

Granito Interview Transcription

Advice

What advice would you give to young or aspiring filmmakers who do want to cover sensitive topics like this, apart from not being afraid of that fear? What other words of advice could you give?

Be as well informed as possible. Try to get with and be with people who are more experienced than you are. Try to be with civil society organizations on the ground that know what they are doing that have vastly more experience than you have. They will help you; they will cover you. Try to find allies, try to find mentors, try to find people that will help you understand how to navigate this very tricky and sensitive terrain.

Decision to Make *When The Mountains Tremble*

I was working as a sound recordist on other people's films, because it's really hard to make a living as a documentary filmmaker; an independent documentary filmmaker. I was working in Nicaragua and El Salvador when I heard about the uprising in Guatemala this resistance movement to the military dictatorship. Very few people knew about it, very few people were covering it. A lot of what was happening was in the indigenous highlands where people didn't speak Spanish. It was a hidden war, and I was drawn to try to tell the story. Also because of the U.S. involvement in Guatemala; they had been involved over decades of funding military dictatorships and I wanted to know why and for whom and what was the result of this and the military dictatorship was very much involved in the war. This movement for change that was trying to overthrow the military dictatorship seemed to be very vibrant and growing.

Driving Force Behind *When The Mountains Tremble*

Did you ever think, at that moment especially in the helicopter, that the footage that you were getting would one day be used as evidence...

...against the General? No. When people are in power you always think they are invincible and they think they are invincible and that's why they said things to me and did things with me that allowed me to gather that evidence. I didn't know it was going to be evidence but I thought it was of critical importance to document what the army was doing. I didn't know it was a genocide but I knew that there was repression and killing and I thought it was very important to document that. And that was the driving force behind taking all those risks in making *When the Mountains Tremble*.

Finding Allies

How did you find your allies? I know you said you found people who were at the forefront of this issue, but how did you go from point A to point B to make those connections.

You mean in *Granito*? Well some of the allies become the characters in the film. I was talking with Kate Doyle from the National Security Archive who has almost 20 years experience working in Guatemala and working with declassified documents and

secret information that has come out. All of my conversations with her were so interesting and in depth that I thought Kate has to be in this film. The other people I met, when they testified in the Spanish National Court in the genocide case because court cases are also where people tell stories. You really see how a person can tell a story, how they communicate very complex ideas in a way that's understandable and pretty short in a way that will convince a judge. That was another place I found allies. I also looked for organizations who had been connected with this issue for a long time both in Guatemala and in the U.S. because I knew I wanted to design an outreach campaign in both places. I also connected with facing history on ourselves in the U.S. and in Guatemala I connected with the forensic anthropology team, the police archives investigators, with human rights groups in Guatemala. They were all extremely helpful.

Gaining Trust

How did you feel whenever they were opening up to you because they exposed some extremely sensitive information, especially Alejandra? That moment where she's talking about her father and how she wishes she could see him one more day, how did moments like that affect you as a filmmaker?

We were all crying along with her. What came to pass in *Granito* is that because I made *When The Mountains Tremble* in 1982 I have a long history with Guatemala. That film has been seen thousands of times clandestinely and now is readily available in Guatemala. I think it's important for documentary filmmakers to keep connected to the places where we made documentary films. I don't mean just that you have to go back and make another film, but it's important to keep connected to the people that you once met. It's important to keep connected to them, their country, to the issue throughout their life. Because I did that and because Peter and Paco did that along with me we were able to get the trust from people very quickly in making *Granito*. It helped us enormously because usually it takes a very long time to gain that kind of trust. When I first went to Guatemala to film *When The Mountains Tremble*, nobody trusted me, everyone was afraid of me, it took me a very long time to gain the trust.

Government Issues/Support

How has the Guatemalan government reacted to those efforts?

They haven't done anything to stop it. I think what's important right now is that civil society and educators get behind doing it. We've created a discussion guide for the film in English and Spanish, a lesson plan for the film in English and Spanish and guides for using GanitoMem, the public archive of memory site in English and Spanish. We're hoping that both Guatemalans in Guatemala and Guatemalans in America will make use of these materials, the site and the film itself. There are 13 million Guatemalans and 10% of them live in the U.S. So there's a big population, there's a big population in Washington, and we want them to be involved in the *Granito* Memory project as well.

Guatemalan Screening

Has this film screened in Guatemala?

It did.

How did it go?

