

An interview with Ana Poliak, director of *La fe del volcán* (The Faith of the Volcano)

David Walsh
5 June 2001

I spoke to Ana Poliak, director of The Faith of the Volcano, in Buenos Aires.

David Walsh: How did you come to make this film?

Ana Poliak: I started years ago, after my first film, a documentary [*Que vivan los crotos*, 1990]. I asked my cinematographer and collaborator [Willi Behnisch] to write a screenplay. It would be the first one for both of us, in the sense of a feature film. We started to work with one image, the image of a man on fire. We worked every day without any story, without any idea of character, only with our feelings about the world. That was almost six years ago.

Mostly I started to write images or obsessions, for example, the idea about the knife-grinder. I thought this image was very suggestive. A man who rides and rides many kilometers [on a stationary bicycle as he sharpens the knives], but never goes anywhere.

The other element was my own history. I started to write about my personal crisis when I was young. The main character, a young girl, was me when I was an adolescent. I started to write about this period, the other characters were not written yet. Finally we arrived at a script without a story in the sense of plot points, it was simply about relationships, about pain, about the pain of the world seen through the eyes of this young girl.

We started to work to find money. My idea was that my second film would have a budget equal to the first, so we could pay a crew. After four years we had \$25,000 from the Hugo Bals Fund. We went to the Mannheim film-mart and various producers were interested in the film and for two years we went through a bureaucratic process at the national film institute here, finally with success.

At this point I arrived at the same sort of crisis I had during my adolescence. "This is the world, I am here, I want to say something, but I can't." I can't because I

need to change things; if I take money I have to say the things that the people who give me the money want me to say. I decided that this was not my way. I rejected the money from the film institute. I sank into a crisis. I wrote a letter to the Hugo Bals Fund rejecting that money too, but at this moment I was in a deep, deep crisis because those people were the only people in the world who wanted to help me say what I wanted to say.

I wrote that letter to the fund rejecting the money, and I thought of doing something desperate. I talked to my partner and I didn't sleep for several days. In the end I didn't send the letter. Instead I wrote a letter to myself, including these sentences: "I'm on a very high floor, surrounded by emptiness, I know that I have to jump, but I don't know whether I need to jump outward or inward." Very early in the morning I called my partner and he came to my house and I read him the letter. The question I asked him was how I could shoot the thoughts and feelings in this letter.

He looked at me and said, "Well, let's take the camera, we'll start now." It was in my house. He started to move the furniture, to make a set. And we started looking for the image of this feeling. The first image in the film, of me in the window, was the first image that I liked very much.

We started to shoot without a screenplay. Different things. At a certain point I decided to talk with the actor who played the knife-grinder. We started improvising. He was not in a depression, but he was in the same situation as me, he wanted to do many things, but he couldn't. We looked inside ourselves for elements, feelings, talking a lot, we started to find certain sequences, for instance, the scene when he mimics the people who open their doors and turn him away. When I felt this character was really developed I started to look for a girl. I understood that the screenplay was the

starting-point, but that the girl would not be me, would not be a middle class girl.

DW: Why did you make that choice?

AP: Because I was not interested so much in the problems of my class. I felt that my problems were shown in the introduction, I didn't want to make a film about another girl like me. I decided to make a film about the opposite.

DW: If the prologue had been extended into an entire film I would say, yes, this is interesting, but I know this story to a certain extent. Do you see an historical and social component to your personal crisis?

AP: Of course. In regard to my first crisis: when I was 11 years old I had a teacher, not in regular school, but a parallel art school, a teacher in literature and creative writing, who was for three years my teacher, but also my model, my mother. I thought that I would be a writer. She was everything in my life. In 1976 she was kidnapped with her husband and they disappeared. They were killed [by the dictatorship]. I think that this wound will never close. Never. It will never heal. When a wound is in the body, you develop a scar, but it doesn't happen in this case. I think that the country and everybody in it is still bleeding. It's impossible to live ... how can we walk over these corpses? For example, many shopping centers are built over the corpses. They buried the bodies in construction sites. People continue to live, lead their lives...

DW: Are you saying they are affected by those corpses or not affected by them?

AP: They don't think about it. People forget everything. The past is another planet. But for me the recent past is not past, it is present. It exists, it surrounds me. But people don't speak about it. The knife-grinder is an exception, he is different. Many people from the generation which lived through that period think about it. The young girl knows nothing about this history. She really doesn't know anything. She is very poor, she lives in a very bad situation. She has a very difficult life, with brothers killed by the police or killed in fights in the neighborhood. She has enormous energy and a strong instinct for survival. During the year we made the film she lost two brothers.

DW: The past is not finished with, even for those who don't think about it. It is in the air, it is in the society. How do we prevent this from happening again? And the same dangers are posed everywhere. After all, it

was the CIA and the US that supported the killing here. Trotsky says that while individuals commit suicide, entire populations make social revolutions. The working class, like this girl, isn't going to commit suicide. For the individual the situation may be impossible, you can jump out a window, but the entire population is not going to jump out the window. These are social problems. In the last scene, she is walking, moving, at the same she is depressed, sad, a little resigned. What do you want a spectator to think at the end of this film?

AP: The final sentence, from Nietzsche, says that each one of us has an internal volcano. "I know there is something invulnerable in me, something that may blast through stones." Each of us knows this and feels that we are strong, we are worth something. Each one can blast stones and we are like volcanoes and one day the volcanoes will erupt. In the film at the end she walks along and she remembers all the things that the knife-grinder told her, that she doesn't understand now, but she will in a new situation. Individual power, but if these individual powers are joined together...

DW: I think the volcanoes will erupt, but people need to know this history. If your memory is suppressed, you are paralyzed.

AP: The festival organizers told me that the film could not be in the competition because it was difficult. I said, "But it's an independent film festival." "Yes, but it's difficult. If it's in the competition, well, we have sponsors, and the sponsors like the winning film to be something saleable, and this is a very difficult film." This is crazy, I said, close down the "independent" festival and don't write about "independent" films.

DW: You have a milieu that is part-artistic, and also part-corrupt, part-cynical. "I'm very left-wing ... but one must have moderation in all things." And you have people from that generation who have shifted their views. We have to create a more critical atmosphere. And I think your film contributes to that.



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