# Grupo Chaski's Microcines:
# Engaging the Spectator

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## Introduction

Latin American cinema has commonly been looked at within a radical framework. From the middle of the twentieth century, filmmakers, journalists and scholars have celebrated a type of filmmaking that contains revolutionary ideals, anti-neocolonial stances and attempts at social reform (see for example Chanan, 1997; Fusco, 1987; Pick, 1993).[1] The peak of this radical filmmaking came about in the late 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of the New Latin American Cinema movement and the concurrent, but more globally orientated, Third Cinema movement (Armes, 1987; Martin, 1997). Filmmakers articulated their practices in opposition to a Hollywood centred 'first cinema' which they denounced for re-articulating a bourgeois world view (Solanas & Getino, 1997, p.42). They also attempted to move away from a European, auteur driven 'second cinema' because they felt it had reached its limit of possible expression outside the capitalist 'system'. Third Cinema was meant to offer a new cinematic language that would be based in the material circumstances of post-colonial countries as well as activate a new type of egalitarian society. Towards the end of the twentieth century these movements began to disperse and there is no longer the sense of a continent-wide radical cinema project (Newman, 1993; Oubinña, 2004). Many of the most widely distributed and critically

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[1] All translations within this paper are my own.

acclaimed films from recent years, such as Argentina's *XXY* (Lucía Puenzo**,** 2007) and *La Ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, 2001); Brazil's *Central station*(Walter Salles, 1998) and *City of god* (Fernando Meirelles, 2002); Chile's *Play* (Alicia Scherson, 2005) and Mexico's *Y Tu Mamá También* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001); and *Amores perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000) do not have the same kind of overt political content as the films which made up the New Latin American Cinema movement. Nevertheless, there are still Latin American filmmaking groups and practitioners, such as CineMujer in Colombia and TV dos Trabalhadores in Brazil, that work towards the same fundamental aims, mainly to empower local communities and work against exploitation and discrimination (Aufderheide, 2002). The focus of this paper is on one such group, the Peruvian based Grupo Chaski; in particular it will focus on the way that Grupo Chaski is currently working to develop a solid infrastructure for cinema exhibition as a means to implement sites for community action and interaction. This study is the result of personal research undertaken in South America during 2004, 2005 and 2007 and much of the knowledge presented of Grupo Chaski in this paper draws on personal interviews and observations of this group. This paper will also draw on the critical tendencies that emerged through the New Latin American Cinema movement and Third Cinema to frame the way in which Grupo Chaski continues a type of radical cinema practice.

## Grupo Chaski's and the Microcines

Grupo Chaski's involvement in cinema began in 1982 when the founding filmmakers Fernando Espinoza, Alejandro Legaspi, Stefan Kaspar, María Barea and Fernando Barreto dedicated themselves to

making socially-responsible short films, feature films and documentaries. Many of these films gained international acclaim and the group were commended for a type of filmmaking that engaged with socio-political issues at work in both Peru and the greater Latin American region (Kleinhans & Lesage, 1986). At the Havana Film Festival in 1985 Grupo Chaski presented *Miss universo en el peru* (Grupo Chaski, 1982) and *Gregorio* (Grupo Chaski, 1985). The former interrogated how Peru absorbs global matters while the latter approached the domestic problems which generate suffering in urban areas (Kleinhans & Lesage, 1986). Throughout its work, Grupo Chaski has always retained a commitment to working with remote and marginalised communities across the country and states that:

> *…el Grupo Chaski defiende desde sus inicios una actitud y una metodología orientada hacia un cine responsable, inmerso en lo cotidiano, con personajes auténticos y con la experiencia social compartida de todos los días. Es allí donde se encuentran las bases de su estética y de sus concepto.s* (2008d)
> (Grupo Chaski has, since its beginnings, defended an attitude and methodology orientated towards a responsible cinema, immersed in daily life, with authentic characters and with the shared social experience of the everyday. It is here that one can encounter the basis of its concepts and its aesthetic practice.)

In its current projects, Grupo Chaski continues to engage with 'responsible cinema' in Peru yet it has moved away from its focus on film production in prior decades towards working on specific distribution and exhibition ventures in the twenty-first century.

