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Art from a Fractured Past

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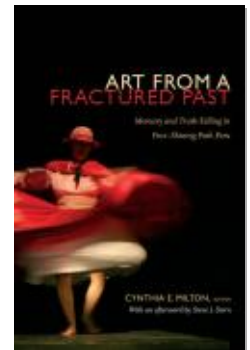
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EDITOR'S NOTE: In this October 6, 2008, interview with the filmmaker Palito Ortega Matute, the historian Ponciano del Pino explores the cinema boom in the 1990s and early 2000s in their shared hometown of Ayacucho (also known by its colonial era name, Huamanga) and the choice of the political violence as a direct and indirect theme in cinematic production.¹ Palito Ortega is well known in Peru for his nine feature-length films that take place in the department of Ayacucho. Ortega's films have been screened internationally, in Lima, and in the city of Ayacucho. In this interview, they discuss several of Ortega's works but emphasize his first film, *Dios tarda pero no olvida* (*God Is Late but Does Not Forget*; 1994), and his most recent film at the time, *El rincón de los inocentes* (*The Innocents' Corner*; filmed in 2005). Both films recount the years of violence from the perspective of a child. The first film is the story of a rural family harmed by both Shining Path and the armed forces. The second film takes the perspective of an urban family from Huamanga. In this interview, del Pino and Ortega discuss how *El rincón de los inocentes* makes a critique of the Peruvian truth commission and how this film offers a distinct narrative of the war years.

Trained as a visual anthropologist and attracted at a young age to the potential of film as a medium of creative expression, Ortega reflects on the importance of cinema from the provinces as a testimonial artform. Unlike the films produced in Lima that are influenced by Hollywood and Mexican cinema, provincial films draw from local customs, festivities, and mythology. Importantly, films made in the provinces portray daily life. Until the early 2000s, Ayacuchanos could watch

Ortega's films and sometimes see their own streets and their own faces on the screen of a local theatre, which has since turned into an evangelical church. Despite the lack of a theatre, movies continue to be made in Ayacucho and other provinces by young cineastes following in Ortega's footsteps. And almost every year Ortega tries to show *El rincón de los inocentes* in Ayacucho. Since this interview was conducted, Ortega has created *Dios perdona el pecado, el incesto no, Jarjacha III (God Forgives Sin, Not Incest, Jarjacha III; 2009)* and *La casa rosada (The Pink House; 2013)*. *La casa rosada* tells the story of an Ayacucho family: the mother is killed, the father is accused of terrorism and is tortured in the "Pink House," and his children desperately search for him. This house, which still stands today, has since been painted blue.

DEL PINO: I would like to explore three areas in this interview: first, [to talk] on film and whether one might speak of an Ayacuchoan cinema; second, to talk of your experience as a filmmaker, taking into account that your origins are in Ayacucho and [the fact that] you lived here during the years of violence. Third, if we could elaborate more specifically on your film *El rincón de los inocentes*, which deals with insurgent violence and military repression in the city of Ayacucho. I wanted to discuss this film in particular, although you've told me that your other six films also deal indirectly with, or are framed within, this same violent scenario.

Let's begin by speaking about cinema, and more specifically, about the cinema of Ayacucho.

ORTEGA: Well, in Ayacucho there is no enduring style or school of filmmaking. There have been attempts by a number of young people, born out of enthusiasm for picking up a camera and producing [films] on various stories that they have written themselves or that are based on various events that took place in Ayacucho. All this is thanks to the democratization of digital video technology. Beforehand, such possibilities did not exist in any part of the world. This format has been a boon to many who have wished to tell stories. Ayacucho has been among the places that have seen a large trend of young people trying to make films, right? But digital videos have stalled, and these young people have not gotten beyond this stage of production. But, personally, I have indeed taken this very seriously, with a good deal of responsibility. I have taken it on as an

occupation, as a professional in the art of filmmaking. I've now spent close to twenty years in the world of visual arts, and I have seven feature-length films to my name. This gives me a bit of permanency and currency to be able to call myself—and to have myself called—a filmmaker.

DEL PINO: When you refer to these young people who have tried to produce films thanks to digital cameras, we're speaking of the 1990s?

ORTEGA: We are talking about the 2000s.

DEL PINO: Quite recent, then.

ORTEGA: It is recent. This trend in Ayacucho was sparked by a feature-length project that I made here in the region. Young people were left with an enthusiasm for filmmaking. What's valuable in all this is that they have done it: they tried to create something without the technical requirements, without, in truth, any of the conditions that a film production ought to meet in terms of all the parameters of technique and structure; nevertheless, they have done it. And as with these experiences in Ayacucho, there have been similar developments elsewhere in Peru.

DEL PINO: In the provinces?

ORTEGA: Precisely. Puno is another of the places where there is also an important trend among young people trying to make feature films. One or two of them have achieved a national presence, due to their effort, their perseverance, and their obstinacy, because to make a feature, be it in Ayacucho, in Lima, or in any other part of Peru, is extremely difficult.

DEL PINO: What kinds of films have been produced by these young people?

