

# A tragedy presented, not explained

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15 November 2005

*Innocent Voices*, directed by Luis Mandoki, screenplay by Luis Mandoki and Oscar Orlando Torres

Mexican-born filmmaker Luis Mandoki's new film, *Innocent Voices*, about the El Salvador civil war in the 1980s, begins in silence. A heavy downpour falls in muddy streets. Extreme close-ups of soldiers' boots stepping in puddles, splashing the water. Smaller shoes commingle with the boots. Silhouettes move in slow motion toward the camera. As they move closer, we see them more clearly; they are soldiers.

Among them, are four smaller figures: children, none more than 12 years old. Their arms are raised and their hands crossed behind their necks. They are being pushed and shoved. The rain falls on their dirty faces, strangely immobile, as if paralyzed by an unfathomable resignation. Their march continues in slow motion. Then we hear the thoughts of one of the boys on the soundtrack: "I am very thirsty ... My feet hurt ... I have rocks in my shoes ... I'm sure they are going to kill us ... Why do they want to kill us? We've done nothing." And the boys' fate dawns on the audience. The suspense is almost unbearable.

Then the screen goes white and the story begins in flashback.

Who could have imagined that Luis Mandoki, the director of such pap as *Angel Eyes*, *Amazing Grace*, *Message in a Bottle* and *When a Man Loves a Woman*, would come up with a painfully honest film that manages, despite its flaws, to move and terrify in equal measure? Perhaps it took the experiences of Oscar Orlando Torres, who co-wrote the screenplay and on whose life story the film is based, to bring out the best in the filmmaker and reveal a part of his talent worthy of our attention.

*Innocent Voices* is not a profound movie; it never tries to understand the root causes of El Salvador's 12-year civil war from the early 1980s on, but it is an honest film seen through the eyes of an innocent 11-year-old boy. And if the film is occasionally marred by a sentimentality bordering on the melodramatic, it never ceases to engage us, for it has been done with passion, care and sympathy for its characters without ever patronizing them. Perhaps it is this quality, more than any other, that has given it a certain pedigree. Audiences in Los Angeles have received the film quite enthusiastically. It was nominated for seven Mexican Ariel awards, and won the Stanley Kramer Award for socially conscious films, as well as the Best Film Award at the Seattle film festival in 2005.

Almost the entire movie is told from the point of view of Chava, a sensitive 11-year-old boy about to turn 12—a dangerous age in 1980s El Salvador. The story unfolds as he and his family—mother, younger sister and brother—struggle to survive in the outskirts of the poor town of Cuscatzingo, where houses are built from scraps of building and packing material. It was one of the last outposts caught in the conflict between the guerrillas of the Frente Farabundo Martí Para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and the government forces trained and equipped by the American military forces, including the CIA. The

father has left the family for the US for reasons that are never explained. Chava and his friends watch in horror as government soldiers tear up the countryside and the small towns, killing, pillaging and raping at will.

Nighttime is especially harrowing as vicious firefights erupt in and around the village between government troops and guerrillas. Several shootouts take place right outside the family's shack. It is difficult to tell who is who. But neighbors and friends do die and the children, sometimes left alone by their mother, who has gone off to work, are naturally terrified.

The central, ongoing threat to Chava's life is the government's policy of snatching 12-year-old boys from their families and forcible conscripting them into the army to fight the guerrillas. In one particularly chilling scene, the soldiers invade a school, force everyone onto the gym floor, order them to stand at attention, and make the principal, at gunpoint, read a conscription list of 12-year-old boys. As their names are called, they take their place in an isolated line. Their mixture of anguish, hatred and desperation—as well as that of their friends and teachers—is difficult to watch. At this point in the film, several members of the audience walked out, some crying.

One scene epitomizes the consequences of forced conscription. Several months after the army nabs some of Chava's schoolmates, Chava and his friends go play by the river. One of the conscripts, now barely 13, appears in full uniform. He's carrying an automatic rifle, which he displays proudly. Just a few months ago, while he had stood in line at the school, he had urinated his pants out of fear after his name had been called; now he is all bravado and arrogance, yet eerily naïve—a man-child trained to use his weapon against his old friends if necessary. He spews bile against the guerrillas. In short, he has become a monster, precisely because he is still recognizably human and innocent and thus capable of anything. This transformation both terrifies and fascinates Chava and his friends.

At one point, the boys learn that the soldiers are coming to their neighborhood the following morning to abduct them. They clamber onto the cardboard roofs of their shacks and lie down, in twos and threes, huddled together, throughout their neighborhood. As the soldiers come to look for them and begin to knock down the doors, the camera pans aerially and we see the boys on the roofs, silent while the horror continues below. In this sequence, Mandoki has managed to combine both extraordinary suspense and poetry. Like much of the rest of the film, it involves us in its immediacy; its characters' dilemmas are palpable and involving. We always care what happens to them, this in small measure due to the fine performances that suffuse the film.