In 2003 the group saw that the *cambio digital* (digital change) could bring about opportunities for improvement in the areas of Latin American cinema that have historically had the greatest weaknesses: distribution and exhibition (Kaspar, personal

communication, 16 May 2007). Executive Director, Stefan Kaspar (2007) stated that the group wanted to be engineers for the new information society. He had found that although many development projects in Latin America were based around new communication tools, the majority were in relation to the internet. Grupo Chaski, on the other hand, wanted to use the new technology for more traditional audiovisual purposes. Whereas it costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to build a new cinema in Peru, the group found that they could use digital projectors and screens costing only a couple of thousand dollars to bring films to local communities that are normally without access to cinema. Taking these factors into consideration, Grupo Chaski began to focus almost exclusively on distribution and exhibition projects. The group developed the term *Microcines* to describe both the makeshift cinemas they were creating with such digital technology and the overall project that networked these cinemas together. In 2006, the group attended a Latin American symposium for development projects during which the Microcines plan was one of the few projects selected for further support (Kaspar, 2007). Following this, a strong business plan and strategic development outline were put in place to allow a systematic expansion of the Microcine projects. However, concurrent with the aims of the New Latin American Cinema movement, Grupo Chaski explicitly states that it is a non-profit organization (Grupo Chaski, 2008d). This means that while it has business plans in place, and is responsible to external investors such as the Hubert Bals Fund and the Ashoka foundation, Grupo Chaski does not have the same commercial aims as other distribution and exhibition companies currently operating in Peru.

Kaspar (2007) describes commercial cinema as a 'McDonald's cinema' – a 'fast cinema' – and claims that in contrast, Microcines are cinemas that nourish and work with the spirit and the soul. Key to this 'nourishment' is the content of films on offer through the Microcines, and for this reason Grupo Chaski has a library of films with socially engaging themes and subject matters (Grupo Chaski, 2008e). The films include short and full length documentaries which have an educational basis and are highlighted as potential pedagogical tools for communities that have limited access to education facilities. By mixing cinema with education, Grupo Chaski implies a commitment to using cinematic sites for social projects that go beyond entertainment. It is not a particularly novel idea but this process does set Grupo Chaski apart from the commercial cinema sites that dominate access to cinema in Peru. The group also provides various feature films such as *Dias de santiago* (Josue Mendez, 2004) and *paloma de papel* (Fabrizio Aguilar, 2003) that look at issues affecting Peruvians from urban to rural social problems and inequalities (Grupo Chaski, 2008e). I would argue that films such as these can be enjoyed for the entertainment qualities in their fictional narratives – and yet the content of these films means that they are predisposed to encourage a critical outlook on the social settings that they portray.

## The Exhibition Context

It is not just the content of the films that provides a platform for an alternative type of cinematic experience, as one of the most fundamental aspects of the Microcines is the exhibition context. The organization of the Microcines is set up to allow each cinema location to become a unique and autonomous site. It is a practice

that is somewhat different from standardised modes of exhibition across the world, wherein film distributors have realised that an economics of scale can be achieved by maintaining a horizontal and vertical integration of distribution and exhibition (Blackstone & Bowman, 1999). This involves controlling the sites of film exhibition, such as movie theatres, so that film products are released in a way that maximises marketing resources and channels the greatest amount of profits back towards the distributor without the need for intermediaries. With the rise of multiplex cinemas and the gradual move towards distribution companies running large movie theatre chains over the last few decades, I would argue that there has been an increase in the homogenised viewing experience in which profits can be gained by selling a standardised indistinguishable experience. In Peru, as elsewhere, this is achieved through cinema chains such as Cineplanet that operate in various cities and global distribution companies that organise events such as the simultaneous worldwide release of films.

Although Grupo Chaski can offer a standardised package of projector, screen and films to the communities that it works with, the screening events that are created appear to take on highly individual characteristics (Grupo Chaski, 2008f). This factor comes as a result of the various mechanisms that the Microcines have in place to generate events which engages local communities in a particular way. Rather than building standardised cinema sites that are contracted to screen similar films and produce similar publicity material regardless of local relevance, the group works in familiar spaces such as community centres and public meeting places. These spaces traditionally work on a year-round basis to provide facilities that engage with the needs of a local community such as the desire

to produce local forms of cultural expression or work through social problems. Furthermore, unlike commercial cinemas where the screenings typically involve a run of advertisements and trailers followed by a single film, Microcines forego this formula and instead use opening introductions and debates followed by a programme of various films.