ORTEGA: This is what is so interesting in this great movement that has blossomed in Peru. It is in contrast to the centralist gaze (I'm speaking of Lima), in contrast to those Lima filmmakers who are suddenly telling stories that are infected with Mexican or American cinema, with cultural influences that are not necessarily Peruvian. Those of us who are trying to create a provincial cinema, we are doing something exceptional: we tell daily life; we tell culture; we narrate; we show the essence of Peru. This is the key difference [between provincial and Lima-based cinema].

DEL PINO: When you say "the essence of Peru," are you referring to portraying popular celebrations? What particularities of this "essence of Peru" are represented in these films?

ORTEGA: Everything from folkloric topics, such as festivals, customs, and Andean myths, to very serious subjects, as in my case. I have developed themes related to sociopolitical violence, from my own point of view, of course. In the great majority of places in Peru where films are being made, the youth are playing with topics tied to their own region[s], things that they know.

DEL PINO: These young people to whom you refer, are they also broaching the subject of political violence, or is it much more about customs and mythology?

ORTEGA: Mythology. I don't know of one instance in which they've touched on themes tied to the political violence or on any other subject related to the history of their region. They are essentially playing with the genres of suspense or terror, taking themes or pulling subjects from Andean mythology. Topics such as the Qarqacha or Pishtaco [mythical malevolent figures]. The Kharisiri in Puno, for example, which is a sort of Qarqacha or a kind of Pishtaco.² In a few cases, they are dealing with contemporary themes, for instance, society's abuse of vulnerable persons, such as children.

DEL PINO: What kind of reception has the population given these films of a social or traditional bent?

ORTEGA: There is one thing that I want to emphasize about this phenomenon of provincial film, and that is that the average contemporary Peruvian wants to see himself or herself reflected on a screen, of that I'm quite certain because of my own experience. For example, here in Ayacucho when we make a film of a social or traditional nature, the public goes not only to see the story but also to see their street, to see their neighbor who acted in it, to see themselves reflected on the screen. This is quite interesting, and the same thing happens in other regions. And so success at the box office is ensured. Any film that has been made outside Lima, in the provinces, whether in Ayacucho, Puno, Huancayo, Juliaca, Cajamarca, or Cusco, has an audience that follows those features.

DEL PINO: Though perhaps at the risk of remaining limited to local and regional audiences and not, therefore, reaching a broader public such as that of Lima?

ORTEGA: There have been a few attempts by certain provincial producers who have taken their films to the capital, to Lima, but the reality is otherwise: the market for film production is dominated by a monster called "Hollywood." So no Peruvian production, not even those made in Lima or by directors or

producers from Lima, has the same possibilities or position as those distributed by Hollywood. This, then, is a major limitation. Certainly, the efforts that these young people have made have been stopped short at their beginnings. If we had the same opportunities, these films could have a much greater impact at the box office, because more or less 90 percent of Lima's population is from the provinces. As I said before, the provincial people want to see themselves, they want to see themselves on that screen. If we had the opportunity, these productions could gain a huge following.

DEL PINO: Let's move on to your own experience. Tell us a little about your experience being born and growing up in Ayacucho, and about how you later became involved in film production.

ORTEGA: Very well. Yes, I am from Ayacucho. I was lucky to have lived and witnessed the process of political violence in Ayacucho. I say "lucky" because this is what permits me a certain proximity to that reality and what enables me to tell these stories in a closer way, with convincing details, to portray realistically those years that were so hard. With regard to my inclination for filmmaking, it dates from childhood. I remember vividly how powerfully my attention was caught by the camcorders of tourists during Holy Week. I saw them as inaccessible things, thinking that I would never have the chance even to touch such cameras. But as the years passed, I tried to make some cinematographic works using very amateurish cameras. In a way, that allowed me to gain a certain proximity to the work of filmmaking; it left me feeling a need to study introductory courses on filmmaking, courses on camera-work, on directing. Then, for many years, I had this intention, this ambition of wanting to make a film, but I was conscious that behind it all there was a series of things that were still out of my reach, beginning with a camera.

I studied anthropology, and involved myself with visual anthropology. I began by developing some projects related to the violence in several communities outside Ayacucho. I also did work for a number of foreign television channels and for national television. This, then, allowed me to gain a more direct understanding of how a documentary or feature film might be developed. At this point, I was dreaming of a feature film, of telling a fictionalized story. So then I began working bit by bit; the first thing I did was write some stories, but I wasn't satisfied with what I was writing. I needed stories that could really have an effect

on their audience. It was a learning process for me, until the point when I was certain I had written a story that would work; it was *Dios tarda pero no olvida* (*God Is Late but Does Not Forget*), the first film that I made.

DEL PINO: In what year?

ORTEGA: In 1993. With the story in hand, I started working on the following elements: getting a good camera, getting actors, and getting a bit of financing, which I raised through loans from my family and the actors' own contributions.

DEL PINO: In that film, *God Is Late but Does Not Forget*, the actors were . . . ?

ORTEGA: Locals.

DEL PINO: From here [the city of Ayacucho]?

ORTEGA: From here. The good thing was that these local actors from Ayacucho had a calling, had ambitions to become actors, which is very important, even though they had no academic training. What I did to avoid weaknesses in the acting was to have this group of people train with an expert acting teacher.

DEL PINO: How long did that take?

