailing tendency of attributing the meaning of a text to the biographical knowledge of an author. This essay marks a shift in the ways of reading and interpreting texts. The author of a text is no longer seen as an authority over the meaning of a text, instead interpretation lies with the audience/reader.

¹⁰ In their book *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses*, Elsaesser and Hagener refer to the contributions of David Bordwell on his own internet page as "the star-critic-as-blogger" in an analysis of the digitalization of film and the rise of new media (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010: 176).

reflection. For example, acclaimed documentary filmmaker and professor Michael Rabiger gave the following assignment at an international workshop for documentary filmmakers: “Write down your three greatest problems in life. Now, take a moment and think how this should be guiding your filmmaking.”¹¹ This is not an isolated example, having attended many international scriptwriting and film directing workshops, I can confirm that the personal motivations are generally considered a key element of reflection and exploration in the creative process.¹² Director Richard Attenborough explains why he likes directing films as follows:

If you're directing, you have the opportunity to put your signature at the bottom of the frame. You have the opportunity to say, “This is what I believe. That is my credo. That is what I wish to state.” (Sherman 1987: 4)

As a project which explores both the theoretical aspects of film, as well as the practice of filmmaking and its creative process, this research from the beginning integrates this apparent contradiction. The focus on the authorial ‘Voice’ within filmmaking is very different to the ways in which film theory tends to regard this particular aspect. Being a filmmaker myself this project looks at the author and the authorial ‘Voice’ predominantly from a filmmaking perspective. However, this approach stems above all from the realm of filmmaking and I am very aware that in general the author is considered differently within the realm of film studies.

Within the realm of post-colonial studies the author also continues to be important. In his work *An Accented Cinema* (2001) film theorist Hamid Naficy elaborates on the relation between the filmic text and the accented filmmaker, while simultaneously addressing the previously mentioned suspicion towards filmmakers as ‘authors’ in certain academic circles. Naficy argues for the importance of taking into account the ‘authorship’ of accented filmmakers and observes:

¹¹ Michael Rabiger was Chair of Film and Video department at Columbia College Chicago, he has been a guest lecturer at the Tisch School of Arts of New York University and is author of *Directing the Documentary* (1997) and other influential publications.

¹² For example, during the Binger Screenwriting Lab as well as the Directors Lab, in which I participated as part of this research, an entire week was designated to explore one’s own personal connection to the material one was writing or directing. Also in the Cine Qua Non Lab, in which I participated in 2011, script consultant Christina Lazaridi encouraged us to search for the moment of most pain in our own personal life, to understand the drive for making the film.

Accented films are personal and unique, like fingerprints, because they are both authorial and autobiographical. Exile discourse needs to counter the move by some postmodern critics to separate the author of the film from the enunciating subject in the film, for exile and authorship are fundamentally intertwined with historical movements of empirical subjects across boundaries of nations, not just texts... However, the questioning of the bond linking autobiography to authorship should not be used as a postmodernist sleight of hand to dismiss the specificity of exilic conditions or to defuse their subversive and empowering potentiality. Such a move comes at the very moment that, for the diasporized subalterns of the world, history, historical agency, and autobiographical consciousness have become significant and signifying components of identity, artistic production and social agency. Accented authors are empirical subjects who exist outside and prior to their films. (Naficy 2001: 34, 35)

Naficy's insistence on envisioning "accented cinema theory as an extension of authorship theory" (Naficy 2001: 34) and on taking into consideration the historical and geographical locatedness of accented filmmakers, arises from an interest in how accented filmmakers have gained voice as subaltern subjects. Here the term 'Voice' is to be understood above all in a political sense. Naficy's emphasis on regarding accented filmmakers as empirical subjects, coincides with a general interest within post-colonial studies to take into account the material reality of history. Post-colonial studies often follow Marxist thought, addressing the material consequences of colonialism and its effects on real people. Several scholars in the field of post-colonial studies have insisted on not only regarding colonialism as a discourse, but to also address it as a practice with real consequences for embodied subjects. The general argument, especially expressed in the 1990s, is that it is not possible to talk about extermination, rape, or poverty in merely textual or discursive terms, without acknowledging the material reality of it all and without taking into account the embodied subjects who underwent the atrocities of the colonial process.¹³ In my examination of 'Voice' I will therefore take into account these two interrelated perspectives. On the one hand, I will consider 'Voice' with regard to the cinematic choices and tools employed by filmmakers to express a particular vision; on the other, I will explore 'Voice' as a form of self-representation in a context of marginality.

