In May 2006, an annual teachers’ strike in the southern Mexican city of Oaxaca became the site of an unprecedented act of state brutality. Less than one month into this planned labor action, organized initially against a series of neoliberal educational reforms, the recently elected governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz deployed an army of several thousand riot police to forcefully infiltrate a number of protest camps assembled across the town square. The scenes that followed were devastating: striking labor activists were taken as political prisoners, union coordinators were evicted and reportedly tortured, and at least seventeen individuals lost their lives at the hands of the Mexican state. Over the following days, in an unexpected gesture of support, outraged local residents helped rebuild the devastated encampments, declared themselves
the new regional governing body, and initiated a grassroots anarchist uprising that would seize control of the city for the next seven months. Images of this unrest soon began to circulate globally; almost overnight, Oaxaca emerged onto the world stage as a city in flames, recognizable amid its swaths of smoke and tear gas as a zone of active democratic contestation. From behind their reinforced barricades, the energized occupants—soon to become the Oaxaca Peoples’ Popular Assembly (APPO)—led with the prefigurative chant “Ulises ya cayó! Ya cayó! Ya cayó!” (Ulises already fell! Already fell! Already fell!).

Just a decade earlier, in the neighboring state of Venezuela, a political project spearheaded by the newly elected Hugo Chávez was likewise reconfiguring the contours of an established participatory democracy. Leading the nation out of a decades-long crisis—one stemming from countless years of authoritarianism and a host of failed centrist reforms—Chávez implemented a constitution rich with socialist commitments. Shortly following his election in 1998, flows of capital were redirected from wealthy individuals to poorer citizens and Indigenous communities; welfare projects, vaccine campaigns, and education initiatives were launched in poverty-struck areas of the nation; and a thriving culture sector, consisting of state-subsidized publishing houses, entertainment venues, and arts councils, was fostered in various metropolitan districts. Amassing a populist following in the run-up to his inauguration, Chávez banked on his status as a veritable political underdog while in power to cultivate seemingly boundless support for the ongoing Bolivarian Revolution. Thus, for the first time in the nation’s turbulent political history, it appeared to many that an elected leader truly had their constituents’ best interests in mind. Consequently, a very different mantra was pronounced by the Venezuelan public: “Con Chávez, manda el pueblo” (With Chávez, the people rule).

In many respects, these disparate revolutionary uprisings point to two seemingly incompatible trajectories in Latin American political thought at the onset of the twenty-first century. On the one hand, the Oaxaca strike indexes a pronounced disengagement from traditional state activity. As the citizens of Oaxaca bore collective witness to the brutalities of their militarized local authorities, public sentiment during this period verged on the seditionary. Throughout this moment of conflict, the representative state was figured as a corrupt model to be discarded; graffiti murals throughout the city stated clearly what the torched cars lining the streets asserted materially: “todo el poder al pueblo” (all power to the people). On the other hand, Chávez’s unprecedented popularity signaled a newfound investment in state politics on

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3 See Barry Cannon, Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution: Populism and Democracy in a Globalised Age (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 54.

4 For a discussion and images of such graffiti murals, see Lynn Stephen, We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 265.
behalf of the Venezuelan people. With an overwhelming turnout in the 1998 presidential election, assertions of widespread trust in the new leader soon reverberated across the nation, and the state’s capacity to represent was resolutely affirmed. The differences between these political situations, it seems, could not be starker. Yet, in two recently published monographs attending to the cultural manifestations of these respective incidents—Freya Schiwy’s *The Open Invitation* and Naomi Schiller’s *Channeling the State*—one point of alignment is made clear: screen media was a critical site through which domestic audiences came to both process and negotiate these rapidly transforming political contexts.

