

## PUNKU

Director J.D. Fernández Molero

Peru, Spain | 2025

130 min. | Spanish, Quechua, Machiguenga with English subtitles

**Screenplay** J.D. Fernández Molero. **Cinematography** Johan Carrasco Monzón. **Editing** J.D. Fernández Molero. **Music** Carlos Gutiérrez Quiroga. **Sound Design** Fernando Mendoza Salazar. **Sound Cesar** Centeno Yauri. **Production Design** Susana Torres. **Costumes** Andrea Martolleret. **Animation** Diego Vizcarra. **Producers** Verónica Ccarhuarupay, J.D. Fernández Molero. **Executive Producer** J.D. Fernández Molero. **Production company** Tiempo Libre (Quillabamba, Peru). **With** Marcelo Quino, Maritza Kategari, Ricardo Delgado, Hugo Sueldo.

## Synopsis

Along a river in the Peruvian jungle, Meshia, a Matsigenka teenager, finds young, unconscious Iván, two years after he has vanished. She takes him to a hospital in the city of Quillabamba where he receives urgently needed eye surgery and is reunited with his family. They invite Meshia to stay with them and she takes a job at their bar. Soon, she enters a dark rabbit hole involving a beauty pageant and predatory men, while Iván sets himself apart by refusing to speak. Meanwhile, his damaged sight is haunted by strange visions (evocatively depicted on hand-processed Super 8 and 16mm). In **PUNKU** (the Quechua word for 'gateway'), J.D. Fernández Molero unnervingly explores being young in contemporary Peru, with its jumble of late-stage capitalism, traditional culture, and strongly defined gender roles. Here, indigenous teenagers broadcast their lives on TikTok and homeopathic potions are as trusted as modern medicine. Tinged with autobiographical touches, **PUNKU** is the story of unlikely friendship between Iván and Meshia, who find commonality as outsiders. (Ted Fendt)

**J.D. Fernández Molero** is a Peruvian filmmaker, producer, and editor. His films include **REMINISCENCES** (2010), presented at MoMA's Modern Mondays in 2011, and **VIDEOPHILIA (AND OTHER VIRAL SYNDROMES)**, which won the Tiger Award at the 2015 International Film Festival Rotterdam as well as the Hubert Bals Fund for post-production, and was the Peruvian candidate for the 89<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards. **PUNKU** (2025), his second fiction feature, won the Visions Sud Est production grant and a grant from the Peruvian National Film Fund of the Ministry of Culture for feature film development and production.

**Films:** 2010: *Reminiscences*. 2015: *Videophilia (and Other Viral Syndromes)*. 2025: *Punku*.

## Director's Statement

### A Multi-Layered Dialogue

**PUNKU creates a discourse between forms, formats, and cultures to explore Peruvian identity**

My first interest in cinema stemmed from its ability to express what cannot be adequately conveyed with words, like when you try to describe a dream upon waking. As a child, I had difficulties developing speech in a conventional way and that inability to communicate verbally evolved into a deep connection with the possibilities of cinematic language.

However, my first two films, **REMINISCENCES** (2010) and **VIDEOPHILIA** (2015), were shaped by financial limitations, which inspired me to explore alternative approaches to production and editing. Through avant-garde and experimental cinema, I discovered tools that allowed me to overcome both economic and communicative barriers.

**PUNKU** marks the first time that budgetary constraints took a back seat, allowing me to focus on creating not only the film that I could make, but the one I really wanted to do and the one I felt I had to make. This involved not only capturing my personal experiences, but also representing a type of place that I often see stereotyped and simplified in cinema.

My goal was to show a space from an internal perspective while, at the same time, immersing myself in the diverse inner worlds of its inhabitants. In the research process we did approximately 500 interviews with teenagers to compensate for the focus on my own experiences and those of my older relatives.