ORTEGA: Close to eight months. This period, I can see now, was also a learning process for me. During rehearsals, these actors didn't have the strength that I wanted to see in them. And so I was a little disappointed, but in the end, the project was already under way and we were going to do it regardless. But the funny thing is that the local actor, who was given eight months to prepare, at the moment of my saying "action," the magic word to start the takes and scenes, he suddenly became the actor I was searching for.

DEL PINO: A complete transformation?

ORTEGA: Precisely. There is a tremendous predisposition, a magical predisposition in these actors, and in the end the project, the film worked very well in terms of acting; as a story it worked very well, as a new proposal for Ayacucho: it was the first film made in Ayacucho, and it worked very well. The inhabitants responded to that novelty.

DEL PINO: This was the first film made in Ayacucho?

ORTEGA: Yes.

DEL PINO: What is the story of *God Is Late but Does Not Forget*?

ORTEGA: I wanted to make a film that was somehow related to the political violence, but I was a little afraid, because even at that time, elements of the armed forces and Shining Path were still present in Ayacucho. But I used the

problem of terrorism as pretence to create a story about a youth who migrates, who comes from the countryside to the city [of Ayacucho] because his family was killed by Shining Path. I took up this issue as a pretence, as the story itself is not about terrorism.

DEL PINO: So it is the story of a displaced youth looking for a refuge, fleeing his community because of Shining Path violence?

ORTEGA: It is about life in the city. He finds himself in a reality that he had not imagined; he thought that he was going somewhere like his own community, but he encounters a city, a monster, where the indifference of society is terrible, obvious. So he confronts this society, on top of having escaped that climate of political violence. That provides dramatic elements sufficient to making the film work well.

DEL PINO: As you were creating this story, you came to know the experience of displacement intimately, you explored life histories. Of course, for someone who lived in this city, these were part of everyday reality in an urban landscape transformed by violence. Did you undertake any kind of research that allowed you to understand in depth the experience of being a refugee?

ORTEGA: These were persistent facts in Ayacucho. One knew that many people came from the countryside and had moved to the city of Ayacucho. So we knew about the displaced, about the people who were fleeing from terrorism or the military in the countryside. The particulars of the film, of the boy who flees the countryside, are a story that had happened, that I had been told, and I used this story of one family that lived through this disgraceful period, and whose story is narrated in the film.

DEL PINO: The film was released here in Ayacucho.

ORTEGA: In Ayacucho, it was in theatres for a long time, for close to two months during its first run, then two months of rerelease and then another month again of rerelease, a very long spell. And it also showed in Abancay, Andahuaylas, Cusco, Huancayo, Puno, Juliaca, and Huancavelica. The reaction of the audience was similar to that in Ayacucho. It seemed these places had lived through the same problems as the boy in the film. There was a tremendous amount of identification.

DEL PINO: How old is the boy?

ORTEGA: Nine years old: Cirilo.

DEL PINO: Is it a film that narrates his life as a child, or is it about a boy becoming an adult?

ORTEGA: No, he remains a child. The story covers approximately two months.

DEL PINO: When was the premiere?

ORTEGA: We started working in early 1993, writing the story, preparing the actors, obtaining necessities, and in late 1993 we started filming. The shoot lasted for a year. The premiere was in 1995 or 1996.

DEL PINO: And in Ayacucho, what was the reception like?

ORTEGA: It was unbelievable! It was quite surprising for me because I had initially planned to have just one showing. I wanted the theatre to be full, and I was content with one screening because I cared more about showing this story than turning a profit. It was extended for two months of screenings in Ayacucho. It was something incredible. The theatre was completely full. In this regard, I did not have the mind of a producer. What a producer does is get money, make money, and earn money. What I wanted to do was show the film, and in that I succeeded. The ticket price for the theatre was two soles, which is nothing. But for me it was something encouraging. It allowed me to continue pursuing this occupation. Had it gone otherwise, I would have abandoned filmmaking and devoted myself to anthropology.

DEL PINO: I don't know if you paid attention to people's comments; what were they saying about the film?

ORTEGA: Oh, there's so many anecdotes about this. It became kind of mandatory in Ayacucho to see this film. Come the weekend—the film was shown only during the weekend[s], Saturdays and Sundays, with two screenings each day—the town square would resemble a fair with all the people lining up to see the film. It was shown in the municipal cinema, a venue with about four hundred seats. But the people in the queues exceeded that number. So you can see just what a phenomenon it was to show this first Ayacuchan film.

DEL PINO: How did you get the word out? How did people hear about you, this being your first film?

ORTEGA: For the first screening, we used a bit of marketing—radio ads and local television, Channel 7. It was the only channel in Ayacucho and everyone watched it, especially the news. We ran our ad on these media and tried to attract people with the novelty, the fact that this was the first Ayacuchan film. In

the wake of the political violence, there was nothing to do in Ayacucho; there was no entertainment, there were no parties, there were no nightclubs. Basically, it was almost a ghost town. From seven o'clock in the evening, people were in their homes. But surely it was the novelty of wanting to see this film from Ayacucho, filmed in Ayacucho and by people from Ayacucho, that brought them to the screenings.

DEL PINO: Tell us about the experience of making this film, as you were doing it here, with limited resources. What were the greatest hurdles?

