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Eldorado XXI

Salomé Lamas

Producer Luis Urbano, Sandro Aguilar, Thomas Ordonneau.
Production companies O Som e a Fúria (Lissabon, Portugal), Shellac Sud (Marseille, France). **Written and directed by** Salomé Lamas.
Director of photography Luis Armando Arteaga. **Editor** Telmo Churro.
Music João Lobo, Norberto Lobo. **Sound design** Miguel Martins. **Sound** Bruno Oliveira Dias.

DCP, colour. 125 min. Spanish, Quechua, Aymara.

Premiere 15 February 2016, Berlinale Forum

The panoramic shots are breathtaking: a majestic mountain landscape in winter, flat-roofed tin shacks cowering next to one other, women perched on steep slopes using primitive tools to break through pieces of rock. La Rinconada is situated over 5,000 meters high in the Peruvian Andes, on the edge of a gold mine. This 21st century El Dorado is an inhospitable place, where untold numbers of people live and work in the most precarious of conditions, hoping both for gold and a better life. Salomé Lamas has constructed a cinematic diptych to convey the extremity of this situation and the dimensions of its misery without having to resort to graphic images. While an hour-long single take from a fixed camera position shows an endless stream of mine workers trudging up and down a garbage-lined path day and night, voiceovers speak of cold, hunger, poverty, danger to life and limb, atrocities and lawlessness. The second half of the film then places haunting observations of something like the normal and the everyday alongside all this: chitchat while chewing coca leaves, rituals and social gatherings with music and dancing. It's only then that the true eeriness of the setting comes to light.

Birgit Kohler

The 31st day

Some 80,000 people live in crowded dwellings without the barest necessities for subsistence farming; they foster the hope that one day, they will find the means to resettle elsewhere. There are enough stories of fortunes made randomly to keep their hopes and dreams alive. As a safety measure, the miners chew large quantities of coca leaves. They carry the leaves in their pockets daily to stave off hunger and prevent exhaustion. If they live to work again the next day, it is common for them to celebrate with alcohol and visits to the local brothels. This becomes a quick road to self-destruction with the only motivation being to soften the harshness of everyday life.

Under the system known as *cachorreo* a miner works for thirty days without remuneration and on the thirty-first day (if he's lucky) he is allowed to explore the mine for four hours for his own profit. The little precious metal he might carry down the mountain has now to be separated from the rock through antiquated methods using highly toxic levels of mercury. Then the value of the gold powder has to be negotiated in a non-regulated establishment within the community and the miner will be offered the minimum amount possible in return.

The system is an unpredictable lottery; nevertheless *cachorreo* means that miners and employers can avoid certain taxes. It is a mental game – the possibility of generating a small fortune motivates the miners. To believe in and aspire to 'something bigger' can be a greater motivation than a miserable paycheck at the end of the month; a constant low wage would simply not be worth the life of danger.

La Rinconada and Cerro Lunar are doomed towns, which will very shortly become ghost towns, since the mines are running low on their precious metal. You are alone. You hear nothing, you know nothing and you expect nothing.

Self-oblivion and legend

Eldorado XXI is an attempt to combine elements of parafiction with critical media practice. Aesthetically similar to the majority of contemporary contemplative cinema, *mise-en-scène* is emphasised here, allowing the action to unfold in its own rhythm. Drifting organically into non-diegetic, orchestrated sequences, the film also lingers on a direct ethnographic cinema approach, combining visual sequences accompanied by off-screen sounds. The question raised is: How can an individual carry his entire family to hell while seeking a hoped-for fortune and wishing to break free from poverty? A random lottery promises the awakening of one's oblivion of oneself – an illusion that leads men to self-destruction, moved by the same interests, dealt with the same tools and means in the present day as in ancient times.

The objective and the subjective were displaced, not transformed; the story remained truthful, really truthful instead of fictionally truthful. But the veracity of the story had not stopped being a fiction. The break is not between fiction and reality, but in the new mode of storytelling, which affects both of them. What is in opposition to fiction is not the real, not the truth; it is the story-telling function of the poor, insofar as it gives what is false the power that makes it into a memory – a legend.

Let us go back to the words of Glenn Gould: 'No Man's Land is the natural land of the imagination.' It is in this non-place where we assemble ourselves to resist the silence of the universe, in order

to not succumb to pure panic and the threat of dissolution. The silence of the abyss is strange to us, but we do belong to it, with a piece of us abandoned to the pure possibilities, to the (un)submissive obsessions of any kind, to the inertia of a fear that we are falsely protected by conventions.

Salomé Lamas



Salomé Lamas was born in Lisbon, Portugal in 1987. She studied directing and editing at the Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema (ESTC) in Lisbon as well as at the FAMU film school in Prague. She also studied art at the Sandberg Institute in Amsterdam. Salomé Lamas is currently earning a doctorate in film studies at the University of Coimbra in Portugal. She works as a lecturer, researcher and filmmaker.

Films

2008: *O palimpsesto da rapariga cisne ou choveu durante dois dias e a paisagem alterou-se* / *Swan Girls Palimpsest or It Rained During Two Days and the Landscape Has Changed* (8 min.). 2009: *Jotta: A minha maladresse é uma forma de delicatessen* / *Jotta: My Maladresse Is a Way of Delicatessen* (70 min., co-directed by Francisco Moreira). 2010: *Rapariga Império* / *Imperial Girl* (11 min.), *Unnamed#I'm Sleepy* (10 min.), *VHS* (40 min.). 2011: *Golden Dawn* (16 min.). 2012: *Encounters with Landscape* (30 min.), *A Comunidade* (23 min.), *Terra de ninguém* / *No Man's Land* (72 min., Berlinale Forum 2013). 2013: *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (26 min.). 2014: *Le Boudin* (16 min.). 2015: *A Torre* (6 min.). 2016: *Eldorado XXI*.