In these conversations they shared their interests, their dreams, and their nightmares, all of which greatly strengthened the process of re-writing the script while already settled in the city where the film was shot, Quillabamba, where I lived full-time from 2019 to 2023. This period of time was very rich for questioning my own preconceived ideas, and knowing how to open up to the unexpected.

For this same reason it was important to work not only with a technical team composed mostly of people from the same region where we would film, but also that the people of the same place have the opportunity to represent themselves. Their faces, their accents, their own testimonies when improvising dialogues on my subtle indications, making the characters adapt to the person, and not the other way around, as is usually done.

Taking the time to know your actors and giving yourself the pleasure of making your neighbours, friends, and family act. Allowing your crew to act and your cast to also be part of the production. Inventing fictions to portray your personal spaces where you grew up, where you learned to swim, where you buried your dead. All these forms, somewhat removed from the more industrial methods, have been pillars of what really makes it worthwhile to dedicate so many years to making a film that shows the unspoken and talks about the unseen.

Being a Peruvian filmmaker, I have grown up with few local

cinematographic references that do justice to our realities. This feeling of lack is even greater if you are, like me, from such an isolated place that you have to carry the weight of years of invisibility. Perhaps that is how I desperately entered cinephilia, needing to find some mirror in which to feel reflected. But I wonder, where do these images live? Do they inhabit the same space as dreams, memories, myths, lies, and the dead? Without knowing the answer, I decided that in **PUNKU**, I could put cinema into dialogue with other worlds, a place like Quillabamba with the history of cinema, and my own subjectivity with the collective.

The coexistence of multiple realities is a recurring theme in my films. Through various styles and formats – including stop motion animation, TikTok reels, and hand-processed film – I aim to create tension and shift hierarchies between different layers of reality. By exploring the infinite potential of montage, the different kinds of leaps between formats, point of views, shots, or even between individual frames, I sought to create a unique aesthetic and conceptual experience where the cut is a magical force of creation and transmutation.

**PUNKU**, which means 'gateway' in Quechua, transcends specific cinematic traditions. Instead, it delves into the possibilities of cinema as a vehicle for understanding the human experience and its mysteries. The film is comprised of twenty-one 'inner gateways' that form a personal, syncretic mythology, representing also how a gap can link two moments, two people, or two worlds. **PUNKU**, as I like to write the title, is the feedback loop between the observer and the observed.

J.D. Fernández Molero

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## Interview

### Looking Through the Gate

#### J.D. Fernández Molero on his first fiction feature and critically examining Peruvian myths and culture

DAS INTERVIEW WURDE AUF ENGLISCH GEFÜHRT.

*Barbara Wurm: We are happy to have your challenging film **PUNKU** in Forum, your third feature.*

J.D. Fernández Molero: Yes, but only my second fiction film. The first one, **REMINISCENCIAS**, was an experimental, autobiographical film.

*BW: We thought of **PUNKU** as experimental fiction. Is it in fact autobiographical, experimental fiction?*

JDFM: There is a link between this film and my first, shot in 2009 in the same location, my grandfather's house – the main character's house. Back then, I was watching my family's home movies on VHS and Super 8. While I was editing, I started to imagine another kind of memory that is neither material memory nor my own. Memory cannot be captured by cinema, by cinematic memories. I started to develop this film in 2009, but it was just the seed of the idea of spaces that have their own collective narratives and collective unconscious. Then I made **VIDEOPHILIA** (2015), which was less personal because I thought the previous one was too close to myself. **PUNKU** was the first film for which I actually had funding. The two previous films were very DIY, no budget projects. So in some ways it was the first film where I could really go beyond economic restraints, at least at the beginning. The places that I chose to shoot are also protagonists. Many of the locations were in my first film – not only the house, but also the river where the kid gets lost in the beginning. In general, the city of Quillabamba. My uncle acts in the film along with neighbours and friends. So I do use techniques that come more from experimental documentary and a different kind of production that is less industrial or

professional, more like amateur cinema where you react to your environment. In this case, it was really important to me to shoot in real locations, like the hospital. It actually has a strong link to my family: My grandmother was a nurse there. I was also hospitalised there once, which inspired this film. I got attacked by my grandfather's fighting cock. It poked my eye, but I blinked, so it only injured my eyelid, and I went to that hospital, where they stitched my eyelid. If I hadn't blinked, I would have lost my eye and I probably wouldn't be the same filmmaker.