ORTEGA: The whole film was shot with just one camera, except for the action scenes. In fact, we encountered difficulties. I was conscious from the beginning of not having a budget that was underwritten by a sponsoring company. The challenge was rooted, essentially, in not having any money we could count on. Because of this, the project was delayed for about fourteen months. Moreover, there was the difficulty of not having the support of the people who are responsible for fostering this kind of cultural activity in Ayacucho, such as the municipality. Despite the fact that we were constantly sending them documents letting them know what we were doing, asking them for a little help—like with fuel or a vehicle for our transportation—we never received any reply. They aren't obliged to support us, but they do have a commitment to society to foster culture; yet, they did not do this. But, we were able to overcome these financial problems through perseverance, not only on my part, but also that of the actors who were fundamental to this project. They did not collect a single cent of salary, except for one actor.

DEL PINO: How did you recruit your actors?

ORTEGA: All of this was new for Ayacucho. I didn't know people working in theatre; I didn't have friends who had a passion for acting. So, I made some radio announcements and [got] some posters posted around the city. This worked well: close to four hundred people appeared for the casting auditions that we held in Ayacucho. From this number, first close to two hundred people were selected, and finally I chose eighty actors with whom we finished the preparations and worked on the film.

DEL PINO: Tell me about the evolution of your filmmaking process. I was told there have been seven feature-length films, the first two being *God Is Late but Does Not Forget I* and *II*.

ORTEGA: There have been three stages to my career. I'll explain various aspects of the first stage. Above all, at this stage there was the issue of technique and of my evolution as a professional in this field. This first phase of my career begins with *God Is Late but Does Not Forget* and culminates with the final film of the *God Is Late* trilogy, called *Innocent Blood*, a film that does address directly the theme of political violence. By the end of this phase, I had improved my abilities; I took advantage of the digital technology that came to Peru in 2000. I began a new stage in my career, adopting digital technology as my principal tool. Before this, I worked with analog formats, with almost amateurish parts or cameras—with Super VHS cameras—which were not the standard format, not even for television reports. It was a format more like that for home video use, but of a better quality. I made do with this format out of necessity because I didn't have access to the resources needed to obtain a higher quality format. The second phase marks my transition to digital cinema. This new tool came not only to Peru, but also started being used throughout Latin America and globally. I made two feature-length films using this digital technology, also with actors from Ayacucho. I'm referring to *Incest in the Andes* and *The Curse of the Qarqachas I and II*, which is a theme taken from Andean mythology. And the third and, I believe, final phase is to venture into producing films specifically for cinema with a digital toolkit and with actors who already have experience in national and Latin American films, beginning with *The Innocents' Corner*. I have had two more productions since *Sin* and *God Forgives Sin, Not Incest*, which became the *Qarqachas* trilogy. But I had a new perspective, with a new technical approach and a new acting approach, with the elements that film production requires. These are aspects of technique, of acting, of storytelling.

DEL PINO: In terms of the technology you've used, you see three moments in your evolution. But in terms of the subject matter you explore, is there likewise an evolution or change?

ORTEGA: I am passionate about dealing with subjects related to sociopolitical violence, out of a moral obligation to tell stories not created in my head, but by reality. I've lived though it in Ayacucho. Living in Huamanga [the city of Ayacucho], I was affected by seeing up close the magnitude of this vortex. I am a witness, and moreover, a victim of both sides: Shining Path and the military have each caused me significant harm. If you want me to tell you the details,

Shining Path sent me a letter threatening me with death because I was a leader in a certain [political] party that operated in Ayacucho, the leader of a youth wing.

DEL PINO: Of the Aprista youth?

ORTEGA: Well, yes. I didn't want to say which party, but yes, of the JAP [Juventud Aprista Peruana, Peruvian Aprista Youth]. So they [Shining Path] sent me a letter in which they also included some other names of certain leaders of APRA [Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana]. By my good fortune, I was still young, this alarmed my parents, and the next day they sent me to Lima.

DEL PINO: When did that happen?

ORTEGA: That was in 1986. They sent me to Lima immediately. They protected me, is what they did. I didn't agree with my parents' decision because I was young; I was a rebel; I was also a fighter for my Aprista [the APRA political party] cause.

DEL PINO: That was at the beginning of the [first] Alan García government [1985–1990]?

ORTEGA: Precisely. I didn't want to disconnect myself from that cause here in Ayacucho, but my family's pressure was more powerful. And so I went; they took me to Lima. And the next day, we learned from the news that they had killed this person, that person, people who were on the list that Shining Path had drawn up that I was also on. Well, I returned for a visit after a year or two. It was at that point that Shining Path planted dynamite in my house. I am also a victim of the armed forces. They got into my house on two occasions. The first time, they took everything, and the second time, they raided the house and took my father away. They disappeared him. But God is great and this disappearance lasted only one night.

DEL PINO: This was before Shining Path's assault?

ORTEGA: It was after. The third thing that happened to me was at the hands of the military: they took me to the Casa Rosada. There I was tortured, beaten, like everyone who entered the Casa Rosada. I was absolutely innocent. But as all people from Ayacucho were suspected of being Shining Path or terrorists, to them I was also suspect.

DEL PINO: That was toward the end of the 1980s?

