

# Human Rights Film Festival in Guatemala Ushers In Criticism And Dialogue

*Written by Uli Stelzner, filmmaker and festival co-ordinator*

## **The Initial Spark**

In April 2010 *El Periodico*, one of the best-selling newspapers in Guatemala, surprised its readers with a photograph on its front page showing a film poster among portraits of more than 45,000 missing persons. The text on the front page read: “Bomb threat in the National Theatre did not prevent screening of film *La Isla: Archivos de una Tragedia (Island: Archive of a Tragedy)* on the means of repression by the National Police during armed conflict”.

What happened? The film *La Isla* brought to an end the 1st international film festival *Memory Truth Justice*, a festival that served a “rich local dish” of films from Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Rwanda, that dealt with the search for memory, truth and justice in post-conflict societies. *La Isla* addresses the duration and consequences of state repression from the 1960s through images completely unknown in Guatemala.

Despite the threat of a bomb, a power cut, diplomatic boycotts and the silence of the local press, over three

days 6,000 people attended the festival so that they could watch records of their recent history on the big screen. The positive reaction of the civilian population was so great that it gave the organisers the idea to re-launch the festival as an entirely independent festival of films on human rights: La Muestra, the International Film Festival of Memory, Truth, and Justice.

## **Five Years of Memory, Truth and Justice on Screens Throughout the Country**

La Muestra has taken place five times. The statistics connected with it are revealing and confirm the need for Guatemalan society to break through the silence and isolation of recent decades via film, which today is clearly the most relevant medium for explaining history. With just 105 films screened over five years, La Muestra attracted 45,000 viewers, thirty foreign guests and a hundred domestic guests, who discussed the content of the films shown.

La Muestra, characterised by a small number of films but high quality and rich filmic content and dialogue has become one of the most important public spaces for discussion in the region.

The path leading to this, however, has been long and complicated. In both war and post-war eras, Guatemalan filmmakers and the press have been concerned with murder, exile and censorship. In 1996 a peace treaty was signed, but it remained difficult to express an opinion and channels for producing and distributing films did not yet exist. A small number of enthusiastic filmmakers from Guatemala and abroad slowly began to produce films, which reflected the memory, history, raw reality and breaches of human rights. Threats and attacks still didn't cease. Soon however, in the towns and the interior, a space began to open up for a growing number of projections of mobile cinematography.

Today, La Muestra is probably one of the most innovative festivals, despite the difficulty and risk of doing this kind of work in a country that remains characterized by lenience towards criminals, violence, racism, threats, intolerance and economic disparities.

Every year the La Muestra program has a different thematic focus ("Justice in a Time of Transition", "The Country and Natural Resources", "Crisis and Migration", "Women and Memory", "Courage"). A permanent section is the "World Panorama", which covers films marked by their cinematic skills and innovative visual language. Every year, the festival sees a growth in the number and importance of the morning section "Films 15+", which is intended exclusively for high school students and their teachers. The heart of La Muestra is the section "Memory Truth Justice",

which screens classic films on human rights and memory. The most powerful section is perhaps "The Visual Memory of Guatemala". The festival screens unknown films about Guatemala—internationally produced films shot over various periods, which have never been shown in Guatemala. La Muestra looks for these films in archives all over the world and provides subtitles for them if it has the necessary funds. So far, we have succeeded in acquiring the rights to ten films and their national distribution in DVD format. These films restore and reclaim forgotten episodes of the past for the people of today, allowing festival participants to learn about the images and sounds that connect them to the past.

## Profile

### **The Program is Critical**

La Muestra is not a competition and films cannot be sent to it for selection. We do not have the capacity to accept and view hundreds of films; instead, La Muestra seeks out and selects our own films, drawing on other festivals, distributors, and information we gather ourselves. The festival is concentrated on the historical process relevant to our country, which is why its films do not have to be contemporary. In this way, we also save on funds, as films more than three, five or six years old are not as expensive to screen, and we don't have to compete with the larger festivals. We try to present all current independent documentary productions, and work by filmmakers who have their own vision. Films in the international



*One of the festival slogans, "An obstacle is an inspiration," was popular among the audience. Photo by Cecilia Cobar Falla.*

section come from all over the world and we choose themes with which our audience can identify. Our understanding of human rights is relatively broad. We don't just show films that reveal breaches in human rights but also films that open a space for new life positions that break through ideological norms and traditions, and that motivate and send signals of hope and positive belief, sometimes through music, sometimes through humour.

### **Attracting the Public with Debates and Guests**

We believe that the presentation of a film should not just function for viewers to watch it. At the festival, different people meet in the hall with a variety of ideas, dreams, opinions and experiences; everyone has a reason to be in that place at that moment. This provides a unique opportunity to express your opinion, to look at one another face to face, to open up and express yourself, to get to know one another, and to find agreement or difference in your opinions. In post-war countries dominated by silence, censorship and self-censorship, where fear rules and social bonds are torn, the possibility to discuss and speak is of the utmost importance as it allows—at least for the moment—for the silence and intellectual repression (imposed by television, stolen advertising, reclusive use of the internet, the monopolistic private press, etc.) to be broken. That is why La Muestra encourages discussion about most of our films.

Those who join the discussions come from different areas of society (academics, politicians, journalists,

activists, protagonists etc.) and they analyse, comment and explain the films based on how they perceive them. After the initial five to ten minute introduction by each participant, the debate is opened to the public by a presenter.

