

Film Review

- *Chatdye Tsimane* [*Pariente Chimán*], directed by Chimán community of Maraca'tunsi and Manuel Seoane, Bolivia, 2022

It is rare to watch an 86-minute documentary made by children, and their vitality is precisely the pulsating force of *Chatdye Tsimane*. In 2019, photojournalist Manuel Seoane journeyed to the Indigenous community of Maraca'tunsi, in the Bolivian Amazon, intending to document land-based conflicts and the displacement that the local Chimán people experienced.¹ To make their history more visible, the Chimanes invited Seoane to return to the community and record their lives more extensively. Seoane's original idea was to publish a photo book, but they preferred to make a film. Eventually, a collaborative documentary project was decided to combine children's recordings and Manuel's audiovisual work. By exploring how each perspective depicts a particular reality, *Chatdye Tsimane* is a play of mirrors between Seoane's views and those of the kids.²

At school, the photographer portrays the children sitting silently in front of a computer watching an amorphous doll screaming numbers. Previously, the teacher was a Chimán who taught them the curriculum through songs; now, they are only taught in Spanish. The school as a space of oppression is even more striking when compared to the capacity for creation shown by the young filmmakers. The soundscape is filled with the breathing and laughter of the little Chimán directors. Since they were not taught how to film, the camera becomes an extension of their bodily movements portraying a sovereign world with courage and joy. The children's happiness seems inseparable from their knowledge and experience of the territory. They present the viewer with the gift of entering their homes, the art of family hunting, the abundance of the forest, and their interactions with a multiplicity of beings. The big screen is filled with playful jumps into streams. While they show their feet walking trails, their whispers reveal the living dynamics of the rainforest. Animals, plants, and lively bodies are captured with intimate depth. They are not afraid to grab insects that the audience can now see in colossal forms. The footage captured by them shows how their joyfulness creates an archive of images that

expresses a particular worth of being: they are the owners and producers of their lives. According to Bataille (2015), this kind of sovereignty – present in joy, laughter and games – is related to a poetic dimension available to us all. In this experiential field, humans are not forced to be valued in terms of work and capital production ideals.³

All of this stands in sharp contrast to Bolivia's dominant visual culture portraying the Amazon as a region in need of civilization, manifested through discourses of land productivity and commodity export.⁴ The Bolivian Amazonia is constantly depicted as an empty and underdeveloped region that could improve the country's economy through projects based on destruction. Amazonia is often seen through hegemonic imaginaries of industry and progress, not through people's histories and knowledge. Surely, *Chatdyé Tsimane* contrasts these representations.

When Seoane is filming, memories and current modes of colonization that have been configuring Maraca'tunsi come to light. Here, the excess of information is overwhelming. The images are engulfed by a tsunami of stories that are difficult to digest. Seoane's journalistic approach aims to offer a 'comprehensive' portrayal wherein the narrative operates as a catalogue of violent actions perpetrated by the presence of oil explorations, church activities, logging companies, and the relationship with the Bolivian state – unfortunately, Seoane's making them shallow enunciations.

With his lens, drunken Chimán people in festivities are recorded, and identity cards of the adults participating in the film are explicitly shown at the end. One may raise ethical concerns when such a level of intimacy is displayed publicly. As Taussig (2021) mentions, some images contribute to the continuities of ambivalent colonial stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as both superhuman and subhuman, the strong worker and the lazy one, a wise person and, at the same time, the drunk.⁵ Furthermore, the film painfully neglects the role of women in the exploration of Chimán memory. All of this prompts an ongoing invitation for discussion on how investigative and representational work is conducted in territories affected by colonial dispossession.⁶

However, towards the end of the film, Seoane registers one of the most beautiful and fascinating scenes. Casimiro, a Maraca'tunsi healer and musician, is playing his flute and stops because a chirping bird is getting close to him. The bird seems to communicate with Casimiro's music, and, perhaps, it truly is. While laughing, Casimiro says "*está cantando ese pájaro*". This scene is aligned with the instances filmed by children, where existential worth is inseparable from being with a place and learning how to get to experience and know it. Their joy unites what seems to be separated, i.e. the human, the land and the multiple beings that are part of it. This film is an archive of this understanding, engendered by the lives and laughter of the youngest members of Maraca'tunsi. To undo the relentless decline of the rainforest,⁷ children may be urging us to master their art of vitality.

Notes

- 1 See The Chimanes of Maraca'tunsi, after their stolen Sacred Hill, written by Karen Gil (2019). The project was funded by the Rainforest Journalism Fund and the Pulitzer Center. Available at: <https://pulitzercenter.org/es/stories/los-chimanes-de-maracatunsi-tras-su-loma-santa-arrebatada>.
- 2 This documentary was made possible with the support of the National Geographic Explorers program and was filmed and edited collectively. The film has been screened multiple times in Bolivia and at international film festivals.
- 3 Bataille, G. (2015). *¿Estamos aquí para jugar o para ser serios?* In *La felicidad, el erotismo y la literatura: ensayos 1944-1961*. CABA: AH editora.
- 4 *Naturaleza abstracta*, is a film montage conceptualized by José Orsag and edited by Manuel Seoane, explores this point. This video is part of the art exhibition "Las cosas, como antes. Imaginarios nacionales sobre la Amazonía boliviana".
- 5 Taussig, M. (2021). *Chamanismo, colonialismo y el hombre salvaje. Un estudio sobre el terror y la curación*. Bogotá: Universidad del Cauca.
- 6 It is noteworthy to emphasize that, with the support of Manuel Seoane and the production of the film, Santos Majuyete Tayo and Casimiro Canchi Tayo, both from the Tsimane community, won the Music of the East category at the 2021 Eduardo Abaroa Award, which is bestowed upon artistic expressions by the Plurinational State of Bolivia. Furthermore, various members of the community were able to obtain their identity cards for the first time during the filmmaking process.
- 7 See Amazon Rainforest Nearing Savannah "Tipping Point". Available at: <https://www.the-scientist.com/amazon-rainforest-nearing-savannah-tipping-point-69782>