The manner in which the Microcines allow space for discussion at the beginning and end of each film opens up the possibility for audiences to interact with the themes of the film and articulate their reactions to these within a local community. This method of exhibition follows on from what Third Cinema pioneers Solanas & Getino (1997) defined as the *filme-acto* (film act) where films were shown to spectators in a way that allowed them to participate in the cinematic work put in front of them. Solanas & Getino felt that each film screening should contain breaks and spaces for discussion so that audience members could articulate potential solutions to the issues that were being raised in the politically–minded films placed in front of them (Bustos, 1999, p.25). Although Solanas & Getino's experiments with the *filme-acto* were restricted to their time with the political Cine Liberación group in the 1960s and 1970s, the emphasis they placed on spectator agency bares traces in the contemporary work of Grupo Chaski. The way in which the Group creates time for spectator interaction suggests the person in the audience is as important as the visual moment on the screen. One of the legacies of these spectator-based exhibition practices is a focus on the importance of spatial and temporal location. Getino & Solanas found that certain particularities took place in the *filme-acto* due to the difference in space and time of each screening:

> This means that the result of each projection act will depend on those who organise it, on those who participate in it, and on the time and the place; the possibility of introducing variations, additions, and changes is unlimited. The screening of a film act will always express the historical situation in which it takes place (1997, p.56).

With Microcines, the exhibition experience can never be replicated nor standardised, as there is an engagement with the films and audience members in attendance that is unique to the individual screening event. Spatially, the event is made unique because a screening in one Peruvian community will involve audience debates that are particular to the geographical and social background of those spectators. Temporally, the event is made unique as an earlier or later screening will be reformulated by the exhibitor and will involve differing interaction with the attendees.

In addition to these points, the very particular nature of the alternative screening event removes the cinematic experience from a wider context of mediated discourse. By showing independent films that are not on general release and rescreening older classics that are not in current theatrical circulation, Grupo Chaski disengages spectators from the plethora of reviews, articles and marketing material that accompanies a film in its first round of release. It can be argued that this process of disengaging spectators actually allows spectators to re-engage with the film through their own experience and the surrounding audience, rather than through the lens of the international and national media. In Latin America there has often been a complaint that a conservative media and large audiovisual conglomerates control both the way in which cultural practices are discussed and the types of audiovisual materials that are promoted (Martin-Barbero, 2000; Mignolo, 2005). Similarly, it has also been

said that the media frequently upholds the lifestyles and values of a minority elite while it simultaneously ignores the large numbers of indigenous populations and the urban and rural poor. Kaspar (2007) agrees with these claims, explaining that one of the main reasons that Grupo Chaski became involved in cinema was to counteract control over the cinema sphere; although cinema can be a tool for education, the types of commercial films currently on sale lead to domination, discrimination and exclusion. Using cinematic works such as *Madeinusa* (Claudia Llosa, 2006), the Microcines exhibit films that promote multiple Latin American identities, including under-represented indigenous communities. Furthermore, by bringing about direct engagement between the films, audience and its content, Grupo Chaski films are not mediated by the types of discourse found in the dominant media.

## Creating Alternative Spaces and Language

Engagement is further fostered by the way in which space is created and managed within cinema screenings. Rather than using fixed exhibition sites that have been created solely for projecting films, as mentioned previously, Microcines use places that range from community centres to outdoor screens. Without the carefully controlled darkness of the movie theatre or the ordered seats which may make it difficult to view other members of the audience, the Microcine screenings have a visual and audible space in which the audience exists before the projection. One could argue that in the poor, marginal regions where Grupo Chaski operates, a strengthening of community takes place when familiar faces are brought together in one location; spectators can be seen as they arrive and leave but also as they move and interact with the films

throughout the screening. This can lead to observing another spectator react to the film, sensing someone's interest peak as they come in from the edge of the square to take a seat in front of an outdoor screen, or noticing someone's interest wane as the door to the town hall bangs on their way out. At times these are distractions; at others these elements allow an audience member to sense the way in which their viewing experience is part of a collective act. Dimitris Eleftheriotis (2001) talks of similar processes that occurred in the Greek open-air cinemas of the 1960s where spectators shouted at the screen, joined in with songs and interacted in other ways. Eleftheriotis begins by calling these elements 'interruptions' but goes on to say that in their positive moments they can be better defined as 'looking around'. They are processes that allow the spectator to see beyond themselves and into the world in which they exist.

These practices bring back the messiness of public life that Acland (2003) sees as being repressed in today's cinema sphere. He states:

> The policing of ushers, the presence of security cameras, the regiment of scheduling and the overt appeals to decorum in film trailers (feet off the seat in front, no talking, cell phones and pagers off, etc.) are indices of the intense interest in encouraging civility and reducing the prospects for impromptu (and economically unproductive) interventions (Acland, 2003, p.231-2).

In contrast to this, a lack of rules and regulations are impinged upon cinema-goers in Grupo Chaski's exhibition events. Spectators are not expected to consume films in an individual and isolated manner as the Microcines allow space for distractions, interruptions, interventions and observing the space. This suggests the importance of the *event*, of making sure that the experience of the film does not

end as the credits roll. Unlike multiplexes where audiences are commonly encouraged to exit by a side door under dimmed lights, these screenings bring the lights up on the space, allowing audiences to stay and make the space their own afterwards.