¹³ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam put this forward in their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994); Ania Loomba makes a similar argument in her book *Colonialism / Post-Colonialism* (1998).

Marginal Voices and Unwilling Ears

Telling stories, writing or making films, are ways of producing multiple meanings in the world. Stories are not neutral texts, but instead are shaped by, participate in, disrupt, and reproduce existing power relations. The effect and reach of a story, therefore, does not only depend on the storyteller's voice, but also on the disposition it encounters to be distributed or reproduced, and its capacity to find an audience. The access to an audience and the disposition of an audience to listen may largely depend on power relations and political interests in which the story is entangled. For example, Feminist Studies has had to unearth the voices of female characters, and re-inscribe women writers into the literary canon as the female voice has often gone unheard.¹⁴ In *Tracing Arachne's Web, Myth and Feminist Fiction* (2003), literary theorist Kristin Bloomberg takes the figure of Arachne as a metaphor for women's writing. This story provides, according to Bloomberg, an interesting metaphor for the entanglement of stories with power and power relations. In the story, Arachne accepted a challenge by the Greek Goddess Pallas Athena as to who could weave the most beautiful tapestry. While Pallas Athena wove a tapestry that depicted scenes of vengeance by the Gods, Arachne wove pictures of the God's misbehaviour, such as Zeus kidnapping of Asia. In the end Pallas Athena turned Arachne into a spider as she did not find any flaws in her weaving. The punishment chosen by Athena is striking. While Arachne was granted to keep her mastery of weaving, she was denied the possibility to ever tell a story again through her art. Arachne thus was rendered voiceless, no longer able to express her thoughts and opinions. It seems Arachne was punished both for her extraordinary craftsmanship, as well as for exposing the misbehaviour of the Gods. Bloomberg observes:

Arachne is a powerful metaphor for the study of women writers who, like Spider Grandmother, think up new worlds in the stories that they spin, and who, like Arachne, dare to challenge the establishment by comparing themselves to it. But as Jane Caputi observes, Arachne's story reveals that this can be a dangerous and radical enterprise, because when women "foray into the realm traditionally forbidden to our

¹⁴ For example Mieke Bal rereads the Bible explicitly from the perspective of female characters in her book *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (1989). Rosi Braidotti uncovers feminine voices in philosophy in *Patterns of Dissonance* (1991). With respect to film, female filmmakers make up a small minority and have been traditionally marginalized from the film canon and major film events. Hardly ever female directors are nominated for an Academy Award, and the official selection for the 2013 Cannes Film Festival did not figure a single film directed by a woman.

sex—the realm of the sacred storytellers, symbol and myth-makers—we participate in the creative powers of Thought Woman, employing thinking, naming and willing as forms of power exercised consciously and/or intuitively in the creation of the world(s) we inhabit. (Bloomberg 2003: 3)

In ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988), post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak calls attention to the ways in which the subaltern are unable to speak, and if they manage to speak they mostly remain unheard. Spivak’s notion of speaking here refers to the possibility and ability to articulate a standpoint and influence decisions and events. Spivak argues in this essay that post-colonial studies tend to unwillingly repeat the colonial structures and power relations that they are supposed to critique. Academics and intellectuals end up ‘speaking for’ the subaltern instead of creating a space for the subaltern to speak for themselves. Spivak points out that belonging to academia means belonging to a position of privilege and power. She asserts that Post-colonial studies participate in a structure of knowledge production that is ultimately part of existing power structures, and that one should reflect on these structures. She also contends that when the subaltern tries to reclaim a cultural group identity this tends to re-inscribe existing power relations and discourse. Spivak notes in this respect that it is impossible to ‘return to lost origins’. She concludes that because of the combination of all these elements, it is ultimately impossible for the subaltern to claim a position as the subject of speech, instead of an object of speech. It is precisely this condition of lacking access to articulate a position that makes one subaltern. What Spivak points out, is that the inability to speak for oneself, and the structural denial of a subject position by the powers in place characterizes the condition of the subaltern. This implies that the subaltern stands outside the production of knowledge and discourse and also has no real access to eventually participate in the production of knowledge and discourse. While many have critiqued Spivak’s position, her article has raised important questions and considerations with regard to the possibilities of self-representation, self-expression and self-determination of the subaltern. Spivak’s essay has triggered different reactions within the field of post-colonial studies. In her book *Colonialism / Post-Colonialism* (1998) literary theorist Ania Loomba gives an overview of different discussions and issues in the field of post-colonial studies. Loomba acknowledges Spivak to be one of the most important postcolonial thinkers and observes:

By pointing out how deeply its knowledge systems were imbricated in racial and colonialist perspectives, scholars such as Bernal, Said or Spivak have contributed to,

indeed extended, the discrediting of the European Enlightenment by post-structuralists such as Foucault. The central figure of Western humanist and Enlightenment discourses, the humane, knowing subject, now stands revealed as a white male colonialist. (Loomba 1998: 66)

Loomba expands extensively on the points made by Spivak in her essay and subsequent critiques and explains Spivak's contribution as follows:

Scholars such as Lata Mani, as mentioned earlier, have shown that in the lengthy debates and discussions that surrounded the British government legislations against the practice of sati, the women who were burnt on their husband's pyres as satis are absent as subjects. Spivak reads this absence as emblematic of the difficulty of the difficulty of recovering the voice of the oppressed subject and proof that 'there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak'. She thus challenges a simple division between colonizer and colonized by inserting the 'brown woman' as a category oppressed by both. Elite men may have found a way to 'speak', but she suggests, for those further down the hierarchy, self-representation was not a possibility. Spivak's point here is to also to challenge the easy assumption that the post-colonial historian can recover the standpoint of the subaltern. (ibid. 234)

Loomba also explains why Spivak's text has been extensively critiqued and has been considered problematic by different scholars:

Spivak effectively warns the postcolonial critic against romanticizing and homogenizing the subaltern subject. However, her insistence on subaltern 'silence' is problematic if adopted as the definitive statement about colonial relations. Benita Parry finds that Spivak's reading of Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example, does not pick up on traces of female agency within that text and in Caribbean cultures generally, and is insensitive to the ways in which "women inscribed themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artisans and artists" in colonized societies. Therefore she accuses Spivak of "deliberate deafness to the native voice where it can be heard". (Parry 1987: 39) Parry suggests that such a deafness arises out of Spivak's theory of subaltern silence which attributes "an absolute power to the hegemonic discourse." (ibid. 235)

Loomba considers both standpoints as extremely important and valuable and considers it is unnecessary to choose between the two. Instead, she suggests both points need to be taken into account while doing post-colonial research. Scholar Lata Mani has suggested the question of Spivak can be rephrased in a broader sense, proposing that in each text it is of importance to ask:

Which group constitutes the subaltern in any text? What is their relationship to each other? How can they be heard to be speaking or not speaking in any given set of materials? With what effects? Rephrasing the questions in this way enables us to retain Spivak's insight regarding the position of women in colonial discourse without conceding to colonial discourse what, it in fact did not achieve – the erasure of women. (Mani 1992: 403)

With respect to cinema Naficy elaborates on the subaltern's access to speech as a filmmaker:

Accented filmmakers are the products of this dual postcolonial displacement and postmodern or late modern scattering. Because of their displacement from the margins to the centers, they have become subjects in the world history. They have earned the right to speak and have dared to capture the means of representation. However marginalized they are within the center, their ability to access the means of *reproduction* may prove to be as empowering to the marginalia of the postindustrial era as the capturing of the means of *production* would have been to the subalterns of the industrial era. (Naficy 2001: 11)

Naficy's observation clearly makes reference to the Marxist strand of post-colonial studies and evokes Spivak's article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. Following Spivak's argument that subaltern colonial and post-colonial subjects have no access to speech nor to the production of discourse, Naficy regards accented filmmakers as having conquered their access. Naficy's explicit choice for the term 'Accented' is clearly a reference to Spivak's article, as accents are literally always inseparably connected to language and 'Voice'.¹⁵ Through his choice of

