

altiplano

A film by Brosens & Woodworth

109 minutes, 2009

35mm, 1.85, Dolby SR

In Spanish, Quechua, English, French, Persian with English subtitles



FIRST RUN FEATURES

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PRAISE FOR ALTIPLANO

“Undeniably gorgeous (Francisco Gózon’s cinematography is frequently stunning)...Filled with mythic style and magical thinking.” – Jeannette Catsoulis, [The New York Times](#)

“Strong cast...technically impressive moments... Brosens and Woodworth offer a lyrical approach that uses visual metaphors and thematically hefty gestures to hammer their message home...impeccable, color-rich lensing.” - Jordan Mintzer, [Variety](#)

“*Altiplano* is a lyrical and probing film about our divided but inextricably linked world.”
– [The Washington Post](#)

“Masterfully crafted... the beauty of this work lies in the lyrical storytelling, silence and realization that lurking beneath every beautiful image is something else seething to get out.”
– Amy R. Handler, [Moving Pictures Magazine](#)

“Dreamy...eye-catching...they conjure haunting, achingly beautiful visions...mental reflections from the minds of characters sick in their bodies or their hearts — or their graceful, sweeping, circular camera moves.”
- Ian Buckwalter, [NPR](#)

“Most moving when it relishes the passionate theatricality of folk rituals, even with some surrealism, for a combination of the poetic with the political.” – Nora Lee Mandel, [Film Forward](#)

“The story is all the more compelling because of the music. It brought goose bumps to my skin, as it rose up to fill my ears, my senses with its power, its beauty.” – Linda Zises, [Ladies Film Club](#)

FOUR STARS “Quietly stunning, visually inventive feature...there is no denying the directors’ stunning mise en scene, bold cinematic flair and haunting tale of a world dangerously out of balance.”
- Alex Roberts, [SoundOff.com](#)

“Utterly compelling in its encompassing beauty and design... the photography here is beautiful and compelling, due to its exquisite composition and its use of color and light.” - James van Maanen, [TrustMovies](#)

SYNOPSIS

War photographer Grace, devastated after a violent incident in Iraq, renounces her profession. Her Belgian husband, Max, is a cataract surgeon working at an eye clinic in the high Andes of Peru. Nearby, the villagers of Turubamba succumb to illnesses caused by a mercury spill from a local mine. Saturnina, a young woman in Turubamba, loses her fiancé to the contamination. Ignorant of its true source, the villagers turn their rage on the foreign doctors, and in the ensuing riot Max is killed. Grace sets out on a journey of mourning to the place of Max's death. Saturnina takes drastic measures to protest against the endless violations towards her people and her land. Grace and Saturnina's destinies merge. **ALTIPLANO** is a lyrical and probing film about our divided but inextricably linked world.

DIRECTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Brosens & Woodworth

Since 2001 Brosens & Woodworth have been an extraordinary duo of filmmakers. Their first fiction feature **KHADAK** won 20 international awards, including the 2006 Venice Film Festival's Lion of the Future. The film was also nominated for the 2007 Sundance Grand Jury Award. The acclaimed film was hailed for being "one of the most powerful film meditations ever". www.khadak.com

Peter Brosens

Peter (Belgium, 1962) first visited Peru in 1984 where he studied the invasion settlements of Lima. From 1988 until 1990 he worked in Ecuador studying migration, and in 1992 he investigated protest suicides in the Andes (his award-winning documentary **EL CAMINO DEL TIEMPO** is one of the results). Between 1993 and 1999 Peter produced and co-directed his internationally acclaimed *Mongolia Trilogy* (**CITY OF THE STEPPES**, **STATE OF DOGS & POETS OF MONGOLIA**). Together, these innovative documentaries received 23 awards, were selected for 100 festivals and were distributed around the globe. In 1998 **STATE OF DOGS** won the Grand Prix at the prestigious Visions du Réel Festival in Nyon.

Jessica Woodworth

Jessica (United States, 1971) studied classical theatre and literature at Princeton University. In 1994 she began working in television in Paris and then worked as a documentary researcher and news stringer in China for several years. Jessica obtained an MA in documentary from Stanford University, which brought her to Mongolia to direct a documentary short, **URGA SONG**. In 2000 she received a Fulbright grant from the US government for **THE VIRGIN DIARIES**, a documentary shot in Morocco, which was nominated for the FIPRESCI Award at the 2002 International Documentary Festival of Amsterdam (IDFA).

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

ALTIPLANO is built upon moments of trauma and loss but is, fundamentally, an expression of our faith in the possibility of mutual understanding between people. It is also an extension of deeply personal questions.

Grace is a war photographer who has lost her soul in Iraq. She suffers further grief at the loss of her husband. She is forced to evaluate her perception of reality, her obligations of conscience, her relationship to the image, and her sense of worth as an individual and artist. In Peru, the young Saturnina sacrifices her body in protest against corrupt outsiders. Saturnina's spirit and Grace's body eventually touch, thus infusing one another with purpose and power. This symbiosis reflects our conviction that we, mankind, share a common destiny and, therefore, could potentially share a common sense of responsibility.