ORTEGA: That was in 1988 or 1987, I think.

DEL PINO: So this experience, as with many people from Ayacucho, shapes your output, which in your own case is cinematographic?

ORTEGA: Even if one has not lived through these difficult experiences, the simple fact of being from Ayacucho gives one the ability to tell stories in a different way: real, you see, because it's been lived. We are the only ones who know what really happened in Ayacucho: what degree of responsibility lies with Shining Path and what degree of responsibility lies with the military. But furthermore, having lived this experience so closely myself, I think it gives me the power to tell these stories as they were. It is my duty. My conscience compels me to tell these stories without manipulation, without machination, without elaboration: this is the history that happened in Ayacucho.

DEL PINO: Perhaps it is both—of living in Ayacucho and of having experienced the violence—that gives you this moral mandate to say something about what transpired. And the result is desire to represent this experience through film.

ORTEGA: Well, initially I didn't know that this was going to happen in Ayacucho.

DEL PINO: Of course.

ORTEGA: I have always been drawn to the camera. I never imagined that the coming years would bring what they did to Ayacucho. I think that is one facet. It's a good subject for a film, right? Thank God, I say, for having lived through that phase so as to be able to tell stories in a real way. But I am grateful for what I have witnessed. It sets me apart from other productions made in Peru, like those of Pancho [Francisco] Lombardi, Fabricio Aguilar, or Mariane Eyde; I am sure that they have based their scripts on bibliographies, from newspapers, drawing on information from books. Not me. I don't need to read books. Of course, I do read books, but for me it was enough to have seen, for me it is enough that my neighbors and my friends tell me their stories. Each neighbor has his or her own story. Each friend has their own story. And so even fictionalized, even as a story I'm creating in my mind, the stories that I can create are very close to the reality.

DEL PINO: Seeing as you have your own experience and every experience is unique, in developing a script, how do you negotiate among these distinct experiences and different perspectives to form a fictionalized account?

ORTEGA: It's somewhat complex. Film is purely artistic. In my case I prefer that my films be more historical. I try to represent things as they were, right? And sometimes I get outside the boundaries of storytelling in the scenarios in a



FIGURE 6.1. Palito Ortega filming *La casa rosada* (*The Pink House*; 2013) on set in Ayacucho. Photograph reproduced with permission from Palito Ortega.

script. And I have trouble; many friends who are screenwriters tell me, “No, try to make it this way, create it that way.” That would mean getting rid of some of the elements that belong to real life. And so I’ve broken away from that rubric, from the question of a cinematographic script. In any case, I want to make mine more historical. I always say that my movies help serve as documents on film, so that later it will be said, “That’s the way the violence was.” Because of this, I try as much as possible not to embellish.

DEL PINO: This explains why, and I’m thinking now particularly of the film *The Innocents’ Corner*, one of the greatest achievements of your oeuvre is to show daily life, what it meant to live the years of violence in this city. One can feel that atmosphere of what it was to live through the dark nights (without electricity), with the assassinations, the sleeplessness, the gunfire in the night, the explosions, and the insecurity to which one was exposed.

ORTEGA: That is what you will not find in books, never in the writings of the “Senderologists” [experts dedicated to the study of Shining Path]. You will only hear that [the experience of the violence] from the people who have lived through it, right? I’ve lived that, and I put part of that life that I had into my

films. For instance, the fact that when there is gunfire, one automatically, instinctively, gets under the table. That was an everyday thing, part of daily life. I remember that one Christmas, we were on the second floor of my house, in the dining room. We were having some chocolate with *panetón* [sweet Christmas bread], nothing else, there were no *cohetecillos* [Christmas noisemakers] because they weren't permitted. Only a few little candles. And suddenly we heard the bombs, the explosions, and what we did was grab our cups and take our *panetón* under the table. Lying or sitting, we had it there. We had already become accustomed. We no longer reacted [by thinking about it].

DEL PINO: Right, I believe that's a scene that really caught my attention in the film's first moments. Now I understand you better when you say that more than a fictionalization, you aim to make of your film a historical document. This explains overtly showing the brutality of the aggression that the inhabitants suffer at the hands of the military and through the Shining Path's crimes, or not?

ORTEGA: In a sense, I try to delimit that rawness that was suddenly there. Because one way or another what I do is film, right? In order to maintain a tolerable balance, in order to keep the viewer from falling into morbidity, I've often felt obliged, against my own wishes, to cut out certain things that have been told to me. For example, I have been told that in the Casa Rosada, women were tortured with live rats that were put into their vaginas. This, for instance, could never work. It's too much. There are films that have been made outside Peru with subject matter that also included a lot of violence with quite forceful depictions. But I didn't want to go to that extreme.

DEL PINO: So, then, there is a moral dimension to the limits of your telling or not telling of certain stories. What are the parameters for you? What are the principles that keep you from displaying that morbidity in your portrayal of violence?

ORTEGA: Every film is subject to criticism. And the critics would be harsh, they would be cruel if I had included elements of that sort. Additionally, so as to keep from becoming grotesque, and thereby breaking the film's dramatic power, it is not possible to show cases like the one I told you about. I also do it as a matter of personal morality. I was brought up in a Catholic family that believes in God, and from a certain point of view, such things would not be appropriate in a film.