*Irina Bondas: Thank you for your fantastic film. Following up on what you said about the autobiographical links and the locations as protagonists in the film: Machiguenga culture is something that comes up in it time and again. It is also personified through the female protagonist. Is this also inspired by your biography? Why is it an important element in your film?*

JDFM: There is the cultural aspect of the city of Quillabamba, which is a melting pot, a doorway between the Amazon and the Andes. If you see the whole South American landscape of the Amazon, it's always next to the Andes. But because it is so close to the Inca capital of Cusco, the Andean influence, especially the Quechua influence, is very strong. Machiguenga culture has been in dialogue with Quechua culture for many centuries. So this territory has always been a place of encounters and Quillabamba is located where the Machiguengas were originally based. Later, the Inca and the Spanish Empire started to push them into the Amazon flatlands. But originally they were from the tropical mountains. I thought it was really important to convey the multiple influences of the Amazonian and the Andean, the mountains and the Amazon flatlands. My own connection is mostly to Quechua. My two grandfathers spoke Quechua even though they have more Spanish ancestry. They were raised in Quechua communities and learned Quechua as their first language. When I started film school, I felt a visceral rejection of some kinds of classical cinema language. And I started to wonder why. It doesn't come naturally to me to compose or structure a scene in the conventional way. So I started to think about what kind of neurological baggage I've inherited through my two grandfathers and grandmothers. It's a way of seeing the world. Sometimes you lose the language, but you don't lose the brain connections that language creates. There are two filmmakers – one from Bolivia and one from Peru – who have experimented a lot with language, which hasn't been so common here. Jorge Sanjinés from Bolivia and Armando Robles Godoy from Peru. They have different intentions, but they're always trying to use language for more than a narrative. They have a philosophical or a sociological approach to language and cinema. So I think that's one of the ideas in this film.

*IB: Speaking of language, I'm curious about the film's title.*

JDFM: The film's name comes from the Pongo de Mainique canyon in Peru. Pongo is the Spanish adaptation of the Quechua word punku. I learned during my research that Pongo is this canyon that cuts through the Andes and opens towards the Amazon. So it's actually the division between these two territories. That's where the film was shot. It's also interesting because you can see a whole mix of worlds there: it's called Pongo de Mainique in Spanish, Pongo, or punku, from Quechua and Mainique from the Machiguenga word maini for bear, like the Berlinale bear. It means "gate of the bear." This mixture was one of the starting points for my research, which brought me all the way to this film.

*IB: Right from the start, I had the feeling that you play a lot with references and that you quote a lot of filmmakers, either reclaiming, undermining, or reinterpreting their images. The first scene – maybe I'm completely wrong – already seems to be a reference to Tarkovsky. And then there are the Surrealists, like Buñuel, but also Lynch and other contemporary filmmakers. The film deals a lot with vision and seeing something on film, but also*

*with the question of what is not seen, like indigenous cultures. I wondered if this is also related to the fact that indigenous cultures often pass on knowledge through oral history less than through images. Was it an attempt to translate these cultures and their stories into visual language?*

