

## Film Review

– *Nosotros las piedras (We the Stones)*, directed by Álvaro Torres Crespo. Betta Films, Costa Rica/Mexico, 2017.<sup>1</sup>

Costa Rica is generally known as a positive exception in Central America: its development indicators, general stability and rule of law compare favourably to those of other countries in the region. Some speak of a (tourist) paradise, all the more so because of the country's famous biodiversity efforts. In order to promote eco-tourism, a system of National Parks was created in 1970. Currently there are 26 of them, set up in accordance with a traditional view on nature conservation that is known as 'fortress conservationism',<sup>2</sup> ruling out any form of human presence. Álvaro Torres Crespo's award-winning documentary *Nosotros las piedras* offers a glimpse of what this means for that 'human presence' in a concrete setting: the Osa peninsula.

Back in 1986, Dutch journalist Carolijn Visser wrote a book about the gold seekers in Osa.<sup>3</sup> Its title, *At the End of the Rainbow*, symbolises the hope of the so-called *oreros* to find the gold that will enable them to get their life back on track. That is exactly what Costa Rican director Torres Crespo (1977) shows: these men are at the end of the road. They sleep in makeshift shacks in the rainforest, where they look day after day for gold in the rivers that criss-cross the peninsula. Sometimes they find a few hundred milligrams, fetching about five dollars on the market.

It used to be different. For many years, the peninsula was a no man's land where it was easy to find gold: in some parts 10 or 20 grams a day, or so the men say. But in 1975 the Corcovado National Park was created, covering a considerable part of Osa and, more importantly, the zones where most of the gold was found. Suddenly, the *oreros* had to go. By 1986 they had all been evicted from the park, without any compensation whatsoever. And not only them. 54-year old Felipe says: "My father was a farmer in [the village of] La Sirena with 260 hectares of good land. When the National Park was created, they just threw us out." Many of these people stayed close to Corcovado, from where the rivers descend in which they hope to find their gold.

Torres Crespo confines himself to observing. He shows the men's hard work and their good-natured campfire conversations while having a bite of food and a swig of *guaro*, the local liquor. These intimate scenes make up

more than three-quarters of the film and alternate with some discussions with other stakeholders, especially with people of SINAC, the national nature conservation authority. The mutual lack of understanding is evident, and thus we witness a concrete manifestation of the tension between the fortress narrative on conservation and its opposite, which is the community-based approach, allowing human presence and resource extraction. For that is what the gold seekers in Osa argue: they do not harm the environment, rather, they help preserve it. In the words of Manrique, a young *orero*: “At least we don’t chop down all the trees like they do in Las Crucitas [a gold mine in the North of the country], we just cut what we need for shelter.” The film does not take sides in the conservation debate, which is, by the way, far from settled: there is almost as much to be said for the community-based approach (combining conservation and poverty alleviation efforts) as for fortress conservationism, that, some claim, is also effective in poverty reduction.<sup>4</sup> Even if the latter is true, Torres Crespo wants to show that every policy has its victims.

*Nosotros las piedras* is a dark and engaging film. A particularly poignant *leitmotiv* is the recurrent appearance of an old, bearded man wandering in the dimly lit streets of the local town and daydreaming about the opening in the rocks that only he knows about, and where some day he will go and get ‘his’ gold. His tragedy is almost tangible. But the documentary is also literally dark. Many scenes are filmed at night and even when they are not, heavy rain clouds temper the light. The sun does not appear one single time. The sound of running water is omnipresent, adding to the sombre atmosphere: if it is not the rapids where the men sift the sediments in search for gold, it is the torrential rain. The haunting low tones of David Stükenberg’s music reinforce the general gloomy feeling.

The men talk about former president Laura Chinchilla, who once said that she would prefer to meet a pack of *chanchos de monte* (wild hogs) over ten *oreros* anytime. They laugh it off but are visibly hurt. Chinchilla’s offensive remark is indicative of the way these men are despised by society and treated harshly by the authorities, with frequent evictions and arrests. The film ends with Güicho, a leader of sorts among the men, musing about the power of money and suggesting that the benefits of the rule of law do not apply to poor farmers and *oreros*, who cannot buy the favours of lawmakers and judges. Perhaps Costa Rica, while certainly doing better than, say, Nicaragua or Honduras, is still no paradise.

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## Notes

- 1 Award for best documentary film, FICCI festival (Cartagena de Indias, Colombia), 2018.
- 2 Lisa Campbell (2002). “Conservation Narratives in Costa Rica: Conflict and Co-existence.” In: *Development and Change*. 33. 29-56.
- 3 Carolijn Visser (1986). *Aan het einde van de regenboog* (At the End of the Rainbow). Meulenhoff: Amsterdam.
- 4 K. S. Andam et. al. “Protected Areas Reduced Poverty in Costa Rica and Thailand.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) of the USA*, 2010 Jun 1; 107(22): 9996–10001 ([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2890456/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2890456/)).