FIGURE 6.2. Publicity for *El rincón de los inocentes* (*The Innocents' Corner*; 2005). Reproduced with permission from Palito Ortega.

DEL PINO: When I watch the film, it deals extensively with military repression. But there is something more than simply military repression. Isn't it a repression not just of a potentially insurgent population, but rather of the inhabitants of Ayacucho, of the highlanders, who are seen as less human than the soldiers?

ORTEGA: [It is] racism.

DEL PINO: I don't know whether you've considered [racism] as a topic?

ORTEGA: There is a certain degree of racism on the part of the soldiers, isn't there, of seeing someone from the provinces as a "little Indian," in quotation marks, of course. This has contributed to making the savageries that they committed more flagrant, because if the violence had begun somewhere other than Ayacucho, say in Lima, I don't believe that the brutality that was employed here would have been used in Lima. But also, to see a person of humble origin, dressed differently from how they dress in the city, a person who doesn't know how to communicate with soldiers because he or she speaks Quechua, a person who conveys a physical impression of humility; I believe that they [the armed forces] took advantage of that aspect as well. There has been a pronounced degree of racism in this counterinsurgency struggle.

DEL PINO: A third element of *The Innocents' Corner* that strikes me as interesting is the question of who has the right to represent this past, a subject that

is brought to the fore in a notable way in two instances in the film. On the one hand, there is the presence of the journalists coming from Lima in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's [CVR] work, looking for "news," the most dramatic story. And the narrator, the boy who grew up in it [the city of Ayacucho], realizes at one point that these guys simply do not or cannot understand what he is trying to tell them, what he has lived through. The other instance is the confrontation with the CVR's legitimacy in seeking to represent the past. The film not only suggests that outsiders are unable to narrate the violence, but also questions how they can even come to understand what people here have lived through.

ORTEGA: A boy who had a difficult time: he lost his parents; he fled; then he returns as a grown man to give his testimony. The controversy around the CVR is that for many people in Ayacucho, the testimonies were manipulated. In this case, the young man in the story lets himself be manipulated a little. He realizes that this is not a group of journalists working for a television station, but rather that they work for the CVR, which had a press and communications department. I have producer friends who have worked for the CVR doing this kind of work. That's where the idea comes from, this part of the truth commission's work that certainly displeased so very many people. So this youth's rejection of it in removing the tape and throwing it into the river is an absolute need that he feels. Countless people disagree with the truth commission's process. In the scene at the CVR's public hearing [*audiencia pública*], the now grown boy airs his point of view, showing what the truth commissioners who didn't know Quechua are made of, and rejects their outlook. And this very point has been widely debated in Ayacucho. What use is a commissioner who, with the exception of one or two [words], doesn't understand Quechua? It was necessary for these people [to] be well-informed about each testimony so that they could fully understand the suffering of that person, of the family, of that victim. And this is certainly a great metaphor and, as I said before, a collective need of Ayacuchan society.

DEL PINO: This is ultimately a metaphor for the nation's botched encounter.

ORTEGA: Above all in Ayacucho. I've heard these kinds of comments in Ayacucho. In Lima, I had a lot of friends who worked for the CVR, but they never said anything like that to me. Here, yes, and not only from people who had participated directly by giving their testimony or from their families; rather,

the people as a whole disagreed with certain things. I felt a moral obligation in the film to represent these objections, though of course to a lesser degree. This certainly isn't an indictment of the CVR; it's only intended to tell them that they were wrong on these points. Because surely the work of the CVR is an abysmal assignment, it's an enormous job that deserves our respect, and one ought to keep in mind certain figures like Salomón Lerner, who has considerable integrity by all accounts.

DEL PINO: In any case, I really liked that metaphor of this disjuncture in the country. On the other hand, it calls into question the legitimacy of representing that past. To what degree can people who are not part of this experience or have not lived through it represent that experience? Is there a moral imperative concerning the legitimacy of representation?

ORTEGA: It's a twofold grievance: the first is to have lost someone close to you; the second is that here comes a person—this has occurred to me—a stranger to the violence, drawing a fantastic salary, who is thus living off the suffering of these people, profiting from the pain of others. That has been said. It's not a point of view that I defend. I am a communicator, and I have a duty to convey that with which a community, a society as a whole, takes issue. In fact, we do agree, don't we?

DEL PINO: Although the film is very critical of Cipriani [bishop of Ayacucho, 1988–1997] and of the role of the Church, we don't see the face of civilian authority, even though the repression in fact took place under two civilian governments in the 1980s.

ORTEGA: In that respect, the authorities in Ayacucho were practically inhuman. Essentially, no authorities existed, and if they did, where were they? That's why these authorities are absent figures. And when they are represented, as with the judge, it is to demonstrate their indifference to what the people are suffering. At the beginning of the film we do make a reference to the governments of Alan García and Belaúnde; the worst phases of the political violence happened during the years of the Fernando Belaúnde and Alan García governments.

DEL PINO: Moving on to speak about the art itself of representing this experience—you started with *God Is Late*, which is the story of a boy, and in *The Innocents' Corner* the protagonist is also a boy. Is there something particular about the presence of a child in the scripts you develop?