JDFM: You're not wrong at all, you've actually pinpointed many of my initial objectives or ideas. I still have the original storyboard of the chapters and, yes, it began with some frames from Tarkovsky's *MIRROR*, then Bergman's *PERSONA* and so on. Of course, Peru was not initially part of the cinematic cultural dialogue. It's just starting to become part of that dialogue and not only a place where we copy other cinematic styles. There hadn't really been an exchange in both directions. So to some degree you always feel a lack, a void in your culture and your belonging, you don't feel part of the conversation. I was trying to enter into dialogue with these movies, with this universe. It is also my own mythological background, with cinema as contemporary mythology. And that brings me to the other part of the question: I was raised with this oral history and these ways of seeing the world. Another issue is that I have some trouble with the concept of magical realism, with the influence that magical realism has had on Latin American and Spanish-speaking countries which try to go beyond a natural realism or objective realism. Zitat: I was obsessed with these kinds of stories. But how do you show something that is an oral description, that you can't see?

*BW: Because there is pressure that you have to go this way?*

JDFM: Yes, it's a self-contained label that is a burden. I even have this debate with fellow Latin American artists because they have different feelings about this. Before magical realism, there was just culture. So it's one of the branches, but oral history has a shared origin. I didn't grow up with only fables or bedtime stories. The style of the film derived from that. I also grew up with anecdotes tainted by some things that could be questionable or puzzling. What did it mean that my uncle or someone's uncle was walking by the river and saw a mermaid, or that my cousin got pushed by a supernatural creature? I'm more focused on the psychological effect, this kind of normalisation of a broad notion of consciousness, of reality, but it generally taught me to research local mythology. I was obsessed with these kinds of stories. But how do you show something that is an oral description, that you can't see? I play with the visual imagery of a mermaid that comes from the Western world. But I actually have other conceptions that I can't really put into words. The film reflects on that while also acknowledging the Western influence on myself.

*BW: I was struck by the overall arc of your structure and the love between the two people who ultimately get a voice in their shadow play. One of them, the woman, Mesha, gets a lot of screen time, and as a female she also is very exposed. And then there is the one-eyed male teenager character, Iván.*

JDFM: Originally, the characters were twins, a boy and a girl. I even cast a twin. But once I cast Maritsa as Mesha, who was actually a secondary character at first, I understood that she was not a secondary character and I adapted the story to fit her personality. Neither of them are trained actors. Initially, I did an open call at the local council. Of course, the people that came were very extroverted people who always go to after school activities and are pro-active. So I had to change tactics. I consulted documentary filmmaker Miguel Hilario. We started going to schools and just went into the classes inviting students to talk with us about our film. That's how I met the boy cast as Iván. He was an orphan. His stepparents loved him, but they didn't have time to take him anywhere. It was very magical to meet him. For Mesha, on the other hand, we were looking for someone from the native communities in the Amazon. We started to talk with people and realised how complicated it would be to bring someone from that community to the city, especially a minor. My field producer, who also acts in the film, recommended Maritsa, who had also competed in a beauty contest before.

Her father is Machiguenga and her mother is Quechua, so she actually contained a lot of what I wanted to portray. There were some details about her, like her activity on TikTok and her braces, which I thought were interesting for the character. I usually don't describe much of my characters in the scripts. I describe everything around them, because I know the locations. And then I start looking for these people. That's why I just chose people that are from there, they're already part of these places that I imagine.

*BW: You portray both the path to empowerment as well as the illusions and disillusion of this empowerment, which is uncommon, at least in Latin America. There is also a lot of criticism of this society. It's especially powerful thanks to the presence of this wonderful actress. For me, it is also a story about exploitation not by one individual person, but by a society and by a very patriarchal, very masculine society. Did you ever think about your film in terms of gender and class? Did you discuss these problematic social issue with the people participating in the film or was it more a dialogue with yourself?*