¹⁵ This analogy is followed in other texts on accented or independent transnational cinema, for example by film scholar Song Hwee Lim in his contribution 'Speaking in Tongues: Ang Lee, Accented Cinema, Hollywood' for the book *Theorizing World Cinema* (Nagib, Perriam and Dudrah 2012)

terminology Naficy presents the accented filmmaker as a subaltern cinematic storyteller who can certainly speak, but whose voice has developed a very own and particular accent because of journeys and displacements. The question for subaltern filmmakers is therefore not so much if they can speak, but rather how and to whom they speak. Finding one's own 'Voice' as a marginal filmmaker revolves thus around the question: How does one express oneself through film, both in aesthetic and political terms?

Indigenous filmmakers and 'Voice'

The central question of this research is thus: How can one find one's own 'Voice' as an Indigenous filmmaker? This question has both aesthetic and socio-political implications, as it refers both to the aesthetic and narrative choices made by filmmakers in their works, but also to the process of gaining access to self-representation. In this exploration it is important to take into account Spivak's critique of a homogenizing approach to oppressed and colonized groups. It is of utmost importance to understand that Indigenous Cinema does not exist as a genre, nor as a unitary cultural expression, nor should it be taken as an essentialist notion. Instead it should be understood similarly to Naficy's concept of Accented Cinema. Indigenous Cinema is produced in similar political and social circumstances. While there exist great cultural, geographical, and historical differences between different Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous filmmakers around the world - like Accented filmmakers - are likely to encounter specific ordeals in their filmic practice. For example, most Indigenous filmmakers will face issues of stereotyped representation and cultural appropriation by the media. Many Indigenous filmmakers will have a limited access to production tools and funding. And most Indigenous filmmakers are working in a context wherein the vanishing of languages and traditions due to ages of assimilation politics by different governments is an important issue that needs to be addressed.¹⁶ The intention of this research project is to discern and analyse a variety of narrative and aesthetic strategies that address the practical, representational and ideological issues faced by Indigenous filmmakers.

¹⁶ For example, Indigenous Peoples in the United States, Canada, and Australia have been forced to assimilate culturally and linguistically through a politics of sending Native children to boarding schools. In Mexico, during many decades there was a prohibition on the use of Indigenous languages at school premises. While Mexico today has an official policy that accepts Indigenous languages as part of Mexico's cultural diversity, Indigenous languages are not taught at schools.

I will explore this question through a combination of artistic practice, reflection and scholarly analysis. The artistic practice consists of an exploration of different issues in documentaries and short films, presented as a creative portfolio. The analysis focuses on my own filmic productions in relation to the work of other filmmakers addressing similar subjects. This approach can be understood as ‘the critical practice of film’ (Kydd 2011). Film director and scholar Elspeth Kydd considers the critical practice of film to be a combination of research through practice and scholarly analysis and states:

We will embrace the idea of a continuum between theory and practice rather than absolute categories, breaking down these distinctions, in order to see writing criticism and theory as practical and creative, and practice as critical and theoretical. This integration is not new, filmmakers have always engaged with critical and theoretical ideas, just as critics have explored and experimented with creative practice. Critical practice also means that we debate and discuss our own practice and see theorizing as practice: writing and producing knowledge and ways of engaging with the world. (Kydd 2011: 4)

During the period of this research I worked on different films, including fictional shorts and a feature documentary. In the production process of these films I encountered several recurring political and representational issues which led me to develop particular creative solutions. I will compare the choices that I made with regard to narrative structure and aesthetics with the creative choices of other Indigenous filmmakers in dealing with similar matters and concerns and thus explore the relation between form and content and between form and ideology.