Schiwy’s study centers on a mass of activist videos produced alongside and from within the Oaxaca uprising, framing the stakes of its investment around a declaration that the city’s occupation was “one of the first widely . . . recorded social uprisings of the twenty-first century.” Indeed, covering an impressive range of this output—from “well-crafted documentaries” to “short animations” and “feature-length” productions—the book’s intention to expand and update an established corpus of Latin American political cinema is clear from the outset. Simultaneously, however, such wide scope facilitates the book’s secondary project: to grapple “with the apparent shift in revolutionary affect that [these] activist videos make apprehensible.” To this end, chapters dedicated to the decolonial capacities of solicited *rage* and *joy*, as well as those zoning in on Indigenous uses of humor, offer some welcome additions to a burgeoning body of scholarship that weds considerations of cinematic affect to the study of national political cultures.

Initially, such a move to the affective surface of these video-texts is framed as a neutral departure “from the ethnographic” mode currently dominating reflections on the uprising. By the book’s conclusion, however, this same assertion is more provocatively inflected. Up until now, Schiwy states, accounts of this political history have “bypassed” the significant “appeals for recognition” harnessed within these videos. At the core of *The Open Invitation*, then, is a demand that we take seriously the aesthetic as a sphere of generative insurgent activity; “activist video,” Schiwy notes, worked to extend “the time and space of [the Oaxacan] uprising” in ways that push back upon many inherent recollections of this political moment.

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6 Schiwy, 5.
7 Schiwy, 4.
9 Schiwy, *Open Invitation*, 15, 162.
10 Schiwy, 162.
For Schiller, however, the ethnographic retains its critical purchase. Structured in line with a more orthodox “anthropological methodology” involving “long-term engagement with . . . research subjects,” Channeling the State offers an account of Schiller’s extended stay with members of Catia TVe, one of Venezuela’s most prominent community television stations.\(^\text{11}\) Acquiring their “cameras, cables, [and] microphones” through a “publicity contract with the state oil company,” Catia TVe rose to prominence following the election of Chávez, directly benefiting from his commitment to actively “remake Venezuela’s media world.”\(^\text{12}\) It is this tenuous alignment—between state influence and community expression—that occupies most of Schiller’s attention. How, she asks across a series of broadly focused chapters, was this small media operation—run primarily by volunteers living in the barrios of Caracas—able to carve out a network for vernacular communication under the looming influence of the state? Her answers lead us away from the ever-present textual surfaces dominating Schiwy’s work and toward a claim that reading production process is the most generative means of reaching conclusions. The illustrative tendencies of the ethnographic thus buttress the analytic here; “[t]o acknowledge the state as a process rather than a thing,” Schiller argues, “allows us to account for the history of the material and ideational unfolding of the state-idea and the social relations that constitute it in particular places and times.”\(^\text{13}\)

Despite their different approaches to navigating these distinct media economies, Schiller and Schiwy share a commitment to upholding local specificities. “Any true learning and critical assessment must occur in deep context,” Schiwy writes, an observation that aligns neatly with Schiller’s assertion that “[w]e require an empirical understanding of the specifics of place and time.”\(^\text{14}\) Thus, whereas some recent shifts in the discipline have led film scholars to herald cinema as a productive site through which to grapple with the totality of an overwhelming global system, Channeling the State and The Open Invitation suggest that the unique tenets of television and video practices might also function as a means to scale down our often too-generic figurations of the world.\(^\text{15}\) One welcome outcome of this scalar reduction is the emergence of various Indigenous perspectives, those voices all too easily eclipsed by imposed universal frameworks.

For Schiller, “Bolivarian maternalism” therefore provides a more useful interpretive category than does liberal feminism; for Schiwy, the “shared laughter of a Mayan audience” offers as much insight as any grand theory of spectatorship.\(^\text{16}\) In sustaining such anchored methodologies, both Schiwy

\(^{11}\) Naomi Schiller, Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), xi.

\(^{12}\) Schiller, 23.

\(^{13}\) Schiller, 88.

\(^{14}\) Schiwy, Open Invitation, 77; and Schiller, Channeling the State, 67.