ORTEGA: Now that you mention it, I confess it was done unconsciously. Perhaps the gaze of a child is my perspective because I lived through these experiences at an early age, and I identify with these boys. In addition to the age, there is a special perspective, a dramatic power, held by a child as a sublime being in society. I believe a child can easily captivate hearts, easily deliver the message that needs to be conveyed. And the message is this: know that this happened in Ayacucho. This is addressed to everybody, so that the magnitude of this violence can be truly understood.

DEL PINO: The boy, then, embodies innocence and vulnerability in the face of what society was exposed to. Thinking about your audience, are you contemplating a more universal public, or a more local one, and how might this have changed between your first film and *The Innocents' Corner*?

ORTEGA: This has also been part of the evolution I've undergone. When I started writing the first film, I began without a particular audience in mind. As I went forward with my career, I became a producer as well, out of a need to recoup and earn money from my productions. And these days, all the more so. It's certainly a matter of thinking of a general audience. I don't want this film to be wasted only on adults' eyes, or on those of children alone. I want it to be a film that will be watched by entire families, I want mom and dad and child to go to the theatre and to discuss it. That's my intention.

DEL PINO: When you speak of this family, you mean a family in Ayacucho, or . . . ?

ORTEGA: *The Innocents' Corner* is a project with international ambitions, and because of this we worked with all the elements that such a production demands in both dramatic and technical terms. We made this film to be shown globally. As a result, we set high standards for ourselves on every aspect.

DEL PINO: How did people react to the film? How did they receive it?

ORTEGA: Well, the film still hasn't been released on a commercial level, not even in Ayacucho. A preview was held in Ayacucho, a long preview that lasted almost two months. More out of financial necessity than anything, to recoup the costs we'd incurred. Besides bringing in some resources, it allowed me to observe, to see the film's potential, because the people who came to see the film weren't only from Ayacucho, but from all over. We lucked out in that during the preview run there were a lot of tourists in Ayacucho. There was complete

consensus, among those from Lima and abroad as much as among those from Ayacucho, in saying that the film was very good. Good on several counts, as a story, as a historical narrative; ultimately, this gives me some sway to get a good release, not only in Ayacucho, but nationally and internationally too.

DEL PINO: Among the people from Ayacucho, did you pick up on any common reactions to the film? Could we speak of a pattern in their reactions?

ORTEGA: Certainly. The Ayacuchan audience was definitely capable of embodying the film's pain: it belongs to them. This is our story, part of our lives. Although it might sound like masochism, many people, above all those from Ayacucho, have seen the film two, three times, and the reaction is the same whether for the first or third time: remembering, suffering, crying, achieving catharsis through the film. This reaction, then, according to what many have said, is an opening of their wounds. These wounds will always remain, scarred and dormant, in the mind of each inhabitant of the region. I believe that's the aim of this film, to say that this is not forgotten, so that remembrance continues, so that wounds continue to be opened if possible, right? To speak about it so that it may never be repeated. It sounds trite to say it, but that's how it is. So the profile of this film among the people of Ayacucho is extremely important. People plead with me in Ayacucho: we want to see the film again; we want it screened again; my dad hasn't seen it; my aunt hasn't seen it. We want to convert the film to video because people are asking me for it in this or that place. This makes me think that there a need, of wanting to remember this history, not so much to see a story on film or to see a cinematographic production, because if they just wanted to see a film, there are so many films out there, but they want to see, essentially, the story that's told in *The Innocents' Corner*.

DEL PINO: In my view, this is the root of your film's success, that it causes people to remember the past, to relive the experience, and to come to recognize themselves in the film.

ORTEGA: Precisely.

DEL PINO: So people see themselves not just as spectators, but rather as protagonists who make up part of this story.

ORTEGA: Precisely because the Ayacuchan is the film's protagonist, an Ayacuchan viewer feels it, lives it, becomes the one who is going through the harshness of the story, right? He is the father; he is the person who was kidnapped by

the military; mothers are the mothers who are fighting to see their husbands in jail. The [Ayacuchan audience] identify fully with each of these situations, with each of the characters who are struggling for a common end, which is to survive this conflict.

DEL PINO: I remember the film well, and toward the end, when the boy finds himself with a mother who is looking for her son, there is a turning point vis-à-vis the past. It comes when the woman is no longer daunted by the soldiers' repressive power and talks back to them with spirit, with insults. It's a remarkable passage, a kind of symbolic and emotional triumph over fear. The prevailing order is subverted and the woman asserts herself with dignity.

ORTEGA: With courage.

DEL PINO: It's the moment when people get a release through laughter, when the woman insults the soldiers. It's a celebratory empathy of the audience with the woman's feat.

ORTEGA: It is a celebratory identification; it is to identify oneself with that human drive, survival.

DEL PINO: From my reading of it, I see in this film more than an attempt to represent the violence that tries to depict a particular experience. When I see how people recognize themselves in this story, in the experience of repression and humiliation that plays out, you truly capture people's sensibilities. And because of this, they end up identifying with the film; you make them relive that story as its protagonists. At that level, your art has a cultural and political agenda; it is itself a cultural production. It's an agenda that one can disagree with in terms of its approach, its themes, but what cannot be denied is the way that people recognize themselves in it. I believe this is an achievement. But also, with this film, you offer a distinct version of what took place, and in this way, it's a work that overlaps with the work of the CVR.

