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Director's Statement

By Pamela Yates

It's now been 40 years since I directed *When the Mountains Tremble*. It's a good time to reflect on what was learned, both politically and cinematically, so that we can act in the present to help Guatemala regain its democracy and envision the world of the future where our own democracy needs defending and strengthening as well. What I learned from the people in front of and behind the camera formed these principles I carry with me in my life as a human rights filmmaker.

Anger. Anger is a powerful impetus to creating artistic cinema.

Anger drove me when I first went to Guatemala in 1982 to investigate the role that the United States played in overthrowing the democratically elected government of Jacobo Árbenz in 1954, ushering in a legacy of brutal military dictatorships and repressive authoritarian governments. I felt that if I could just get that story out, Americans would be moved to act. The Lucas García regime of that moment was so averse to any outside reporting that they detained international crews at the airport, questioned them, and then deported them. Co-director Tom Sigel and I had to wait for our moment to get in. It came when the Guatemalan government, under pressure from the U.S. declared a presidential election, and they had to let in the international press corps as part of their claim to a "democratic opening."

Trust. Like slow cooking, trust takes time, and over time, trust yields access and insight.

At first, no one in Guatemala would talk to me, everyone was too afraid. State-sponsored violence was sweeping the country, targeting anyone who advocated for reform. Painstakingly, we built relationships across civil society and with the guerrilla fighters, the Army, and the Church. It took 6 months. We had to dispatch the film footage clandestinely out of Guatemala.

Positioning. Present yourself knowing the political juncture of the moment.

People say I was naïve, a cute *gringita*, that by dint of youth, I got good access and made a moving film. As if. A veteran of the wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador, I knew that the United States under President Carter had cut off military aid to the Guatemalan government due to egregious human rights violations. When President Reagan was elected, the military saw their chance to reopen military aid from the U.S. Being one of the few crews working in Guatemala, they saw us as a potential megaphone to amplify their needs, and I worked my way into their inner sanctum. They thought they were upholding the national security doctrine, fighting Communism, and doing good in the eyes of the U.S. That wasn't the story I was going to tell. Ever.

Unseen/seen. How to cross that Invisible Line

Where were those who had taken up the armed struggle to defeat the military dictatorship? They were putting up a fierce resistance against the best military in Central America, but where were they? How could we film them? Few knew their story. Then a message arrived. I was to

wait for their representative in a McDonald's in downtown Guatemala City. I was told to bring a Time Magazine and a tourist map to lay on the table as a signal. Thinking that I'd be met by someone utterly different from me, maybe an Indigenous person from the highlands where it was said the war was raging? After a long wait in which I was afraid I was being set up, a blonde woman with blue eyes approached. She spoke to me in perfect English, "I'm Gabriela from the Guerrilla Army of the Poor. Your pseudonym from now on will be Ana María". From that point onwards, I crossed an invisible line. Everything that had previously been hidden became known and available to be filmed with our cameras. A pop-up meeting of a thousand civilian supporters who materialized on a hilltop, seemingly from nowhere, became an unforgettable scene. And as quickly as they assembled, they dispersed, demonstrating local well-organized support, essential to any guerrilla army intent on overthrowing a well-armed military dictatorship.

Collaboration. What I learned from Rigoberta Menchú and the Mayas about collectivity.

We had filmed everything and were editing scenes back in our studio in New York, but were discovering that there was no connective tissue in the story, there were no recurring protagonists. There were just a lot of dramatic scenes with a lot of different people and ideas. Filming in war is just hard. Hard to know what's going on, hard to keep safe, hard to know where to be and what to film. We had great material but the film wasn't coming together. Then an acquaintance who knew we were making a film about Guatemala brought a young, 22 year old woman, exiled from her country, to our studio in New York. She told us her story. She was extraordinary. Her name was Rigoberta Menchú. Rigoberta came into our editing room, took a look at the filmed sequences and together, we came up with the idea that she and her story could weave the disparate elements of the armed conflict into a coherent whole from her perspective. It would be the perspective of the Maya K'iche' and Rigoberta's vision for a democratic, plurinational, pluricultural country. Seen across the world, *When the Mountains Tremble* helped put Rigoberta Menchú on the world stage, and 10 years later, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the first Indigenous person to be so honored.

