

a film by
SALOMÉ LAMAS

ELDORADO XXI











On Salomé Lamas's ELDORADO XXI

Lawrence Weschler

At 5100 meters (16,700 ft.), the sprawling Andean goldmining encampment at La Rinconada, in the southeastern corner of Peru, just shy of the Bolivian border, is quite simply the highest-elevation permanent human settlement in the world, encompassing a population of close to 30,000 souls, the vast majority of them desperately poor. The principal enterprise there is overseen by the Corporacion Ananea, but, as William Finnegan pointed out in a recent piece in the *New Yorker* ("Tears of the Sun: The Gold Rush at the Top of the World," April 20, 2015), "Nearly all the mines and miners there are 'informal,' a term that critics consider a euphemism for illegal. [Others] prefer the term 'artisanal.' The mines, whatever you call them, are small, numerous, unregulated, and, as a rule, grossly unsafe. Most don't pay salaries, let alone benefits, but run on an ancient labor system called *cachorro*. This system is usually described as thirty days of unpaid work followed by a single frantic day in which workers get to keep whatever gold they can haul out for themselves."

Not surprising, then, that such an extreme locale might draw the attention of the precociously accomplished young Portuguese filmmaker Salomé Lamas (still in her twenties though already the veteran of cinematic projects ranging from the Azores to the Netherlands to Moldovan Transnistria and focusing on everything from the confessions of former French Foreign Legionnaires and Portuguese colonial mercenaries to the midnight exertions of North Sea fishermen and the borderland perambulations of Post-Soviet nowheremen) – but aye, the terrible splendors, by turns devastating and grace-flecked, that she has managed to haul back from her time up there.

Lamas's *ELDORADO XXI* launches out with a series of sublimely still images, mountain lakes and sheerscapes, like nothing so much as the magisterial photographs of Ansel Adams, except that in this instance black and white are the actual colors and, wait, those scraggly grass tufts over there in the corner turn out to be shivering in the wind, a bird suddenly floats by, and all that scabbly scree isn't a mountain face at all but rather an entire town, barely clinging to the cliff-face.

Shortly after the credits, the biggest marvel of all: another long take (long and then longer and then longer still) – one is put in mind of those amazing careering single-takes at the outsets of Scorsese's movies

or the endlessly roving vantage in Sokurov's Russian Ark, except that in this instance (an audacious Copernican flip!) the camera doesn't move at all, peering down instead from on high as Lamas holds her unblinking gaze for close to an hour, while dozens and then hundreds (and presently thousands?) of miners, groaning under the weight of their burdens, trudge by in squeezed files, some heading up and others down the narrow pitched mountain path, the scene starting out in thin crepuscule but persisting into pitch black (by the end all we see are the criss-crossing beams of the workers' hardhat headlamps), the soundtrack consisting of the crunch of their boots played off against stray wisps of audio testimony and wafting passages of radio banter. A human antfile. A Dantesque Escherscape: Möbian Sisyphi.

An hour in, Lamas finally blinks, and what follows is a veritable avalanche of sense impressions, one haunting and haunted setpiece after the next. Tin shacks scattered about a high desert plateau. The wind. Snug inside one of those shacks, a huddle of weathered women, bundled against the cold, sifting and sorting coca leaves, stuffing the occasional wad into their cheeks as they trade gossip and often surprisingly sophisticated political analyses (one of the women weaves in the insights of the economist Hernando de Soto) laced between considerations as to the relative beneficences of coca chew and tobacco toke. A lone truck lumbering up a stark barren switchback. In the distance, silhouetted against a precipice of scree, a few individuals braving the blowing snow, hunched deep, scrabbling, clanking, chipping at the rocks, leaning in, tossing most of the shards aside, stuffing the occasional promising chunk into ever more bulging bags and then heaving their tentative hordes back up the crumbling screeface. (It occurs to us that in much the way they are sifting for ore, Lamas is panning for souls, the main difference between them being the veritable bonanza of her takings compared with the pathetic paucity of theirs.)

Later on: an organizing meeting on an exposed windswept plateau. And then a different lone truck comes wending down the steep mountain track, its back filled with miners already celebrating the end of their grueling day: a bit after that, we meet up with the same guys once again, though now they are grotesquely masked and prodigiously caped, dancing up a storm around a spitting bonfire: Goya incongruously set to the frantic pulse of the latest in electropop.

Elsewhere, earnest rituals imploring the protection of various patron saints.

Or nighttime alleys, with drunks tumbling out of shanty bars. Or a little boy scrunched alone in his little shed, gazing intent, palming of all things a remote control unit (could it be that he is playing video games?), after which we get to see him one last time as he simply stares out at us, his gaze mute, shy, inheld, penetrating, perfect: and then the thing he goes and does!

The hush, in short, of witness. Toward the end of it all, Lamas's visit opens out onto a daytime procession of some sort, a religious festival, and amidst the clanging and the toots, the banging and the shouts, the shuffle and gavotte, the sway and dip, the soar and smiles — two hours in and somehow, thanks to Lamas's intrepid wizardry, the feeling rises and we know, we just know that we have been someplace!

Someplace we will in fact likely never go, though on second thought, as we emerge from the trance in which Lamas has had us entrapped all this time, and gaze, say, down upon the rings on our fingers or the baubles hanging from our ears or necks, a place whose sordid travails actually implicate us all, and profoundly so. And what are we to make of that?

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