ORTEGA: It comes after. Much later.

DEL PINO: You are trying to tell a story that differs from that told by the CVR. That is some part of the motivation, isn't it?

ORTEGA: No. I don't have a bone to pick with the CVR. That was never my intention. It was to convey a body of thought from my people, from Ayacucho. On some points, I was in agreement, for instance in how the people were mocked,

on top of the pain they felt over losing someone, by having people with egregious salaries come and do things that didn't meet the expectations of so many people.

DEL PINO: In a way, you aim to tell an alternative history?

ORTEGA: Yes.

DEL PINO: In that sense, it's not a bad thing that there are different modes for representing—or for legitimizing a representation of—that past.

ORTEGA: Well, definitely compared to other productions, the film is absolutely alternative, because its perspective is different from what has already been done. It's a perspective that's all at once more convincing, more real, closer to the history—I'm talking about history as fact.

DEL PINO: Even though your film is meant for any audience, I get the feeling from you that at root you remain—in a positive sense—with the audience of Ayacucho.

ORTEGA: In some way that's there, though perhaps not at a conscious level.

DEL PINO: Concerning your evolution, first came *God Is Late but Does Not Forget*, where the subject of the violence is present, but isn't the central theme. Yet, you told me that in that trilogy the topic of the violence is indeed addressed directly. How different is that first trilogy from *The Innocents' Corner*?

ORTEGA: They're two distinct visions. One is a story from the rural perspective in which a family is both violated by soldiers and subjected to the Shining Path; a family of humble origin. In the second case, in *The Innocents' Corner*, it is an urban family in Huamanga.

DEL PINO: In the second stage of your career, *Incest in the Andes* and *The Curse of the Qarqachas* deal with subject matter that turns away from the theme of the conflict.

ORTEGA: Completely, though they nevertheless occasionally invoke the history and atmosphere of terrorism. In *The Curse of the Qarqachas II*, two guys appear in a community. And from the point of their arrival, people start dying. What happens is the *Qarqacha* had followed these two guys. Then the inhabitants assume these two are causing the deaths, that they're terrorists. And so the people say they are terrorists and they are killing people. Thus, in every way we connect to the atmosphere of the [years of] violence.

DEL PINO: Speaking of people's reactions, of your films' reception, have you

seen a difference between the reception given to more social topics that give accounts of the violence like *The Innocents' Corner* and people's reception of, for example, *The Curse of the Qarqachas*? I don't know if you've noted any difference in people's reactions?

ORTEGA: Yes. There are two things. The films on social matters, on terrorism, definitely have an audience distinct from the audience [that saw] *Qarqacha*. I've noticed that the social-interest films are seen by city folk. I see teachers, professors, judges, educated people. But *Qarqacha* has a reliable audience in the periphery, primarily in peasant communities. The numbers are almost the same. The difference is in the type of viewer.

DEL PINO: It's interesting to hear that the subject of the [years of] violence has been more captivating for an urban audience. Is this because the film takes place in an urban setting, or because people in the countryside don't want to remember and to see it again in film, or how do you understand this difference? Given that people in the countryside lived through similar or sometimes even worse repression, why didn't they go see the film?

ORTEGA: I suspect it was an issue of publicity. That could have been part of it. With *Qarqacha*, we directed the film more toward the countryside, with actors who spoke with more traces of the rural accent, and we advertised it that way. For rural people, between *Qarqacha* and *The Innocents' Corner*, *Qarqacha*'s the obvious choice. It's a topic that relates to their lives. That enables a direct communication.

In my films, there are common elements that let you recognize that this is a film by Palito Ortega; I try to use regional music, music from the religious culture of Ayacucho, which is often unreleased, but which we fuse with Western [broadly popular] elements to make it more accessible in the films.

DEL PINO: Does the music also convey something about the experience of the violence?

ORTEGA: Music is an extremely important element in these stories . . . it's a central aspect. Without music the film would have had maybe 70 percent of its capacity to make the story seen or believed.

DEL PINO: So the fidelity of the story, conveyed through the use of the boy, also works in tandem with the music?

ORTEGA: The aural elements, for example the gunfire, the bombs, all these things make of the film a cohesive whole.

DEL PINO: How do you create those sounds, considering the technological limitations of our region?

ORTEGA: There are now no limitations, starting with *The Innocents' Corner* project, which saw a great input of money. The limitations have been left behind, though at any rate there is a limit because we can't compete with people who have enormous millions of dollars of financing.

Notes

1. Interview October 6, 2008, Ayacucho. Original transcripts provided by Ponciano del Pino. Translation by Katherine Saunders-Hastings and Cynthia E. Milton.

2. The mythical figures of Pishtaco and Qarqacha (or Jarjacha in Ortega's films) are Andean mythological figures that may serve as metaphors for the violence in Ayacucho. Pishtaco (Nakaq in Quechua) is a being suspected of extracting and trafficking in human fat. Qarqacha is an incestuous human being who transforms into an animal at night. See Degregori, "Entre los fuegos de Sendero y el Ejército" and Weismantel, *Cholas and Pishtacos*.

