The film “Chaco” was one of the most popular offerings in the Spring 2021 CineLatino Series produced by CLAS. After the screening, director Diego Mondaca spoke with CLAS staff member Ana De Carolis about the film and the stories behind it.

Ana De Carolis: What motivated you to make “Chaco”?

Diego Mondaca: The most immediate reason, or the most obvious one, was the need to know a little more about my past through my grandfather [who fought in the Chaco War]. But it was really about a need to propose imaginaries that could talk with us in the present. Questioning the narrative about the Chaco War [between Bolivia and Paraguay, 1932-1935] that was imposed on Bolivian history, about who the heroes were. A narrative that was constructed at the expense of thousands of Indigenous people who were murdered or abandoned in precarious and impoverished conditions where the Bolivian army was sent to fight a made-up enemy. Narratives that were written by those in power, a social class that was white and mestizo, that systematically marginalized and continues to marginalize most of the population of my country today.

So that’s where our narrative came from. That was the aesthetic and ethical basis of the film. I also think that it’s a very political film because it highlights something that should be much more common in Bolivian film and in Latin American film in general: the way we speak and our languages, which also means recovering our culture, a culture that has so often been shot down by the colonizers,
Remembering to Avoid Repeating Chaco region?

So that’s the general context for what motivated “Chaco” — confronting the lies, going against the system set up in Bolivia, confronting the tendentious manipulation of political circumstances, the kickbacks of money or status that disadvantage “the weakest.” And it also examines our dead, our defeated, not in the sense of analyzing the defeated like [German philosopher Walter] Benjamin, who I obviously reference, but rather by putting ourselves in the position of our defeated, which allows us to critique ourselves more fully. I’m not critiquing the Other, I’m critiquing my present and myself in this present. I use this landscape of war, this story that I invented about the 1930s, to talk about the present day of our country and even Latin America in general today.

ADC: In “Chaco,” the limits between the body and the landscape seem to disappear. The camerawork and the sound make the audience feel as if they were there, the landscape seem to disappear. The camerawork and

the dictators. Thanks to their own strengths, and our profound connections with them, [our languages and our cultures] survive and help us survive, as well.

So this record comes from a patriarchal, white, classist, racist perspective that viewed the Indigenous soldier dressed in uniform like something from the circus. The joke just kept going, making fun of the Indigenous people, their language, their behavior. The mockery is in the photographs and so is the horror. I saw it in a series of nine images that I found during my research — a sequence that showed a firing squad, the Bolivian army shooting Bolivian soldiers. It was as if the orders had been given by the photographer, not the captain. There’s the photo of when they put the blindfolds on, when they tie them up, when they make them stand. There’s a priest giving them the last rites, the shooting, the fallen bodies, the confirmation of death, and the burial of the bodies. But the only image that shows movement, a slight tremble, shaking, and so this photograph is confirmation of death, and the burial of the bodies. But

ADC: What was it like to work with the cast of “Chaco” and with many different languages?

DM: I started my work in film making two documentaries — “La Chirola” y “Ciudadela” — with really small teams. In “Chaco,” I tackled my first historical fiction with a team of nearly 40 people, with actors from the theater. It was a huge challenge to go against the stigma of “bad acting” that Bolivian film had and, I think, still has.

I should clarify that bad acting is a problem with the director, not the actor. A lot of directors say, “There are no actors.” The problem is that the directors that exist are not trained well enough, and they don’t know how to communicate.

I used my experience in documentary filmmaking to work with the actors. I did a systematic search for actors who came from the theater for the corporality that the discipline encourages; total corporal expression where the body suffers, not just the facial expression. That was...
that fostered a sense of trust, trust in the actor, in the camera, trust that we were all there doing something truly collective. And that meant each scene became a sort of ritual, because at some point, we all became aware that we were talking about our dead, we were working with our dead. So that gave our work a sense of ritual that imbued it with a different rhythm.

**ADC:** You mentioned at the beginning of the interview that “Chaco” is engaged in a dialogue with the present. How do you see Bolivia today, and what does the film tell us about contemporary Bolivia?

**DM:** That’s an interesting question, and one that’s also very difficult to answer. I started writing the screenplay in 2011, 2012. During those last few years of Evo Morales’s administration, there was a tremendous political and social decline in Bolivia, that lost all of us, everyone who was trying to contribute to this very necessary change — because Bolivia is a different country thanks to Evo Morales and the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo/ Movement for Socialism). But there’s also burnout. I think that feeling is also evident in my writing, because I wrote the screenplay shortly after the disappointment, after understanding how far we still had to go and that we are very vulnerable to the lust for power and messianic delirium.

Something else interesting is that the last phase in making the film — the stage of color correction and sound mixing — took place in October 2019, that terrible time of killings during the coup. I talked with the sound crew a lot, with [sound designer] Nahuel Palenque, and with Federico Lastra, about how the meaning of the film was changing and growing because Bolivians were hitting bottom.

In our society, a society that has been torn to pieces, there’s a big question of work to do. That was proof we had not overcome our failures. When we can’t critically analyze our history, we repeat it systematically.

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— Diego Mondaca

We had six theater-trained actors, and all the extras were Aymara- and Quechua-speaking soldiers, young men between the ages of 16 and 19, who are still doing their military service in the Chaco region. We filmed in Ibibobo, right where the war took place. It seemed unbelievable, but so many years later, these soldiers are reproducing the same journey that my grandfather must have made 80 years ago.

The issue of language was complicated, but it was a very powerful aesthetic decision, and it needed to be done. The first thing was to establish a channel of communication with the actors from my language, which is Spanish. Sadly, I don’t speak Quechua or Aymara or at least not very well. But establishing communication on another level means that they feel committed to and curious about the story that we also want to tell.

It means that somehow they also became interested in what we went there to do. They were very interested in the technical equipment, the cameras, the sound gear, etc. And gradually, through that curiosity, I introduced the reasons why we were making this film — the same reasons that I explained to the cinematographer, the sound engineers, the producers, and the financial backers — the basic motivations for making this film, as well as my questions, that ended up being their questions, too, because after all no one knew what had really happened.

That established a narrow bridge for communications. But obviously, the most complex part was the language, working in their language, with their language. Fortunately, Raymundo Ramos, who plays the part of Liborio, is a Quechua speaker. I explained everything in Spanish and Raymundo translated it to Quechua, but he also gave them suggestions from his discipline, which is theater. Raymundo collaborated a great deal on these aspects, which demonstrated how horizontal all of our work had been. We were all able to contribute.

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