
Film Review

El Sito del Plomo (The Site of Lead): Social Poisoning in El Salvador

Film by: Hugo De Burgos

*Reviewer: Sam Migliore
Kwantlen Polytechnic University*

El Sito del Plomo is an interesting and timely film. Hugo De Burgos brings together, in a sensitive and thoughtful way, a variety of ethnographic, scientific and historical data to address the tragic circumstances surrounding lead poisoning in a small community in El Salvador. The community, Sitio del Niño, was exposed for years to lead contamination from a nearby car battery recycling plant (La Record). The film documents the efforts, often unsuccessful, of community members to have both the contamination and its health effects recognized by the company, local medical professionals and political leaders. We see and hear individuals affected by lead poisoning tell their stories, describe the effects of lead poisoning on the community and struggle with fears about their future well-being, as well as that of their children. One woman, for example, discusses her daughter's condition in this way:

She has problems walking because her bones hurt ... she falls down. She has also been afflicted with fatigue, vomiting, dizziness, headaches ... She had a blood test and it showed 33.08 micrograms of lead in her blood.

By contrasting these powerful personal statements (and those of community leaders and activists) with those of company representatives, De Burgos provides the viewer with a better understanding of the serious and complex nature of the situation.

Although the film allows people to speak for themselves, the sickness narratives and other statements are presented in such a way that De Burgos is able to subtly address complex issues of social inequality, social suffering and the biological and social poisoning of a community—a poisoning that appears to involve the direct or indirect collusion of industry, health

professionals and the political system. One of the more powerful statements linking social suffering and social poisoning explicitly comes from Dagoberto Gutiérrez, vice-president of Lutheran University of El Salvador:

The poisoning clearly refers to lead. However, there is another kind of poisoning, which is the relationship between the corporation and the government or the relationship between the market and the state. La Record's contaminating activities were possible because the state was very permissive. This permissiveness coincides with neoliberal philosophy, which establishes that the market is the king and the state is the subject.

For years, the government favoured economic gain over environmental and health concerns. This insight will touch a chord with people in various parts of the world as they struggle with similar issues.

The film has the potential of making an excellent contribution to a variety of anthropology courses (as well as courses in other disciplines). The film can be used to address issues and theories concerned with social inequality, political economy and sickness. It is likely to be of particular interest for medical anthropology and sociology courses. The film can also be used to address important issues about the place or position of the anthropologist in the research process. Near the end of the film, for example, one woman indicates clearly that she has high hopes that the film will be effective in letting people know about their predicament and that those in positions of power will help the community. The film should provide an excellent opportunity for classroom discussion of the anthropologist's responsibilities to the community she or he works with, what is or is not possible in certain circumstances and how one might proceed with advocacy. By placing the film on YouTube, De Burgos has taken the first step in helping to disseminate information about biological and social poisoning in Sitio del Niño. I look forward to reading some of his work to get a better sense of how he is attempting to serve the community.