Depending on the funds at our disposal, each year we can invite five to eight directors from abroad. Before we invite them, we “vet” them. We scan information and study conversations that make it possible for us to determine whether the person is engaged with the issues, is democratic and willing to share their views with the public.

La Muestra is not a festival with red carpet and prizes but it can offer guests a full screening hall and an interested public. We want our foreign guests to be motivated by not being alone in the discussions but by being accompanied by one to two domestic participants who will try to outline and explain the film from a local perspective. We want our guests to cooperate with the organising team and public. In exchange we will offer them, via our network of friends, meetings and visits to interesting places and organisations. Until now we have had the good fortune that our guests have unquestionably enriched our festival and the public.

### **Team and Organisation**

It is not easy to put together an organising team. However, it is a vital issue. The organisation of a festival





*A full cinema is what a festival organiser wants to see. Photo by Cecilia Cobar Falla.*

that brings about so much work, stress, difficulties and uncertainties requires mutual confidence, tolerance and respect among team members. A collective, democratic structure of the team is ideal. La Muestra's organising team changes every year. Due to this fluctuation, there are more and less experienced persons among us. There are no formal ways of integrating a new member; instead they have to fit in and be able to perform their duties. We are all "workers". Among us there are cultural advisors, photographers, designers, social workers, journalists and people from the artistic world. None of us is a human rights activist, but we are all parties to the process, and we are all engaged volunteers. One disadvantage is that our team is short of any representatives from the film industry. That, however, is the reality of our location: there is only one film school in Guatemala, and it focuses on fiction films, not documentaries. There are simply not enough filmmakers. This means that we have less experience in making a coherent selection of films for the festival; the selection process requires willingness to get involved, and to learn on our own. Due to the lack of funds, La Muestra is not active during the year: once the festival is over, La Muestra's team is dissolved, so that we can survive.

Most of our members are young people whose life plans change quite often. Others have jobs that do not allow them to dedicate their energy to other projects. From the beginning, management unit has been in the hands of the German filmmaker Uli Stelzner who spends more time in Latin America

than in Germany. This has its advantages and disadvantages. Since formally La Muestra is an international festival, we are able to enjoy certain political protection in a country with unstable development, violence, almost absolute impunity and an alarming political polarisation. The filmmaker is familiar with other festivals, has contacts and general know-how for acquisition of films. Moreover, he is capable of handling a credible and to a certain extent "neutral" discourse in public; a certain level of neutrality comes in handy in this country. The disadvantage is obvious: many—sometimes too many—things depend on this one person. However, we feel it would be very difficult to find another enthusiast who would resume this adventure with us every year.

Our pre-production phase (formulation of the project, selection of films and communication with the distributors, search for funds, etc.) lasts for about four months and is administered by one person. The production phase also lasts for four months; at the heart of the team are four to five people, and this number gradually increases as the start of the festival approaches. The post-production phase (reports, accounting, etc.) is one month and is dealt with by one person.

The funds for the festival come from foundations and NGOs. The state does not really support our event, and the private sector in Guatemala is one of the most reactionary on the continent and does not support "subversive" activities. The first four editions of La





The poster for the film *La Isla: Archivos de una Tragedia* was an inspiration for a human rights film festival in Guatemala. Photo: Archive of Memoria Verdad Justicia.

Muestra were free. In 2014, we asked for donations for the first time. We announced this decision publicly and supported it with the necessary argumentation. We started to search for sponsorship from bars and restaurants.

## Difficult Political Context

The very existence of the festival has been put in danger from the very beginning. The attacks against us were not always open, but still obvious. At the start, there was a bomb threat as well as a power failure in the biggest cinema in the country. During the third edition, the lights went off across the whole quarter in which the cinema was located. In 2014, three new films about Guatemala were withdrawn from the program because their protagonists (young people from the suburbs, human rights activists) feared repression. As if this was not enough, the Guatemalan film *La Propuesta Impuesta* (Imposed Proposal), about student protests in 2012, was subject to a strong political pressure from the ministers of education, interior and foreign affairs. The TV station that covered the film was also intimidated; the live interview with the festival director was stopped. This is a regrettable, pitiful and disturbing development: the political situation in our country is full of uncertainty, fear and insecurity, all of which are amplified by the government policy that censors critical opinions. This tendency has had sweeping consequences and transmits a fatal signal: *do not make documentaries; do not be critical; you had better be silent!* Despite this message, La Muestra has al-

ways found the way to overcome obstacles. A screening was replaced by a forum titled, “Film Besieged by Impunity–Censorship and Self-censorship in Guatemala”, and had the participation of 250 people. Any intimidation thus becomes subject to public debate.

## The Festival that Dignifies Us in the Eyes of the World

Nowadays, La Muestra enjoys such recognition of the Guatemalan public that we may consider ourselves a part of the national imagery of contemporary history and culture. We search for new ideas, enforce freedom of thought and teach audiences to appreciate new horizons through films. Film images mediate tragedies from all over the world for us, yet they also provoke an irresistible desire for life. After the film is over, we can go home and share with our neighbours the certainty that pain does not outbalance the positive aspects of human existence. This is emphasised by the motto of the 2011 edition of La Muestra “El Cine de la verdad nos impulsa a librarnos del olvido y nos prepara para hacer la Memoria de la Alegría”, which translates as: “a truthful film makes us liberate ourselves from the oblivion and helps us to create joyful memories”.

## Filmography

*La Isla: Archivos de una Tragedia* (Island: Archive of a Tragedy, dir. Uli Stelzner, 2009).

*La Propuesta Impuesta* (dir. Archivo Documental, 2012).