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The People's War to Come

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Generations come and generations go. But somehow—by standing on the shoulders of giants—humanity advances towards something more positive. This is the hope held out by Iciar Bollain in her new film *Even the Rain (También la lluvia)*. I believe she shows how this slow march to a better world through struggle is a reality.

Even the Rain is the story of a foreign film crew in Bolivia overtaken by the revolt against the privatization of water resources in 2000. Good idea, but nothing in the situation is exceptional. After all, popular uprisings are everywhere and so are film crews. Normal that events sometimes impinge on the sensibilities of privileged outsiders. But the test is in the telling.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L266xH400/meme-la-pluie-2011-11822-1721826987-73503.jpg

Iciar Bollain, born in Madrid in 1967, is clear about where she stands. One of the first frames of her film dedicates it to Howard Zinn. We understand why as she gets into the story. But she is also indebted to—or is rather clearly influenced by—Ken Loach. Iciar Bollain was an actress before writing scripts and directing films, and she performed in Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995).

She also acted for the amazing Chus Gutiérrez (in *Sublet*, 1991). In fact, She and Gutiérrez are friends and close collaborators. Both are members of a coterie of astonishingly astute and socially critical Spanish female film directors the likes of which exists nowhere else. In brief, this politically and socially conscious young director is on the cutting edge of the New Spanish Cinema—perhaps the richest in terms of its combative creativity and productivity.

Here is the story: The film crew, under the direction of Sebastian, played by Gael Garcia Bernal—known for his portrayal of Che Guevara in both David Attwood's *Fidel* (2002) and Walter Salles' *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), and for starring in other successful films such as James Marsh's *The King* (2005) —arrives in Cochabamba. Sebastian begins casting extras for his film about the enslavement of Indians on Hispanola in 1511. The script pits Conquistador military leaders against the missionaries Bartolomé de Las Casas and Antonio de Montesinos while indigenous peoples are enslaved and exploited. Manipulation, torture, maiming and massacre are the lot of the Indians.

It was just before Christmas in 1511 that Montesinos, a Dominican friar, gave a sermon before the colonial elites in Hispanola. It was a courageous speech, regardless of the authority of the Catholic Church. Montesinos castigated his respectable congregation: "I who am a voice of Christ crying in the wilderness of this island…This voice says that you are in mortal sin, that you live and die in it, for the cruelty and tyranny you use in dealing with these innocent people. Tell me, by what right or justice do you keep these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged a detestable war against these people, who dwelt quietly and peacefully on their own land?"

Bartolomé de Las Casas was present at this astonishing act of courage, one that convinced none of the other colonists present. He then allied himself with Montesinos in a life-long effort to expose the imperialist atrocities committed in "New Spain" and to counter the emerging racialist theories that justified them.

In this way, by having the actors—acting in her film as Sebastien's actors—

recite the real words of Las Casas and Montesinos, Inciar Bollain exposes the genocidal practices accompanying the imposition of imperial control over rich lands and subjected peoples. Her film within a film thrusts us back to the beginnings of contemporary colonial depravity, and the words used to invoke it are the words of those who lived it, unchanged. There, in the still unspoiled jungle, next to a clear, placid river from whose shallow bottom the newly enslaved Indians—under threat of exemplary beatings or amputations—pluck gold nuggets for their massively armed Spanish masters, we begin to lose our historical bearings.

Or perhaps we are gaining them, for we gradually realize the connections between the experiences of indigenous people at the beginning of western and colonial and imperialist domination and the present condition of their descendants. After all, the extras playing the Indians seem to grasp immediately the sense of the lines spoken by the actors playing the roles of La Casas and Montesinos, although they say nothing. They need the two dollars per day paid by the production company. Even this is little in a country where the average worker earns 70 dollars each month, and where most must struggle to survive on far less.

It turns out that the man cast—out of the hundreds who turned out for the jobs—in the role of Hatuey, chief of the Tainos—is an important activist in the growing movement against the privatization of water resources. This man, Daniel—played by Juan Carlos Aduviri—becomes a problem because the repression of the protest movement seriously compromises the successful completion of the film.

