Image courtesy of Color_Monster, Pasto, and Murillo Cine.

In this still from "Chaco," soldiers listen to a *bolero de caballeria*, a genre of Bolivian music played during the war to bid farewell to soldiers leaving for the front and to welcome those who return, dead or alive.

FILM

Remembering to Avoid Repeating

Interview with Diego Mondaca (translation by Deborah Meacham)

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,

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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 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 on this endless march. What was it like to film in the Chaco region?

DM: It was really hard to make decisions in a place so distant in our memory. Because most Bolivians — and I think most of the world — only knows the Chaco region from the photos that the military took during the war. We also had to fight against that. And it's important because all the photographic evidence we have of the Chaco War was taken by members of the military or white adventurers who were able to buy a camera and travel.

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, is when six Mauser rifles shoot the three soldiers in unison. The ground shakes, and so this photograph is shaky. For me, that was the horror, and for me, that is the Chaco War.

"So now tell me, how is your hell where your glory has gone?" Somber lyrics from a Bolivian song echo in this still from "Chaco."

Image courtesy of Color_Monster, Pasto, and Murillo Cine.

Now, as I was telling you, the landscape of the Chaco region looks really strange to our eyes and in our memories because there is no real record — very few people go all the way into the Chaco, which is 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles) from La Paz, from any urban environment. [Going to the Chaco] means going to see what it's really like and telling the story from a different point of view. And that allows for so many of the film's aesthetic sensibilities, because you can really get swept away by the landscape. You can play at being Werner Herzog in a place where no one else is ever going to go. But the whole team had to really concentrate and especially in this case [the cinematographer] Federico Lastra had to really focus on what we were trying to achieve with each frame.

Photo by Doctor Carlos De Sanctis/Wikimedia.

In 1932, Paraguayan soldiers in Alihuatá, site of two major battles during the Chaco War.

The Bolivian soldier of that era was 1.6 meters (5 feet, 3 inches), on average. So the camera was always 1.6 meters off the ground, the height of [the protagonist] Liborio's eyes. It's possible to think that you are looking out over the landscape, but in reality, you cannot. And that sensation of the "almost possible" contributes to the feeling of claustrophobia, hopelessness, and because of all the other factors, it generates that feeling of insanity.

And there's also the dust, that blinding dust. There's the wind. We definitely subjugated ourselves to the landscape. We told the story with it, using what nature gave us. If the screenplay said, "you need a table in the shot," and there wasn't any table, but there was sand and a tree trunk, well, you used that trunk, and you used that sand. Every object that we had in front of us took on a new meaning. Adapting to the landscape, rather than fighting, it made it really easy to do our work and gave us a lot of freedom.

And something that I really appreciated about working with Lastra is that I never talked with him about cinematography. We talked about history, about literature. We got way out there, as [the Chilean director] Raúl Ruiz would say, to find the real meaning.

The movie was filmed in a square frame so that the subject is always in the center of the frame. The Indigenous man is a central figure and so is his language. And that changes the depth of field. It changes the cinematography. In this composition, we are set in an almost infernal depth of field, where we are in a much larger space than the sound can reach, in order to create an imaginary in which the audience can participate. The audience can also create their own horrors based on the information that we give them. Thanks to the soundtrack, you feel a series of sensations that I don't think would have been possible just through the cinematography. Because the sound goes right through your body. It touches you in a different way. It can hit your spinal column, not your optic nerve like an image. Sound lingers much longer in the memory than images, and that's why it is so central to the film.

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

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Image courtesy of Color Monster, Pasto, and Murillo Cine.

A still from "Chaco" shows soldiers' delirium and euphoria when it finally rains — no one knows how to quench their thirst.

fundamental for being able to understand the physical dimension of horror and not just the spoken word.

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.

I was also very lucky to have a team that was very savvy technologically speaking, but also quite sensitive and respectful of each and every one of the people working there. That respect facilitated a group dynamic 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, something began to break out again, something that we didn't see or didn't want to see — racism and classism began to erupt, and you would see these attitudes in the people around you. It became clear that we still had a lot 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.

It's very similar to what happened in the Chaco War, in the revolutions of 1952, in the dictatorships, in 2003, in 2008. The same thing is happening now. And I say we don't have the critical capacity because there is a narrative that makes us say, "No, everything is fine, let's keep going." But no, everything is not fine, and it's really hard to keep going. This pandemic has given us

> "When we can't critically analyze our history, we repeat it systematically."
> – Diego Mondaca

this much — it has brought us to a full stop and allowed us to return to a different scale. It has forced us to rethink the scale, to rethink the body as a space, and from the body, to recognize the possible spaces that we have to inhabit, how much impact we have, and how we impact each other.

That's one of the ideas that we've used a lot in "Chaco" — understanding our scale, human scale, which means the body. We don't use machines, we don't use cranes, so that we don't ever lose that scale. And in this human scale, the audience identifies with us and with the film.

Diego Mondaca studied film at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y TV in Cuba and directed the documentary films "La Chirola" (2008) and "Ciudadela" (2011). This interview took place on April 21, 2021.

Diego Mondaca.

Photo by Alvaro Gumucio Li.