The dedication to creating space that can be used by the local community also involves dealing with the issues of the standardisation of language in Latin America by cultural sites such as cinemas. Although there are numerous indigenous languages in use across the continent, all of which have distinct cultural heritages, Latin America is widely considered a Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking region. In the 1960s and 1970s the issue of language was of particular concern for one of the main pioneers in the New Latin American Cinema movement, Jorge Sanjines. In an attempt to support the indigenous communities of Bolivia and surrounding areas, where Spanish remained at best a second language and inaccessible to many people, his early work such as *Ukamau* (1966) and *Yawar mallku* (1969) used the local languages Quechua and Aymara (Sanjines, 1997). However, self-reflection in the 1970s led him to realise that there was a need for a 'different cinematic language' (Sanjines, 1979, p.31) that involved not only a new type of aesthetic but a new way of transferring meaning through the link between cinematic form and spoken language. He found that:

> A film about the people made by a screenwriter isn't the same as a film made by the people *through* a screenwriter, inasmuch as the interpreter and translator of that people becomes their expressive vehicle (Sanjines, 1997, p.63).

The primary concern here was that simply transposing another spoken language onto screen is not enough, and the only way to ensure that the traditions and cultures of indigenous groups are

expressed is through participation of local community members in the creative stages of production. Thus, later films such as *El enemigo principal* (Jorge Sanjines, 1973) included Quechua-Aymara oral traditions to inform the narrative structure (Sanjines, 1987). This combination of form and language allowed tradition and living culture to permeate into various levels of the cinematic work. Sanjines also supported Quechua speakers who borrowed prints to show the film to other *campesinos* (peasants) in the area.

Due to the abundance of US films at the box office in contemporary Latin America, the majority of films exhibited are screened in English. One of the effects of this is not so much the domination of the English language in Latin American cinemas but the domination of the Spanish language as the alternate provider of meaning. Each commercial movie theatre in Spanish-speaking Latin America provides either subtitles or dubbing in Spanish, yet there are almost no theatres providing subtitles in the variety of indigenous languages spoken across the region. This is particularly problematic for communities in which Spanish is neither the first language nor commonly spoken in the area. There are clear technical restrictions that make it both simpler and more cost-effective to provide translation in only one language, but the dominance of a singular language is also consolidated by the commercial drive of movie theatres; economic returns are easier when providing for a large monoglot spectator group rather than smaller groups with individual language needs. In her work on early cinema, Miriam Hansen (1991) looks at the way in which the emergence of one language in the US exhibition space during the first half of the twentieth century reduced the apparent cultural diversity of the various immigrant groups that went to the cinema. She states:

> The implementation of the rule of silence in the motion picture shows not only imposed a middle-class standard of spectatorship; by suppressing a locally and regionally specific linguistic environment – foreign languages, accents, dialects – it contributed to the cultural homogenization of a mass audience (Hansen, 1991, p. 95).

While this process has continued in standardised commercial cinemas, the free flow of space within the Microcines means that rules of silence are far less likely to be followed.

Furthermore, the small and localised nature of the Microcines means that it is possible to find alternative ways of engaging local language difference. Grupo Chaski works against the cultural homogenization in language by respecting the varied idioms of the communities it works with – particularly as it sees language as a fundamental issue in preventing exclusion from the cinema. Kaspar (2007) states that 70% of the Peruvian public cannot read subtitles and so need a film which has dialogue in their own idiom. As many of the rural communities do not speak Spanish, this means that films should ideally be provided in a local language. Although it can be difficult to find films that have dialogue in the indigenous languages of Peru, such as Quechua and Aymara, and although the cost of dubbing into these languages is high, Grupo Chaski still sees this as an aim that has to be met whenever possible. When translations are not possible and a film is shown in Spanish the encouragement of spectator voices during debate, before and after the films, means the possibility of introducing expression in different languages. In this way, the cinematic experience does not need to be confined to a Spanish language event.