It was great! It opened at the National Theater which seats 3,000 people and many of the people in the film came; Freddy Patcherelli, Antonio Caba, Kate Doyle, Alejandra Garcia and there was a sustained standing ovation to the film. It must have gone on for about ten minutes. What was most gratifying was as the people in the film came up to the stage there was a roar for Antonio Caba because what he's doing is so courageous in both travelling to Spain to testify in the genocide case there and working in the highland communities to let people know how they can participate in seeking justice in Guatemala. And I think his presence in the film and his presence at the opening in Guatemala was huge. But more than that, we've also made available all of the DVD's in Spanish for free in Guatemala and we are doing two other versions in Maya languages. Because those are versions that will really touch people's hearts. And I found it's really important in human rights work to do multiple language versions. While we were making *Granito* we got asked to show *When The Mountains Tremble* in lots of different places around Guatemala and we did. And most of the people who came to the screenings were in their 20s and 30s. Afterwards they said "Wow, we had no idea because they don't want to talk about the war at school, we aren't taught about it in college. And we only know one part that happened to our family but we didn't know the whole story." So we came up with this idea that we would create an interactive public archive online to record, document and be able to access memories of what happened during the time of the genocide. The younger generation would interview the older generation, the elders in their families, to get their memories. And we've created this site called GranitoMem.com like *Granito* Memory, GranitoMem.com and there you can see all the memories that have been uploaded and access; we've created collections. It's a great interactive place where people can go to after they've seen the film.

Helicopter to *Granito*

Can you tell us what happened whenever you were brought on to the helicopter to record?

Yea, I was trying to film across the whole political spectrum of Guatemala and that included the armed forces, the security forces but they wouldn't talk to me. So every morning I would go down outside the military headquarters and I'd smoke cigarettes with the soldiers guarding the entrance. Eventually they introduced me to their Sergeant, the Sergeant introduced me to his Colonel, and finally the Colonel introduced me to the head of the Guatemalan armed forces – General Benedicto Lucas Garcia. And I asked him when I was interviewing him, if I could go on a mission with him into the highlands and he agreed. He thought what harm would there be taking this young woman and the camera person on the helicopter and he did and the helicopter was shot down. And I live to tell this tale in *Granito*.

Meeting Characters

How did you 1, get to meet those characters and 2, how did you gain their trust for them to open up as much as they did to you?

Well documentary filmmaking is very much casting for characters to help tell the story. So I was looking around for who was really at the forefront for documenting what happened in the past in order to bring justice in the present. And that was when I found the people who were doing really hard work in Guatemala, in the US, in Spain and to join forces to try to bring the perpetrators to account for the genocide in Guatemala. Of course Rigaberta Minchu, she appears in *Granito* and she was the storyteller in *When the Mountains Tremble*. She was 22 years old, she was living in exile and I met her and I had actually filmed the whole film, but there was no thread that would hold all the different stories together. It was my first film and I was trying to figure out how to make it, how to tell the story, how to stay safe in a time of war. And when I met her she became the storyteller and of course I wanted her to appear also in *Granito*. I think one of the most astonishing characters in *Granito* is Alejandra Garcia. She's 26 years old. Her father was disappeared when she was 2 years old. I was trying to find a young person who was carrying on the legacy of the search for justice. And I met her and I was immediately taken by her and I said she has to be in the film. I think what's different about Skylight Pictures Films, our films, is that we never use experts to help us tell the story. You can be an expert but you have to be a player. You can be an international lawyer, but you have to be trying the case in the film. We never photograph people in front of the bookcase who are observing the situation. You have to be an active player and that actually makes the documentary form itself more accurately.

More on *Granito*

Granito is also a film, contemplation on the art of documentary filmmaking. In the film I tried to share all of our experiences at Skylight Pictures over 30 years of making documentary films. It's a thread that weaves its way through the film. It's also a love letter to the next generation of documentary filmmakers. It says what you're doing is important, what you're doing can have impact, and it's really important to keep documenting it.

Other Screenings

Can you speak a little bit more about your festival experiences?

With *Granito*?

Mmmhmm.

We have probably played in more festivals with *Granito* than any other film we've ever made. It started with a world premiere at Sundance and it was the opening night of the human rights watch film festival in New York at Lincoln Center. Its played all over Latin America, Europe as well as Africa. I think now its played on 6 continents; in festivals on 6 continents. So its been a real whirlwind year and a half with the film. But to me, the most gratifying premiere of the film was in Guatemala with the Guatemalans who had really shared this history and I had shared the history with them. In *Granito* I say "Guatemala had wrapped its arms around my soul and would never let me go." And it's a country that does that to you.

Outreach

Given the expansion of the project, what are some of your plans in the near future for both the film and some of the other educational aspects of it?