\(^{15}\) Such a line of thought is frequently anchored in Fredric Jameson’s concept of “cognitive mapping.” Fredric Jameson, The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). Recent publications that have both energized and adapted this engagement with geopolitical systems via the cinematic include Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, Cartographies of the Absolute (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015); and Elena Gorfinkel and Tami Williams, eds., Global Cinema Networks (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

\(^{16}\) Schiller, Channeling the State, 190; and Schiwy, Open Invitation, 176.
and Schiller effectively echo the memorable conclusion of an essay that the late Chuck Kleinhans wrote on “subversive media” practices, wherein he calls for us to attend “to the local situation (the when and where), to contingency, and to seeing media as part of an historical process, itself in change, offering different possibilities through time.”

The necessity of this grounded engagement is affirmed furthermore in both books by repeated references to the inefficiency of our established political-theoretical vocabularies. For instance, in *Channeling the State*, the formation of a post-Chávez televusal economy is said to be “incomprehensible to a liberal framework of press freedom.” Likewise, the Oaxacan activist videos at the core of Schiwy’s project are described as transcending those same “liberal democratic framework[s].” While there is something to be said here about a specifically Venezuelan/Mexican aversion to the exhausted benefits of a liberal politics, other, perhaps more historically transformative, conceptual frameworks come under similar scrutiny. In this respect, Schiller pronounces that “[o]rthodox Marxist understandings of class as one’s relationship to the means of production have been ill-equipped to analyze conditions in Venezuela.”

Relatedly, Schiwy writes of Jill Friedberg’s *Un poquito de tanta verdad* (*A Little Bit of So Much Truth*, 2007) as a video that “works on the limits of capital, not quite entering its matrix but rather corroding it from the edges.”

Implicit, then, in both of these studies is a question about our cultivated language for attending to radical media practices. How, both authors ask, do we effectively convey the machinations of these revolutionary flushes within a discursive economy oriented around comparative generalities? Given the persistent relevance of such a query—made amid a resurgence of anti-government protests in Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, and Nicaragua—we would do well to think on a much broader scale than can be covered in these monographs.

Ultimately, the most impressive aspect of these two books lies in the way they employ cinema to reconcile and mitigate some of these broad terminological impasses. In varying ways, centering the filmic here facilitates both Schiller’s and Schiwy’s attempts to attend to political sentiments lying well

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18 Schiller, *Channeling the State*, 216.


20 Schiller, *Channeling the State*, 96.


22 Here both texts offer inadvertent contributions to an ongoing discussion in the field of critical and political theory surrounding the necessity of both reclaiming and/or abandoning established terms for describing radical action in our present. We can see the opposing parameters of such a debate through two recently published monographs: McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (New York: Verso, 2019); and Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (New York: Verso, 2019).

23 Though I limit my examples here to those protests occurring in Central and South America, a lot of work on the so-called Arab Spring uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East have called for a similar interrogation of our inherited political terminologies. See, for example, Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London: Zed Books, 2012); and Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy’s Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
outside the rigid determinants of established revolutionary models. Whether via Schiller’s foregrounding of production networks in community television or Schiwy’s focus on the affective labor of activist video practices, screen media works for both thinkers to put static interpretive frameworks into conjunctural motion. As Schiwy notes, in opening ourselves up to the cinematic, we encounter “traveling political theor[ies],” those necessary palliatives to the depersonalized, the abstract, and the generic.24 Taken together, Channeling the State and The Open Invitation thus do some significant work in making a case for the cinema’s capacious function as an agent of insurrection. In both accounts, the outputs of Catia TVe and the Oaxacan uprising are said to not merely consolidate our inherited historical and political narratives but rather fundamentally reconstitute the grounds upon which we are able to conceive of these respective political histories. Therefore, while operating, for the most part, at seemingly incompatible registers of national focus, disciplinary commitment, and methodological rationale, these books collaboratively affirm the potential of screen media as political tool, historiographic document, and object for theory.

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24 Schiwy, Open Invitation, 90.