JDFM: I definitely talked with the people in the film about its critical aspects as well as how to make a film that can be critical without taking it away from the people you're portraying. I lived there for four years and have always been there at least one month out of the year. I've always been concerned about not doing cultural extraction or exploitation, not becoming the exploiter while criticizing it. Iván and Mesha grow up in this normalised patriarchal, violent, and classist environment – my country. There's a mixture of specific things: things I like, things that make me angry, things that make me sad. Not only with regards to gender or the male gaze. There's a lot of discrimination towards indigenous people from the Amazon, even more than towards the Andean indigenous people. Even the Andean people discriminate against the Amazon people. And on top of that, the Amazon communities often feel distinct from the no contactados – people who haven't had any contact with Western society. There are so many levels, it's so complex. Of course, when I'm exploring these kinds of environments, I try to ask myself questions. Why haven't I seen any films that portray a teenager from a native community who also uses TikTok? I've explored this region since 2008 and observed some cultural shifts, not only in the native community, but also in Quillabamba and everywhere. I thought it was important to try to capture these cultural contradictions. For me – and this is the film's documentary aspect – it's also a sonic testimony. It's not only about what they are saying, it's what they want to say and what they feel comfortable saying. For them to feel comfortable saying what they say, I had to back out and make it a safe environment. Let them be themselves. It is also important that their dialects differ. It depends on how much influence you have from either side, in addition to the centralised media with a homogenised Spanish. But they have a different way of speaking. I have seen it in my mother who is from there. On old VHS tapes she speaks differently, while she has now lost her dialect.

*BW: I want to turn to the film's structure, how you chose to divide it into chapters.*

JDMF: One of the principal influences were the Major Arcana of a tarot deck. I had 22 chapters at the beginning, starting with the fool, the zero card. And then it went all the way to the 21<sup>st</sup> Arcana, the world. Because of the pandemic, I had a lot of time and started to explore astrology and demonology and all sorts of stuff. I only wrote until chapter 13, the Arcana of death. The structure changed a lot during this process. The idea of the chapters was very conceptual, too, because the title, *PUNKU*, means threshold or gate. In Incan culture, doors were basically just like gaps that separated one place from another. The whole film is about this concept applied to cinema, to cuts. Going to sleep, waking up. These kinds of doors between states of being. Zitat: I wanted to portray a collective unconscious that is half collective unconscious and half personal imagination.

*IB: I wonder if your interest in cuts is also connected to your work as an editor. For me, one of the most striking qualities of your film is how you juxtapose elements. You mentioned that you didn't want to engage with cultural extraction. At the same time, you portray how cultural and economic extraction has happened over centuries. Colonial history and its legacy are very present in your film. Consumer culture resonates with colonialism, it's brought from the West. I was wondering why you decided to use very drastic imagery for loss, violence, and exploitation.*

JDFM: The idea of including TikTok came late in the editing. I thought it was important to add that layer. It's a fake representation, but it's also real because it is Maritsa's own TikTok channel. I think it was important to show how she, Maritsa, and her character, Mesha, portrays herself. I thought it was interesting to show her inner fantasies or the external fantasies that she projects, and also to correlate these kinds of dreams or nightmares with contemporary media. I think Peru's culture is very violent. Not necessarily in an obvious or literal way, it's more of a climate or how people relate to one another. It's also inherited from colonialism and capitalism. How we see the other, the other being different: different gender, different social class, different culture. It was something that came up in the process of writing a story to fit the space I was portraying. I wanted to portray a collective unconscious that is half collective unconscious and half personal imagination. In some way, **PUNKU** is my doorway to this collective unconscious or to the way I relate to this culture. Of course, there's a lot of love, but if you love something, you can criticise some aspects of it.

*BW: The question is also how accessible it will be for festival audiences. I believe it triggers a lot of different interpretations and ways of perception. It's strong as a visual exploration. It's a dark film, but there are a lot of scenes that are not dark at all. It questions belonging and there is a variety and vastness of symbolic fields and spaces, but at the same time there is also a really harsh impossibility of getting out, getting away and creating something new.*

JDFM: I'm also interested in hearing all the different interpretations. I'm excited, scared – everything. I think that sometimes the darkness in what we understand as magical realism is censored. So, it's also a film about the shadows, it's about being able to see the dark side.