

The San Juan massacre, one of the more devastating events in Bolivian history, is also one of its most well-hidden. On June 24, 1967, a still-unknown number of mining families in the Catavi-Siglo XX tin mining complex were murdered just as the miners' union and a group of students were set to meet with representatives of Che Guevara¹ about liberating the country from the U.S.-backed Barrientos military dictatorship². Almost as disturbing as the actual event, the Bolivian government's near-total erasure of it from recorded history, is countered only by political filmmaking collective Grupo Ukamau's *El Coraje del Pueblo* (*Courage of the People*) (1971, dir. Jorge Sanjinés) which provides a transmissible form for the memory of this atrocity and the exhortation to prevent others like it. This film, created in tandem by the collective and the Siglo XX survivors³, mixes disembodied narration with reenactments by the survivors in order to create a record of events that is both correct and comprehensible to the people it actually affected. Through this complex formal approach, *El Coraje del Pueblo* serves not only to document the San Juan massacre but to document the process by which official records of events can be challenged; in doing so, it posits hybrid nonfiction filmmaking as a uniquely suited medium to preserving endangered oral and personal histories, as well as the cultures they stem from.

In the absence of archival footage or a clear paper trail, filmmakers are left with the dilemma of how to present truth while lacking most of its tangible and accepted markers. To deliver what the filmmakers did have--the oral histories of the survivors and their families, *El Coraje del Pueblo* avoided the use of recorded interviews, instead enlisting these primary sources to reenact the morning of June 24 and the events leading up to it as they remembered

¹ Campbell and Cortés, "Film as Weapon," 389.

² Foreign Relations.

³ Seguí, "Testimony," 180.

them. While a loose outline existed in the form of a script by Oscar Soria, the mining families--particularly the wives and mothers, who were instrumental in forcing the issue of labor rights in the mines--had free rein to alter things in accordance with what they remembered in the pursuit of a "historic collective memory"⁴. Reenacting real events with their real participants in this way allowed the filmmakers to avoid imposing a narrative that was not in line with the actual experiences of the community being portrayed; as an added benefit, the more naturalistic performances brought out by this method, found in scenes like the one where Domitila Chungara and several other women confront the pulperia managers about the lack of food to feed their families, are all the more affecting for their lack of such narrative constraints. Returning to the specific choice to avoid interview footage as a primary tactic, this also served to elide the barrier and unequal power dynamic implied between interviewer and interviewee in talking-head style documentary⁵, allowing the collective to align themselves directly with their subjects/collaborators and become "instruments of the people's struggle"⁶ rather than its omniscient saviors. The interview format itself precludes the formation of a collective viewpoint by only allowing for one speaker at a time, at the risk of otherwise obscuring the content; *El Coraje del Pueblo*, through its narrative retelling, manages to instead present instead a unified account of events that is at once immediate, affecting, and authoritative.

Besides the contrasts with other forms of documentary, this hybrid mode of filmmaking allowed Grupo Ukamau to explore formal devices that connected more with the culture of the people who would ultimately end up on-screen. The concept of a collective protagonist was not just a conscious divergence from Western emphasis on the individual, both culturally and in the types of narrative that are privileged,⁶ but a way of making the story identifiable to the actual

⁴ Sanchez-H, "Bolivian Cinema," 92.

⁵ Nash, "Power and Trust," 23.

⁶ Sanjinés, "Form and Content," 289.

intended audience, which was, again, the people. This is shown effectively in the film's closing sequence, where the mining families march through the desert; rather than focus specifically on any of the individuals with prominent speaking roles earlier in the film, the camera starts with a wide shot of the entire procession and then moves in, mingling with the crowd, never lingering for more than five seconds on any individual face. This movement and lack of devotion to any one "character" invites meaningful identification with the collective on its own terms, rather than the more common strategy of representing collectivity by inviting a viewer to identify with a previously introduced individual protagonist within a group.