Well right now we are on massive academic screening tours in the US. We have a Guatemalan co-producer and she is doing all the work with *Granito* and the *Granito* Memory project in Guatemala. Every film that we do has a multi-year outreach campaign. So now we are in year one and a half with *Granito* so we still have two more years to go and probably it will continue forward. I think that outreach is a really integral part of making documentary films. You wouldn't do research and not shoot the film yourself; you wouldn't shoot the film and not oversee the editing yourself. And my feeling is you wouldn't make a film and not oversee the outreach yourself and think about the outreach while your making the film. Who are going to be my outreach partners, who are going to be my allies? How am I going to put this film on their radar so that when the film is finished they are going to want to take the film out to their entire constituency? When you think about documentary filmmaking that way it opens up a whole new aspect of having impact.

Rios Mont

In January of 2012, Rios Mont stepped down from his position as Congressman so he lost his immunity from prosecution. He was hauled into court and in January he was indicted for genocide. And the prosecution in the genocide case projected parts of *When the Mountains Tremble* on the screen because his defense attorney said that he didn't actually know what was going on; that these were a group of rogue officers who carried out these killings. But what he said to me in 1982 was that "I control the army and if I don't know what's going on then what am I doing here." So he was indicted for genocide and placed under house arrest with high bail and he's awaiting trial. So maybe with all the impact that we see that is the most significant; that a documentary film actually helped indict a General for genocide.

Were You Afraid?

How did you feel when you were in those types of situations cause you understood the risks were you afraid or were setting your fear aside in order to move forward? How did you feel?

Afraid. When I look at *Granito* and I see the film of me from 30 years ago and I'm doing slates on camera so you actually see me, I look at my face and I look really afraid. I don't know if you thought that when you looked at it, I was afraid. But you do, you put your fear aside, you have to compartmentalize it, you put it in a box and you leave it there. You can't be afraid all the time and still function. And that was really the way we got through making the film.

Maybe it was my perception of it, but I didn't see fear. I saw someone who was really eager to see what was happening, to expose something, to learn about it and help others learn about it. That's what I saw.

Well both things can operate at the same time and I think the main thing I learned from that experience is not to be afraid of fear. In other words, you have to be smart and try to stay as safe as you can given those conditions, but you also have to do the work. You have to know that you're going to be afraid and that's okay.

What is *Granito* About?

Well, *Granito* means tiny grain of sand. It's a Mayan concept that means each of us has a tiny grain of sand, something, to contribute to positive social change. It's a concept I learned when I was making my first documentary film and I've tried to carry it with me throughout my filmmaking career. In the case of this film, I'm trying to share that concept with all other documentary filmmakers but most especially the next generation of documentary filmmakers.

What is *Granito*?

Now you're talking about some of the ways you teach people ways that they can get involved, can you speak more specifically about that?

Well *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* is really about how a film that I made in 1982, *When the Mountains Tremble*, is now being used as forensic evidence in a genocide case. And actually in the case, the film I shot in 1982 parts of it were projected on the wall as part of the prosecution for Generals who are accused of committing genocide against the Maya population. The film itself shows to a lot of people, especially young people, especially students who are trying to figure out their lives and what their *Granito* will be, multiple ways of becoming a human rights activist. You could become a human rights activist as a documentary filmmaker, as a forensic anthropologist, as a forensic archivist, as an attorney, as a peace advocate and that there are multiple ways into this. So I'm hoping people will see that in the film and take that idea away with them. Guatemalans have shown us a great example of never having given up on the quest for justice. The sole genocide of the 20th century in the Americas was perpetrated in Guatemala and very few people know about it. The Guatemalans have never given up on this quest for justice and I think that's what makes *Granito* a kind of feel good human rights film. You actually feel that you can do something at the end of the film.

Why Documentary?

Given the intensity of the situation in the area, what made you decide that a documentary was the best way to tell that story?

Storytelling has such great impact and documentary storytelling even more so. I'm from the Appalachian mountains of Pennsylvania and I'm from an Irish-American enclave where storytelling was of paramount importance. My father was a great storyteller; he was really popular person in town. And I like to think that the next generation we are also storytellers and we carry on the tradition; we just do it in a different form. I think what's different about Skylight Pictures and the team of people I work with, is that we really think about how the story we are telling is going to impact the audience. So each film we do is not just a feature length documentary film but is a flagship for a number of other media offerings including always a companion digital interactive media project. Documentary storytelling can pack such an emotional punch and you want people to have a place to go after they've seen the film and after they've been on the emotional journey the film takes you on. So we do a number of media offerings and we are always trying to figure out how is the audience understanding this story, what are they going to do with this story, and how can we help them do things with this story?