Innovation. New content demands new form

Rigoberta watched the scenes and wrote her story to be able to segue in and out of our filmed material and describe her lived experience. We went into a studio and in a black liminal space, we filmed her speaking directly to camera, the first time anyone that I know of had done that in a documentary film. We researched recently declassified CIA documents that chronicled correspondence between the US Embassy in Guatemala and the State Department and wrote a script of the scene that we reenacted with actors, rather than narrate archival footage, a controversial decision at a time when documentary filmmaking was closely associated with "objective" journalism. The rising salsa and Latin Jazz sensation Rubén Blades, composed and performed the music score.

Emotion. You have to be moved, in order to be moved to act*.

Because *When the Mountains Tremble* expresses the hope for a different Guatemala, the film endures as a classic in political documentary filmmaking. Rigoberta was not only in the film. We traveled together to film festivals and cities where *When the Mountains Tremble* opened in

cinemas, speaking about stopping the violence in Guatemala and raising contributions for solidarity work that focused on stopping U.S. intervention in Central America. Thousands acted then, and many more were inspired to be activists over the years - people who chose their professions after having seen the film, and above all, Guatemalans who relied on this story, to never give up on their quest for justice and to find the disappeared.

Save everything. You never know how important visual/audio documentation can be.

Even when you feel impotent to prevent human rights abuses, it's important to document them.

Though *When the Mountains Tremble* was seen all over the world, translated into several languages, and broadcast in 25 countries, it had never been shown in Guatemala. I went to the first public screening in Guatemala in 2003, twenty years after the film was first released. And at that screening were lawyers who came up to me afterward to ask if I had kept all of the outtakes from the film because they were building a case against General Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide and crimes against humanity. And we had kept all our footage in deep storage in a warehouse in New Jersey. Ripping into the boxes we hadn't touched in a quarter of a century, we found inculpatory material in an interview with the General that became key forensic evidence used against him to convict.

Change. One great movie can change you.

Possibly the greatest impact that *When the Mountains Tremble* made is in making sure that the historical memory of what happened in Guatemala during the time of the genocide and the resistance to that genocide is never forgotten. When rural Mayans and urban dwellers joined forces to exert their political power to create a democratic Guatemala, they changed the country forever. The film contributes to the narrative accumulation of those seeking justice for past crimes against humanity, and it contributes to understanding the leading role that Mayans play in envisioning a way forward for their country, for their people - that of a pluricultural and plurinational state.

When the Mountains Tremble is still sought out for use and is widely available. It has been embraced by a new generation of human rights activists in Guatemala and abroad.

If you've made a factual mistake, correct it immediately, even if it's years later.

Thirty-two years after making *When the Mountains Tremble*, a man came forward, saying that one scene in the film was completely wrong. Because the film endured and continued to be used widely, I decided to investigate to discover the facts. The scene in question was a massacre that we had said was perpetrated by the Army, but under scrutiny, it turns out was committed by the guerrillas who gathered the civilian militias allied with the Army, and killed them. Because I believe that establishing the truth about human rights violations committed during armed conflict is essential to peace and reconciliation, I wrote an essay and made a short film called *Ethical Dilemma* to set the record straight. You can read the essay and watch the film [here](#).

Stay connected to the people you filmed with and the places you've filmed in. Return.

Having become persona non grata in Guatemala after the release of *When the Mountains Tremble*, I didn't return for 10 years. Then, in 1992, when Rigoberta Menchú was awarded the Nobel Prize and the tens of thousands of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico decided to return, I returned with them. I continued to stay connected to Guatemala and the people we'd filmed with throughout. And by staying connected to the quest for a true democracy in Guatemala, when we were asked to contribute our filmed footage to the genocide case and the growing justice initiatives, I gladly agreed. And since we had kept everything, that discovery and the ensuing landmark case, led to the sequel, *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* (2011). This film tells the story of how people came together from all walks of life to build a genocide case. I tell the story in the first person because I wanted to share my experiences and send a kind of a love letter to the next generation of committed documentary filmmakers. In 2017 we made the third film *500 Years*, completing a trilogy. In 2024, we will release *Borderland: The Line Within*. The film takes place in the U.S. and is very much the fourth film in a quartet that began with *When the Mountains Tremble* in 1982.

*words of wisdom from the late, great Jess Search.