Besides the concept of the collective protagonist developed in *El Coraje del Pueblo*, the cohort also used the form of their film to more accurately reflect this indigenous group's view of time as circular; the future "is not always forward, it can be rearward"⁷. This perception is expressed in the way the film begins with a viscerally shot reenactment of an earlier, 1942 massacre at Siglo XX. Here, a contingent of mining families led by Maria Barzola march up to a plain and are promptly murdered en masse. The film returns at the end to this same setting in a final series of intimate, on-the-ground shots, with a triumphant procession of miners and their families marching to the same plain where the massacre in the beginning took place. This recontextualization of the space where the opening march occurred, now named "the Maria Barzola" valorizes the people's struggle and gives a sense of meaning to the cruelty of the massacre by "naming the space of its representation;"⁸ while it is possible to argue that the palpable hope in the shots of the march only adds to the tragedy, the killings are not shown again at the end of the film, suggesting that the courage of the people is indeed meaningful and not always doomed to result in death and loss. Also supporting this more hopeful interpretation are

⁷ Alvares Beskow, "Interview with Sanjinés," 25.

⁸ Mowitt, "El Coraje del Pueblo," 134.

the scenes featuring the hunger strike carried out by the women of the mines, whose courage is shown in these scenes to successfully threaten the oppressive status quo. The positioning of these scenes after the massacre serves to similarly uplift their importance in a way that also emphasizes the temporal circularity present in indigenous thought. Again, it is the hybrid structure of the film that allows the filmmakers to create this effect and this interpretation of history, as without the use of reenactment there would be no such strike, march, or massacre to show.

All of these formal innovations might be less meaningful if the film did not circulate widely; thankfully, it did, although the process was arduous. It took four years and financial assistance from Italian TV stations for all the people involved to prepare this historical correction, which did not show in Bolivia until 1978 even as it scooped praise and accolades for its political importance and groundbreaking style on a lengthy festival run around Europe that started in 1971⁹. Prior to *El Coraje del Pueblo*'s domestic release, the massacre at the Catavi-Siglo XX mines was described in newspapers as the unfortunate death of three people in a drunken scuffle_[7], when the real death toll ran somewhere between twenty and more than one hundred_[8]. Even the Miner's Federation, a politically active labor union with a major stake in the issue, was seemingly unable to challenge the erasure_[9] of the "biggest labor massacre of Bolivia's history"_[10] at the time of its occurrence. As late as 2007, it remains absent from the official historical record;_[11] however, in that same year, the union that was so conspicuously silent in 1967 did issue a statement of remembrance on the fortieth anniversary of the atrocity_[1]. It is hard to figure this not being at least partially empowered by the existence of *El Coraje del Pueblo*. Additionally, the film's more recent showings to tens of thousands of workers in Quito,

Ecuador have spurred conversations and movements there towards unionization and political consciousness [12].

These achievements, in the view of Grupo Ukamau, are more than enough to justify the film's existence_[reference]. However, they may sound more like nebulous moral victories than anything else given Bolivia's recent history. Senseless massacres are no less familiar in the present than they were in the 1960s, as the deaths of at least eighteen people in two separate massacres of workers and peaceful protesters during a violent, illegitimate government takeover in 2019 show_[reference]; and one may ask with a degree of confidence whether going from at least twenty to at least eighteen deaths is a difference worth crowing about. Acting as if the existence or nonexistence of this one film is the sole factor in the oppression of marginalized laborers, though, is as obviously unsound an argument as this sentence makes it appear to be.

Notwithstanding the fact that the film medium is rooted in a history as pure entertainment, a carnival attraction_[reference], and that *any* attempt at challenging inequality and injustice through a film work can be said to rise above the low bar set over the past century, the purpose of politically motivated art is secondary, only following or preceding actual political actions like labor organizing, protests, and community work. A political film may serve to record or to motivate change, but may not be mistaken as change itself. In line with this view of film's political function as one of documenting, Burton-Carvajal writes of the diverse filmmakers grouped under the New Latin American Cinema umbrella as similar in their determination "to preserve their countries' cultural heritages...against deforming cultural exports from the developed world" [hour of embers 1]; in this respect, *El Coraje del Pueblo*'s adherence to indigenous perspectives and storytelling concepts make it a clearly worthwhile venture. Its hybrid form allows it to preserve these cultural concepts while simultaneously recording the truth

of its subjects' experiences, also an inherently radical action given the wholly false account of events pushed forward by the Bolivian government.