Indigenous Cinema is not a unified genre or film style, nor is it a particular national cinema, instead it is a term that refers to a conglomerate of different authors who somehow belong to an Indigenous community and face similar working conditions and cultural and social issues. Indigenous filmmakers share certain characteristics but are not a homogenous group. Instead, Indigenous Cinema should be seen as the work of a growing group of individuals situated in specific historical, cultural, geographic and social networks producing cinematic texts. In this respect Indigenous filmmakers have much in common with the filmmakers grouped by Naficy under the definition Accented Cinema. Indigenous filmmakers, like exilic and diasporic filmmakers also live through the tensions of the process of globalization and modernization. Most Indigenous filmmakers belong to pre-industrial

societies, which live in conflict and discord with contemporary capitalism.¹⁷ Just as including the author and authorship in the analysis of Accented Cinema allows for a better understanding of the tensions of the process of exile and diaspora, in a similar way including the author and authorship in the analysis of Indigenous films, allows for a better understanding of the effects of the ongoing process of globalization and modernization on Indigenous communities and subjects. Acknowledging the ‘Voice’ of Indigenous filmmakers in their filmic texts is important both from a political and an academic perspective. As Naficy explains, the insistence on authors and authorship in this respect does not assume the genius of the author, but rather highlights the material and embodied reality to which the filmic texts make reference. Naficy observes in this respect:

To that extent, accented cinema theory is an extension of the authorship theory and it runs counter to much of the postmodern theory that attempts to either deny authorship altogether or multiply the authoring parentage to the point of “de-originating the utterance”. However, film authors are not autonomous, transcendental beings who are graced by unique, primordial and originary sparks of genius. Accented film authors are literally and figuratively everyday journeymen and journeywomen who are driven off or set free from their places of origin, by force or by choice, on agonizing quests that require displacements and emplacements so profound, personal and transformative as to shape not only the authors themselves and their films but also the question of authorship. Any discussion of authorship in exile needs to take into consideration not only the individuality, originality and personality of unique individuals as expressive film authors but also, and more important, their (dis) location as interstitial subjects within social formations and cinematic practices. (Naficy 2001: 34)

While not all Indigenous filmmakers live in a condition of exile or diaspora in a different country, most Indigenous filmmakers have experienced internal migration, as they have moved from their rural communities to urban centres. At the same time, Indigenous filmmakers do share the experience of living in an ongoing context of colonialism and also

¹⁷ Most projects of progress and modernization do not arise from Indigenous Peoples’ own interests or initiatives, but are in many cases initiated by multinationals looking to make profit out of Indigenous lands and resources, disregarding the consequences for Indigenous Peoples. Notorious examples are the drilling for oil in Ecuador, and the mining for gold in Brazil. In Mexico several organizations of Indigenous Peoples are living in conflict with mining enterprises, as is the case for the mountains of Wirikuta. More information on similar conflicts can be found on the page of Survival International: <http://www.survivalinternational.org>

share a continuous tension between pre-modern societies and industrial capitalism as a consequence of globalization. For all these reasons Indigenous Cinema can be examined through the lens of Accented Cinema. Though it is known that Indigenous Cinema is closely related to ethnographic cinema, it is also indebted to Third Cinema. Many Indigenous filmmakers started using film or video after they were handed cameras by ethnographers, or after participating as subjects in documentary films. The first fiction films about Indigenous issues were made in the context of Third Cinema. In Chapter One of this dissertation I will consequently discuss the relation between these various cinemas, and set out the theoretical framework of Accented Cinema.

Indigenous filmmakers also have to take into account the way in which Indigenous Peoples are portrayed in mainstream media, as they either react or elaborate on these previously existing representations. For this reason in Chapter Two I will analyse the representation of Indigenous characters in recent films by non-Indigenous directors. I will focus on how different films employ mainstream narrative and aesthetic elements in the representation of Indigenous characters. Affect and identification are powerful cinematic conventions that can create understanding and deeper bonds between individuals, within, between and across communities. Through the analysis of different films I will explore how affect and identification can be strategies to tell Indigenous stories about human relations and changing identities and communities.

An important concern for different Indigenous filmmakers is the endangerment of Indigenous languages. It seems therefore logical to turn to language and speech for the development of Indigenous narratives and aesthetics. As Indigenous languages are currently in threat of extinction it is of crucial importance to impulse and treasure the knowledge, metaphors, and symbolic qualities of these languages. Languages are symbolic realms, which contain particular metaphors that give access to the imaginary world of a culture.¹⁸ Languages have inherent structures and encapsulate ways in which a culture perceives and represents the world.¹⁹ In Chapter Three I will discuss, through an analysis of my own work

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan has argued that the subject enters the symbolic order through language (cf. Slavoj Žižek 2006). In this context Luce Irigaray (1985) has proposed the need to create and engender new, female symbolic orders that provide an alternative to the symbolic order of patriarchy.