Chava, the young hero of our story, observes everything and suffers many indignities. By the end of the film, there is no doubt about where his sympathies lie: against the government, for the guerrillas. Not because he understands their cause, but because of the utter evil

and wanton destruction that government soldiers, obviously acting in the name of some vague and nameless dictatorship, have caused. He may have opened his eyes, but they see no further; at the end of the film, he is still an innocent. To his credit, he neither becomes jaded nor cynical. And from a psychological point of view, well should he remain innocent; he is, after all, barely past 11.

But his point of view should not necessarily be that of the filmmakers (or ours), which, unfortunately, is exactly what happens in the film. *Innocent Voices*, by its very content, must be a *political* film. Even though related by a child, this is a film about a civil war, with major geopolitical implications, that cost 75,000 people their lives. This is an enormous tragedy; artistic choices must rise to the occasion.

By limiting our view of the struggle and horror to only what is seen and understood by this boy, the director and the writer absolve themselves of having to explain any of the historical or social complexities. Perhaps this was not their intention, but the finished artistic product is lacking. The material roots of the struggle, the oppression, the murderous rampages, and the role, direct or indirect as it may be, of the ruling classes is never examined. And thus, after all the destruction, killings and deaths, we know no more about El Salvador at the end of the film than we did at the beginning.

What, precisely, is this monstrous army defending? Are there any social interests involved? What was the role of the United States, alluded to in one short scene? In fact, why was the US involved at all?

The Salvadoran dictatorship, backed by American “advisors” and the CIA-sponsored death squads, was a gangrenous horror on the Salvadoran people, but the film gives us no idea—none—why the peasants have revolted, why the guerrillas are such saints, why the government is persecuting them. We meet at least two of the guerrillas, yet nary a word from either one about their cause or the nature of the government in power.

The filmmakers could have maintained the child’s innocence (and ignorance of the larger issues) while at the same illuminating the audience. After all, one of art’s purposes is to cognize the world. Even a conversation between Chava’s mother and his uncle (a guerrilla leader, by the way) would have helped. The child could listen to the talk without understanding it. If the director and screenwriter are not interested in history, only in empirical observations, this is a problem. If they compromised their vision to increase the film’s commercial possibilities, this is an even bigger problem. No one is asking that solutions be given, just that questions, even elementary ones, become part of the drama and the dialogue.

In this sense, the film is simplistic: soldiers bad, guerrillas good. Perhaps the director assumes that the audience—and we think he assumes it’s going to be mostly Hispanic—already knows the reasons why the struggle is taking place. This is the kind of assumption that helped mar another honorable effort, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, which assumed that everybody knew how Che Guevara met his tragic end, so there wasn’t an overwhelming need to explain events.

Of course, to a certain degree, a portion of the audience already knows this history; the Latin American peoples have lived in the flesh these horrible conditions and fought great class battles, yet they, too, have failed in large measure to grasp its essence, because of a lack of leadership and betrayals by many who called themselves “communists” and “socialists.” Using the political difficulties and tragedies as a justification, an entire layer of intellectuals and artists has made a principle out of an ahistorical approach to art, culture and social questions. They have arrived at a point where they cannot make heads or tails out of great events, including the tragedy of El

Salvador’s civil war, nor feel a strong urge to do so.

(An exhibition of photographs of El Salvador during the civil war has just opened in New York City. For a review go to: “Images of El Salvador carnage reprised in light of Iraq war”)

The puppy love story in the film—Chava falls in love with a girl more or less his age and they steal kisses once or twice—is too pat and conventional. This part of his story feels as though it were tacked on to fulfill some demands of the formulaic Hollywood script. That it was based on Torres’s real life experiences doesn’t matter. In the midst of all the chaos and suffering, it feels trivial, banal and overly sentimental. It just doesn’t translate into dramatic terms.

And never mind that all the main characters—his mother, his guerrilla uncle, his grandmother, and even Chava—are as Hollywood handsome and beautiful as can be. Carlos Padilla, as Chava, is terrific, but he seems to have stepped out of a seventeenth century baroque painting by Murillo. The cast, however, is uniformly excellent, with Daniel Jiménez Cacho outstanding as a liberation theology priest.

That being said, there’s no denying that the film does move and, in its portrayal of oppression and terror, emotionally devastate us—one of the few films that unflinchingly details what it’s like to live and love and work under conditions of extreme violence and how the oppressed manage to survive. More than that, by implication, it shows us what creates the conditions for social revolution.

One false note in the film—and this will be lost on most American audiences, though not on the Spanish-speaking ones—the accents are all wrong. The actors, with few exceptions, are mostly Mexican. I didn’t detect a single Salvadoran accent. I understand the film, after all, was shot, in Veracruz, Mexico. This, however, is not fatal. And I believe that it’s not fatal because of the film’s emotional honesty and ability to involve the audience in its characters’ lives and struggles.

Despite its many missteps—and they are obvious because the film in many ways is so good—*Innocent Voices* is better than 98 percent of the Hollywood claptrap filling our screens today and very much worth a look.



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