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Daniel quickly becomes known as a charismatic leader of the revolt and the film director and his producer, Costa—played by the well-known Luis Tosar—are appalled at the danger to their film as Daniel eloquently denounces the authorities, including the Bolivian government, the multinational corporations and the International Monetary Fund. They see Daniel on television compellingly rail against the new laws enabling corporate control over water resources, laws that even prohibit capturing rainwater for personal use, or at least require a license to do so. “What will they do next,” he asks the crowd, “refuse to allow us to use the sweat from our brows, the tears from our eyes, or what we piss?”

The fears of director Sebastian and producer Costa are quickly borne out, for Daniel is badly beaten and arrested. What to do? They need him for the final climatic scene, where he, as leader of the rebellious Tainos, is strung up on a cross with twelve of his fellow Tainos, each representing one of Christ’s disciples before being burned at the stake in the best inquisitorial tradition. The only solution for Sebastian and Costa is to bribe the corrupt chief of the military police. Daniel is released into their custody, but will be arrested after the shooting of this last scene, thus leaving Daniel to his second, and real crucifixion.

In effect, the last scene is barely shot when the police arrive and arrest Daniel. But, lo and behold, the Indian extras attack, overturn the police car, subdue the forces of order and rescue Daniel. By this time, the insurrection in Cochabamba has swamped the city, now blocked to all traffic by barricaded check points and given over to raging battles within as the population mounts internal barricades to fight against the forces of an order which for them is the disorder of poverty, humiliation and destroyed lives.

And, of course, the popular uprising was successful. The Bolivian populace showed the world that collective action could overturn the corruption of politicians, the schemes of World Bank and IMF “structural adjustment” mavens, and the ruthlessness of multinational capitalist buzzards.

Let us consider that, if this event was not a real one, it might be said that the film recounts a fairy tale. But it is not the case. In all its artistry, and you must trust me as I say that Inciar Bollain is the equal of any filmmaker in what she does. This film captures every nuance of the emotions roused by participation in dramatic events. At all times, we viewers are compelled to ask ourselves how we would react in similar circumstances.

One of the ironies in all this is that the actors playing Las Casas and Montesinos, the heroes of Sebastian’s film, are the most insensitive and cowardly in the midst of the revolt and the brutal attempts to repress it. The most courageous member of the film crew turns out to be the relatively aged and somewhat cynical actor playing the role of cruel leader of the conquistadors. In the end, we are not sure to what degree the privileged film crew has made all the connections between privilege, possession, poverty and rebellion, whether in the past or in the present.

It would be a mistake to think that this “water war” is far-removed from prevailing situations in the industrialized countries—or should we say onceindustrialized countries? In certain of them, such as the United States, Australia, throughout Europe and on other continents, the excessive pumping of underground water and its chemical pollution are preparing general shortages. Adding to this is the increasingly generalized process of “fracking” for the release of natural gas out of shale strata, and it indicates that shortterm profit taking continues to override any other concern for natural resources. In Australia, for example, property owners have no right to refuse the extraction and corporate exploitation of resources from under their soil, regardless of the consequences.

Here, then, we see that the notion of the “commons” can be used for or against the collectivity. In these conditions, “water wars” such as that recently waged in Bolivia are certain to break out everywhere in the foreseeable future.

Ultimately, the kind of direct action movement leading to the victory in Cochabamba will be needed in all parts of the world. For this reason, films like Even the Rain are of vital importance. People everywhere must come to understand that what happened to the Taino Indians at the beginning of the sixteenth century is linked to the present ravages of our social tissue and our physical environment.

Post-scriptum :

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Larry Portis has just published *Qu’est-ce que le fascisme? Un phénomène social d’hier et d’aujourd’hui (What is Fascism? A Social Phenomenon Yesterday and Today)*. He can be reached at larry.portis at orange.fr