¹⁹ An interesting example of how a worldview can be encapsulated in linguistic properties is for example the existence of an 'inclusive us' and an 'exclusive us' in Mixtec language. There are different words to address a 'we all, including every person present' or a 'we that might exclude, and be in opposition to you and them'. Differentiating between inclusiveness and exclusiveness in the concept for 'we', is quite different from, for example, English, where the word 'we' always maintains a certain amount of conflict and opposition to the words 'you' and 'them'. For the inclusive and exclusive first person plural in Mixtec language, see Aurora Pérez Jiménez 2008: 63-64.

as well as through an analysis of other films with a similar subject matter, how language and speech can provide particular narrative structures and aesthetic strategies for Indigenous Cinema. As each Indigenous language has its own specific particularities and there are many linguistic differences between different Indigenous Peoples, it is not possible to provide a structural analysis that will result in narrative and aesthetic ‘formulas’. Instead, this chapter will explore in what ways Indigenous languages and oral traditions can inspire the creation of an own cinematic idiom with its own narrative structures and aesthetic elements.

An important aspect in the cultural identity of Indigenous Peoples is community life and its social structure. It has been largely through community organization that Indigenous cultures and languages have survived and preserved particular knowledge, language, history and traditions. Communities are constructed around shared symbols, celebrations and traditions, which can nourish the aesthetic aspects of Indigenous films. Due to the ongoing process of globalization and migration, many Indigenous communities are suffering from ongoing fragmentation. It is consequently of vital importance for Indigenous Peoples to reconsider the role of community and to find ways in which communities can be (re)configured and valued. In Chapter Four I will explore how community and communitarian structures can contribute to the development of narrative structures and aesthetics. Through the analysis of different films I will discuss the varied ways in which community structures can provide infrastructure for the production of Indigenous Cinema and how community elements can inspire particular narratives and aesthetics. Community structures can provide and replace the absent infrastructure for film production. At the same time, the ways in which communities are organized can provide examples and motives for alternative narrative structures and aesthetics of Indigenous Cinema.

The analysis of my own film practice, in combination with the critical analysis of other accented films and film theory is meant to provide a deeper understanding of Indigenous Cinema and possible narrative and aesthetic strategies but also to further contribute to developing ways in which film practice and film theory can mutually inform each other. With regard to the mutual correlation and complementation of film practice and film theory Kydd observes:

It stands to reason that the more you know about how films are made, the more you can appreciate the artistry involved in a film. Likewise, the more you appreciate the cultural context and critical ideas that inform how films are viewed, the more interesting and engaged your work will become. Thus, critical practice filmmaking

and analysis guide you towards both creative expression and an active role as both viewer and a critic. (Kydd 2011: 4)

The films that comprise the creative portfolio of this research project are the filmic outcome of scholarly reflection on Indigenous Cinema and its alternative narratives and aesthetics. At the same time, this written dissertation is also the consequence of actively and intensively participating in the creative process and embodied practice of filmmaking, and bears the preoccupations and insights of this involvement. In Chapter Five I will explore the process of filmmaking. Filmmaking, particularly in the case of Accented Cinema, is in many ways related to processes of transformation and travel. In this last chapter I will look at my own filmmaking journey through the concept of Nomadic Subjectivity as proposed by philosopher Rosi Braidotti.

The strategies explored in this research should thus be understood as unfixed combinations of different approaches that can mould themselves time and again to particular circumstances and situations. When one plays a game of chess, one can choose a specific strategy from the start, but one has to adjust this strategy while the game develops, and in the end one tends to employ a combination of strategies. The strategies examined in this research should be regarded in a similar manner. They are not predetermined structures, nor formulas to be bluntly repeated, but should be rather seen as a set of possible techniques which can be used in different combinations and situations. Certainly these strategies are not the only possible strategies and they can and should be definitely enriched, elaborated and expanded on by other filmmakers and scholars.