## Removing Hierarchies

Language choice is only part of a variety of elements that set up structures of hierarchies within the exhibition space. Hansen (1991) also touches on the issue of exhibitors and the way cinema management can exert influence over the way films are received. By outlining how early US exhibitors had considerable influence over the meaning of films, she explains that the power of the exhibitor was greater before the standardization practices which took place in the first half of the twentieth century (p.98). With the introduction of film studios and large distribution wings, control over the way in which films were contextualised in the exhibition space moved from the exhibitor to the distributor. In contemporary Peru, the outcome of this change is seen in the fact that global distribution companies retain a great deal of control over the exhibition of commercial films. Distributors not only put pressure on cinema owners to show certain films at designated times (Bedoya, 1995) they also expect cinemas to display the publicity and marketing materials distributors produce. Grupo Chaski attempts to readdress this balance of power by placing control back in the hands of local exhibitors. When Grupo Chaski describes the Microcines it states that they are

> *gestionado por líderes de la comunidad que son capacitados para desempeñarse como promotores culturales que buscan la autogestión y la sostenibilidad* (2008b)
> (managed by leaders of the community that are capable of working as cultural promoters that seek autonomy and sustainability)

The directors of Grupo Chaski refrain from setting up a network of exhibition spaces that are managed top-down by the organisation and instead prefer to train members of the community so that they can take control of the exhibition space for their own local people.

In the training programme for the management of Microcine projects, the first two objectives stated are:

> *Reconocer y valorar el potencial que tiene el cine para la educación, la cultura y el desarrollo en la comunidad.*
> *Conocer el potencial del cine como herramienta para la inclusión y la generación de identidad.* (Grupo Chaski, 2008c)
> (Recognise and value the potential that cinema has for education, culture and development in the community.
> Find out the potential that cinema has as a tool for inclusion and the generation of identity.)

The expectation is that new managers and their associated community groups will continue to be linked to Grupo Chaski and its Microcine network, but will develop cinema screenings that are appropriate to the specific cultural background of their local community. To this end, Microcines such as the Kancharisunchis Microcine in Abancay and Cine Narra Ñawy in Puno have their own website and a unique identity but continue to operate under the auspices of Grupo Chaski's network (Microcinepuno, 2008; Kancharisunchis, 2008).

Importantly, however, Grupo Chaski goes beyond merely inviting participation in the structure of the exhibition space. Kaspar (2007) explains his belief that the films which are shown and the context in which they are shown act as a base to encourage audience members to participate more fully in the larger practices of cinema. He argues that the overwhelming nature of US films, with the large amount of resources put into them, leaves the spectator feeling small and unable to either participate in or produce films. Because Grupo Chaski provides films that are independent and often filmed on a very low budget, Kaspar is confident that audience members can see that the production of cinema does not have to involve huge costs and Hollywood-like levels of expertise. He believes that this factor

acts as an incentive to stimulate spectators into producing their own 'copy-cat' work which is local in its production and engages with issues that are of importance to the communities in which Microcines operate. This attempt to open production beyond the privileged minority who have the economic resources and technical tools to undertake cinema is another aspect of Grupo Chaski's work which is in line with the original aims of the New Latin American Cinema movement. Practitioners advocated using a variety of tools and personnel to move cinema towards independent filmmaking that was not reliant upon what they saw was a bourgeois capitalist and commercial 'system' (Garcia Espinosa, 1997; Solanas & Getino, 1997; Birri, 1997). Fernando Birri noted that,

> Such a conception and practice of making films not with the resources one would like but with those which are possible, will determine a new kind of language, hopefully even a new style, the fruit of convergent economic and cultural necessity (1997, p.92).

By providing films that act as a blueprint for successful low budget productions, Grupo Chaski encourages democratic film production, and in this way generates the potential for further agency amongst the audience groups that the Microcines work with.

## Conclusion

All of the processes mentioned above, such as the programming of events, creation of space, supporting alternative languages and encouraging inclusion, stimulate a non-hierarchical approach to both cinema exhibition and production. When these factors are combined with progressive social ideals in the films and the debates surrounding them, a somewhat radical approach to cinematic culture in Latin America emerges. Although I would argue that Grupo Chaski's

activities are unlikely to alter the continual domination of cinematic exhibition and distribution by international companies in Latin America, they do offer small revolutionary moments in which local communities are engaged. Furthermore, I would expect Grupo Chaski's activities to retain their importance precisely because there is very little space for socially-engaging cinema in the commercial circuit across the continent. This is partly due to the dominance of US film products but also because of the standardisation of commercial movie theatres, which favours certain types of film screenings. The practice of alternative screenings that exist in the Microcines and in other social projects across the continent exist because the practitioners and communities actively seek a means of showing films that uses debate and that forges links with the community, which is almost impossible elsewhere.

At the same time, the local specificity of the alternative cinema practices means that they are most effective when they remain marginal and minor. As opposed to being a *better* form of exhibition, they are an *alternative* form that offers something distinct from commercial movie theatres, yet this does not mean that more common theatre screens should not exist. What is needed is a way in which spectators have the choice of accessing local cinema within a variety of spaces and through different socially engaging practices. Grupo Chaski offers one such possibility in its current function, whilst also offering a model that can be applied to other community-orientated groups.

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