

## Film Review

- *Hugo Blanco, río profundo (Hugo Blanco, Deep River)*, directed by Malena Martínez Cabrera. Austria/Peru, 2019.<sup>1</sup>

The documentary *Hugo Blanco, río profundo* tells the story of Peruvian peasant leader Hugo Blanco and his role in the successful agrarian reform movement in the Cusco region. Two previous shorts by director Martínez Cabrera – *Hugo Blanco y el periódico Lucha Indígena* (2014) and *Cinco trotskistas y Hugo Blanco* (2017) – inspired this ambitious feature project, which had been awaiting financial backing since 2009. That year, the director met Blanco in person and developed the idea of making a documentary about him. Definitive backing eventually came from the Austrian government, while the Peruvian Ministry of Culture awarded the documentary with a distribution grant, guaranteeing its exhibition throughout the country.

The deep river mentioned in the title is a reference to the novel *Deep Rivers* (1958) by well-known Indigenous writer José María Arguedas. It establishes a link between Hugo Blanco and Arguedas' life mission to fight racial discrimination rooted in colonial structures. The documentary aims to bring attention to the agrarian reform movement carried out by the peasant population in Cusco, before the self-identified “revolutionary” military government of Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968-1975) implemented agrarian reform as part of its political agenda. More than fifty years after the Velasco law was passed in 1969, the fight of this bold and organized Andean population in the previous decade seems to be forgotten. Indeed, one of the motivations to make the documentary seems to be to refute the common belief that Velasco was the initiator and sole responsible for the agrarian reform. In reality, he just gave legal status to the achievements of poor Andean peasants in their fight against unscrupulous landowners.

The peasant population in Cusco has suffered decades of brutal exploitation by local landowners who, as descendants of Spaniards, inherited their property. As a young graduate, Blanco arrived to Cusco with the intention of organizing a peasant union that would give the peasants the political tools to free themselves from this oppression. Although the peasant union was a non-violent organization, the population could at times not avoid confronting the police. Un-

fortunately, during one of these encounters Blanco killed a police officer in self-defence. As a result, he was condemned to twenty-five years in prison (although he was later pardoned by Velasco after serving eight years). Blanco is still the most popular figure in the context of the fight for the land in Cusco. However, the documentary emphasizes that success was achieved due to the solidarity and decisiveness of the region's peasant population, who should be considered the true heroes of the movement.

The first scene of the film contextualizes the uprising as an explosion occurring after the brutality of power reaches its most inhumane form. Historical footage shows that the Indigenous people were little more than slaves. However, when Blanco gets imprisoned, the colonial past is dismissed. In a voice-over, Martínez Cabrera reproduces the interrogation of Blanco during his trial. The dialogue between Blanco and the judge, who asks Blanco to "briefly summarize" the more than five hundred years of violence against the native owners of the country today named Peru, is devastating and hilarious at the same time. Underlying Blanco's imprisonment is an important discussion of the differences between legitimate and democratic dissent, and terrorism and blatant violence. The main argument of the documentary is that the only legitimate fight is the one that is determined and developed by the population; it cannot be a resolution from the leaders, only from the masses.

*Hugo Blanco, río profundo* is structured in two parts: one in the absence of Hugo Blanco and one in his presence. The first part, which shows old photographs and news reports, is based on archival footage of the agrarian reform movement, and especially how Blanco was depicted by the media. His revolutionary reputation is seemingly the only thing that has survived from the peasant fight in Cusco. In the second part, we get to meet the mythical leader. This part is more testimonial: we hear Blanco and get to understand his point of view. Blanco's objective is still to achieve self-governance for the people, in his view the only solution that can guarantee a democratic and equitable transfer of power. According to him, all other options, as history seems to corroborate, have ended in dictatorship, violence, or other chaotic failure. It becomes clear from the documentary that Martínez Cabrera is very much taken by the charismatic figure of Blanco. This may be the reason why she has decided not to include the chronology that resulted in the successful agrarian reform. While Martínez Cabrera's ideal spectator is already familiar with the events surrounding the reform, the director fails to explain this reality to viewers who may not be so familiar with this period.

Thanks to the funding of the Peruvian Ministry of Culture, *Hugo Blanco* was able to reach small towns throughout Peru, rural places where there are usually no movie theatres and where the collective memory still fondly recalls Hugo Blanco. In fact, the documentary premiered in Quillabamba, La Convención, the town at the centre of the agrarian reform movement. Unfortunately, the documentary was criticized by right-wing politicians and almost censored due to accusations of supporting terrorism – a common strategy to erase

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the history of social justice movements in Peru. This documentary shows the opposite: if terrorism means to violently impose an ideology on a people, the events in Cusco demonstrate how the people fought back against an ideology that enslaved, exploited, and murdered them.

All in all, *Hugo Blanco, río profundo* is an important film, particularly regarding the differences between legitimate and democratic dissent and the apology of terrorism and violence. The success story of Cusco, where a population dictates action to be taken to their leaders and not the other way around, is crucial in the present context where politicians too often ignore the will of the people they should serve.

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## Notes

1. This 108-minute documentary can be seen at Virtual Cinema organized by director Martínez Cabrera ([www.hugoblancofilm.com](http://www.hugoblancofilm.com); [proyecciones@hugoblancofilm.com](mailto:proyecciones@hugoblancofilm.com)).