

Film Review

- *When Two Worlds Collide*, directed by Heidi Brandenburg and Mathew Orzel. Yachaywasi Films, Peru/USA/UK, 2016.

When Two Worlds Collide is centered around the tragic events that unfolded in 2009 as indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon protested against a set of legislative decrees that threatened their territory. The documentary is among a number of films that have depicted conflicts over resource extraction in Latin America in recent years. Along with the academic literature and media coverage, these films have increased public awareness about the impacts of extractive activity in the continent. While documentary films on resource conflicts have become important tools for organizing activism and building solidarity networks, some are constrained by small budgets, a simple storyline, and a heroic narrative. By contrast, *When Two Worlds Collide*, while being sympathetic of the indigenous protesters, provides a more nuanced analysis of the sociopolitical context and a more detailed account of events that occurred before, during, and after the deadly protests at Bagua.

The film is centered around questions of indigenous rights of ownership over traditional lands and the right to prior consultation and consent over the use of resources on those lands. The “two worlds” that the title alludes to are established from the outset. The film begins with sights and sounds of the rainforest, teeming with life. Part of this environment is Alberto Pizango, President of the National Organization for Native Amazonian Peoples (AIDESEP), shown quietly paddling on calm waters amidst towering trees. From there, the film moves to images of industrial activity and excerpts of a speech by former Peruvian president Alan Garcia to American entrepreneurs, extending an open invitation to invest in the country’s mining, oil, gas and other industries whilst making promises of long-term stability (“We won’t have any political conflicts”). The first scenes in the film focus on Mr. Pizango’s interactions with his family and community, emphasizing indigenous peoples’ collective environment and their connection to (and dependence on) nature. From indigenous wisdom about the sacredness of the land and allusions to a time when animals were more abundant, the film then makes a dramatic shift to images of sticky black crude oil covering the river banks and patients at a health clinic, high-

lighting the health impacts of the oil spills and water contamination. This is what Mr. Pizango calls “savage development”: the pursuit of profit that can “kill an entire people”.

The filmmakers do not ignore the larger political economy of conflict. Against the backdrop of a significant oil discovery in the Amazon, efforts to promote foreign investment and the signing of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, President Garcia introduces legislative decrees that would facilitate the sale of communal property. Incompatible views of land and territory are at the heart of the problem. While Garcia sees indigenous territories as being wasted and in need of being put to use for the benefit of “all Peruvians”, Mr. Pizango argues that their land can never be sold and their rights to it never negotiated. The passionate defense of their territory inspires the mobilization of 1,350 indigenous communities. At a rally, a woman asks Mr. Pizango to take their message to the government: “Tell them that we exist, that we are also Peruvians.”

The growing activism and organization of communities culminated in a national strike, which is the focus of the film. The news coverage that is included in the documentary gives a good sense of the disconnect between Lima and other regions in Peru, as commentators express shock and disbelief (revealing their own prejudices) at the audacity of indigenous groups to bring the country to a halt. Interviews with government officials also show their inability to comprehend the demands of indigenous groups and their unwillingness to engage in dialogue – yet the controversial laws in question were developed without consulting indigenous communities. The government’s failure to repeal a Forestry Law that indigenous groups declared unconstitutional leads to an escalation of the conflict, which the filmmakers clearly blame on the actions (and inaction) of lawmakers. The state however placed the responsibility on Mr. Pizango, who was ultimately charged with rebellion, sedition, and murder.

The depiction of the demonstrations and roadblocks at *Curva del Diablo* or “Devil’s Curve”, the highway near Bagua, 600 miles north of Lima, is filled with tension. Heidi Brandenburg and Mathew Orzel, the two directors of *When Two Worlds Collide*, reconstruct these events by weaving television news clips with interviews of the various stakeholders involved (indigenous people, politicians, and police officers), adding depth to the retelling of the events. Video footage of the protests takes the viewer disturbingly close to the brutality of the clashes at Devil’s Curve. By the end, 82 people sustained gunshot wounds; 11 police officers and 9 indigenous men were killed.

When Two Worlds Collide shows the painful aftermath of the protests as people tried to grapple with the senselessness of the deaths. The film focuses on the desperation of a father looking for his son (a police officer at Bagua whose body was never found) and of indigenous people whose primary demand is to have their voices heard. Meanwhile, President Garcia continued to insist that economic progress was being held back by the “savagery and barbarism” of indigenous groups, but later made an appeal for reconciliation and a

new start. While many questions remain unanswered, the documentary suggests that the conflict was a result of political decisions, economic policies, and a longstanding disregard for the land rights of indigenous communities.

In Peru, Devil's Curve has become synonymous with conflict over resources, representing, for some, the darker side of the economic boom brought about by resource extraction. *When Two World Collides* offers a poignant depiction of a tragic event that will remain embedded in Peru's national consciousness for a long time. Undoubtedly, the documentary contributes to ongoing discussions about resource conflicts, the right of indigenous communities to consultation, and state responses to protests in Latin American countries that prioritize an economic model based on resource extraction.

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Documentary details

Title: When Two Worlds Collide

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Distributor: First Run Features

Director: Heidi Brandenburg, Mathew Orzel

Genre: Documentary

Year: 2016

Country: Peru/USA/UK

Duration: 103 minutes

Language: Spanish (subtitles available)

Website: www.whentwoworldscollidemovie.com/

Can be seen at: Netflix, and rented or purchased from the official documentary website