El Coraje del Pueblo's hybrid methodology, then, holds up easily against such a weak argument, but a more defensible one against the film's form can be found through an examination of Grupo Ukamau's previous film *Yawar Mallku* (dir. Jorge Sanjinés), which is incidentally among the titles which Burton-Carvajal discusses in the above quote. *Yawar Mallku*, or *Blood of the Condor*, is one of the rare pieces of art that its existence did result in tangible and direct political change. In this case, the group created a narrative fiction feature that denounced the forced sterilization of indigenous women by Peace Corps members in Bolivia^[reference]; the resulting film was massively popular, and broke the country's box office records^[reference]. Largely in response to *Yawar Mallku*, the Bolivian government banned the Peace Corps from entering the country for twenty years^[reference]. This rare instance of tangible change is worth celebrating, clearly, and raises the question of why the group would diverge from the strategy that brought it about.

One clear reason to problematize the production of *Yawar Mallku* appears when examining the production practices employed in the two films, and the very different relationships with the filmmakers had by the people whose stories were being told in each movie. Whereas Grupo Ukamau were embraced during the shooting of *El Coraje del Pueblo*, and were even protected by them from the political tumult in the area where they shot, the filmmakers were never welcome in the communities where they made *Yawar Mallku*; hostilities against the crew ran to the point of repeated attempts to sabotage the shoot ^[reference]. The resistance with which they were met, and the degree to which they ignored it shows a degree of paternalism and casual disregard for the actual marginalized peoples' thoughts that was not necessarily malicious

but certainly misguided, and not worth repeating. Even considering the positive result here, speaking for marginalized groups against their will sets a dangerous precedent and ultimately fails to alter their subordinated position even if it serves to remove a single immediate threat. *Yawar Mallku* was undoubtedly an important film, and it could conceivably be argued that the removal of the Peace Corps was more important than respecting the wishes of the indigenous communities in how they were represented, given the existential threat posed by the Peace Corps. However, the hybrid form employed in *El Coraje del Pueblo* shows this to be a false dilemma, as Grupo Ukamau managed through this film's formal choices to show that political films can challenge official narratives and histories without discounting or erasing the culture and experiences of the actual people being oppressed.

The earlier mentioning of how *El Coraje del Pueblo*, after being shown to workers in other countries, spurred subsequent changes there, shows in relief another problem with the form of *Yawar Mallku*. While feature-length narrative fiction is by far the most common film genre, and the one that is most popular[BORDWELL], *Yawar Mallku* still failed to resonate with workers and indigenous people in the way that *El Coraje del Pueblo* would a decade later. This shows that the naturalistic, single-protagonist narrative fiction style developed in the film was too far from the way that the Andean workers imagined life to be for them to identify fully with its messaging[form and content]. No further analysis is needed of hybrid filmmaking's greater effectiveness on this front than a reminder of the labor mobilization that occurred in Ecuador after *El Coraje del Pueblo* was shown there.

Bolivian writer Victor Montoya, who witnessed the San Juan Massacre firsthand, describes how it survived in the collective memory^[13] in an essay he wrote forty years after it took place. The efforts of Grupo Ukamau and the Siglo XX survivors who contributed to the

making of *El Coraje del Pueblo* give this collective memory a tangible form; through the use of hybrid nonfiction strategies, the film situates this memory permanently in a way that also manages to preserve the culture of the Andean people on a fundamental, equal level that neither puts them on a pedestal or underground. In this way the film proves its hybrid form to be a uniquely suited way of reaching these goals.

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