

Livia K. Stone. *Atenco Lives! Filmmaking and Popular Struggle in Mexico*. Vanderbilt UP, 2019. 202 pp.

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Activist filmmaking has been subject to attention, but generally as a peripheral activity falling beyond the standard forms of film research and sitting at the edge of anthropological work. Sometimes exceptional films that meet standard mainstream or conventional criteria are lauded, studied, and put forward as exemplars of activism. Many others are ignored or logged as works of purely indexical value because they are deemed to merely capture a moment and place. Interrogating underpinning assumptions that activist filmmaking should conform or be analysed in these ways, Livia K. Stone proposes that we need to find new paradigms for assessing activist filmmaking. Instead of approaching such films and assessing their formal aesthetic qualities (or lack thereof), she considers their function as process, objects of exchange, and record for those who are engaged in acts of resistance. *Atenco* as a case study is highly specific, but the lessons she proposes have considerable salience across multiple fields making this an invaluable text for documentary film analysis.

Since the early part of the twenty first century, *Atenco* has become a potent and evocative signifier of resistance. *Atenco* is a municipality outside of Mexico City and is the location of a protracted dispute about land rights as a result of a proposal by the Mexican government to build a new airport there. It has powerful political and cultural resonance because of the violence used by government forces against protestors, the latter's success in bringing attention to this, and in putting a stay on the planned build. Film is a tool used by activists and allies to draw attention to the dispute, but not in the ways that are conventionally assumed, as Stone argues.

She looks at filmmaking broadly understood. Although primarily focused on digital filmmaking, her objects of study also include work produced and distributed on VHS and online platform-based activism. The significance of the activist filmmaking she considers does not lie in making a highly accomplished and resonant cultural artefact for international circulation. Instead, Stone explores the other functions of film as a tool for activism, heretofore underexplored.

Stone identifies how filmmaking can function as a powerful tool for both protestors and security forces. Along with being the conventional act of bearing witness, it is Stone's contention that film is a tool that enacts witnessing in confrontations with police that for activists functions as a form

of deterrent and thereby reduces injuries or harm to the protestors. Although, as Stone makes clear, the camera can also act against activists when police or army use it as a form of performed surveillance. That is, when security forces point a camera at protestors it gives the impression that they may be targeted for arrest. The footage may not be used to identify individuals, nonetheless the camera can be used as “a powerful symbolic weapon” (2019, 74). Thus, Stone upends the assumptions about cameras being solely a tool for the activist or, even, necessarily empowering for one side or the other.

Focusing on filmmakers who have filmed the activities of the activist group, the *Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra/People's Front in Defense of Land (Frente)*, Stone examines the work of three filmmakers: Eduardo Ríos, a *Frente* activist; the US-born Mexico-based Greg Berger, who shares common goals with the *Frente*; and Salvador Díaz Sánchez and Odette Castelao, who are self-described militant filmmakers. Stone has carried out interviews with these filmmakers, considers their aims and outcomes as well as the multiple points of contention they have had to navigate in order to create films as insiders, outsiders, or fellow travellers with sometimes competing demands and contradictions, even within apparent sites of privilege. For example, when pointing a camera, Ríos is aware that he is risking putting himself and his community into danger because it is seen as a weapon. Separately, Berger as outsider might be presumed to have privileged protection that should make him less likely to be subject to police attack, but he can also act cautiously, aware that he could be deported from Mexico and taken away from a movement that has become central to his life's work. Ríos and Berger engage in filmmaking conscious of these risks. Stone manages to lay out these competing and, at times, contradictory issues through excellent use of interviews, contextual analysis, and readings of the films.

As well as analysing filmmakers, Stone also looks at the role of the film producer, Canalseisdejulio. They have had a significant role in the production of activist film that has commercial potential and falls within the conventional documentary form. The analysis of these gives her the opportunity to discuss a significant function of activist filmmaking that is rarely considered and resonates with a 2017 article by Rebecca Solnit.¹ Both Solnit and Stone put forward the concept of “preaching to the choir” as having salience and propose it as an essential means of bolstering communities and activist groupings. For Stone, it is a way of thinking about the motivational and solidarity-building potential films of the quality produced by Canalseisdejulio whilst finding such a role significance in films that may have low production quality and apparently little commercial worth. Rather than judged for their failure to make new converts, preaching (filmmaking) in these ways can bolster group identity and reinforce solidarity networks.

Community is clearly central to activist filmmaking for Stone. In Mexico, a key tension for many activist groups and filmmakers is the question of *protagonismo* [egotism] that can arise from taking charge of a narrative through filmmaking. Such centering of an individual can detract from the community and the issue and make the person more important with all the attendant vulnerabilities to the groups' aims. Stone dedicates a chapter to this issue of *protagonismo*, bringing in examples from the Occupy Movement in New York, the *Zapatistas* in Chiapas, and the Black Lives Movement in the US. This allows her to make the case for *compañerismo* [solidarity], a form of community alignment that recognises the individual's contribution whilst privileging the community's aims.

Carefully researched and well written with clear attention to her own faults and privileges, in *Atenco Lives! Filmmaking and Popular Struggle in Mexico*, Stone provides new ways of analysing activist filmmaking. It invites a rethink of the aims, scope, and audiences for such filmmaking and proposes new models that are applicable within and beyond Mexico. The specificity of the case study functions as a way into understanding a broader landscape.

Notes

¹ Solnit, Rebecca (2017) "Preaching to the Choir", *Harpers*, November <https://harpers.org/archive/2017/11/preaching-to-the-choir/4/>