Our point of departure is always reality. For example, the devastating mercury spill that took place in the Peruvian village of Choropampa in 2000 inspired the first scene of **ALTIPLANO**. There is an ongoing struggle between Andean communities and mining corporations. This is an invisible war raging - 'invisible' in the sense that it is not considered newsworthy elsewhere. Saturnina's death is based upon a peculiar form of suicide which is evident in certain parts of the Andes – the protest suicide - which Brosens studied extensively in the early 90s during his years spent living between Ecuador and Peru. In fact, Brosens' first documentaries feature an Andean community that is plagued by alcohol, suicide and destructive foreign aid strategies.

But **ALTIPLANO** is not just a film about the conflicts that dominate in the Andes. Through its style, the film transcends the cultural and historical peculiarities of the region. It is an invitation for contemplation of the human condition with its ongoing movements and tensions between creation and destruction, life and death, past and future, body and soul, growth and decay.

And we firmly reject exoticism, which focuses on the differences between people and which thrives on clichés and prejudices. Exoticism is, by definition, 'the charm of the unfamiliar' and the representation of one culture for consumption by another. We believe in a respectful dialogue between cultures, which is linked to an introspective dialogue with our own personal pasts. **ALTIPLANO** is made with a Peruvian audience in mind, as was the case with *Khadak* which was made with the Mongolian audience in mind.

Both history and non-western cultures remind us again and again that rationality cannot be the dominant approach to life and reality. They warn us that this ongoing process of demystification may lead us astray. **ALTIPLANO** (as well as *Khadak*) encourages self-criticism and offers the possibility of rediscovering values and attitudes towards life that were buried long ago in European spiritual patrimony. And we are, indeed, engaged in what could be called 'spiritual' cinema. Formulas dictate so much of storytelling on film these days, as does this ongoing obsession with 'story'. A spiritual cinema, free of market pressures, reminds the viewer of the healing power of wonder; it suggests the need for synthesis over analysis; it honours the complexity of our world; it evokes the sacred; it invites us to be humble and grateful; it respects the mystery of our existence. And mystery, we believe, is precisely what is lacking in today's cinema.

THE STORIES BEHIND THE MOVIES

Moving Pictures

Reviewed by Amy R. Handler
(August 2010)

Directed/Written by: Peter Brosens and Jessica Hope Woodworth
Starring: Magaly Solier, Jasmin Tabatabai, Olivier Gourmet and Edgar Quispe

Award-winning filmmakers Peter Brosens and Jessica Hope Woodworth have woven magic like none other in their newest feature, “Altiplano.” But viewers beware — this highly potent masterpiece is not for children or the faint of heart.

Perhaps the sorcery lies in Altiplano’s form, which simultaneously employs ritual performance, documentary realism, fairy tale and horror. Too easily labeled “arthouse” by some, “Altiplano’s” greatest strength is its health and environmental awareness — highlighting crucial issues affecting us all.

Masterfully crafted, the opening montage presents the characters and their stories with explosive impact. Slowly, these weave together, leaving us reeling with endless, probing questions that reverberate in our own lives.

The first scene opens inside a church at Turubamba, a small Peruvian village high in the Andean mountains (Altiplano). What begins as quiet adoration of the Virgin ends in a theatrical festival, with masked worshipers leading ecstatic parishioners to the streets. The large sculpture of the Virgin is proudly hoisted by two men, one of whom is Ignacio — a key figure in the film. (We also meet Saturnina, his shy and beautiful girlfriend, who fills her days tending sheep and happily preparing for their upcoming marriage.) Celebration abruptly turns to horror when some gleeful children stumble into Ignacio, and the Virgin falls to the ground in pieces.

We’re next diverted to Iraq where war journalist Grace is forced to photograph her partner Omar as he is assassinated.

Back home in Belgium, Grace and husband, Max, host a party. Max, an ophthalmologist, must soon travel to a Peruvian cataract clinic near Turubamba. Still shaken by her experience in Iraq, Grace announces that she will not accompany Max and will withdraw her photograph from the competition awarding her a Pulitzer Prize. She claims it is her camera that causes Omar’s assassination, and because of this she will never photograph again.

Devoutness and superstition go hand-in-hand in the tiny village of Turubamba. The filmmakers do not pass judgment, but merely present life as it is. Not surprisingly, when Ignacio suddenly develops nosebleeds and falls down dead after bringing holy water from the glaciers, speculation begins. Then, when most of the previously healthy population present at Max’s clinic with inexplicable blindness, this seems further proof that the fragmented Virgin is not pleased. Set against these events lurks the discovery of liquid silver, or mercury, in the Turubamban water, soil and air. Saturnina later construes the contamination as the result of miners disrupting the environment in their quest for gold. Initially, mercury is interpreted quite differently by a villager claiming, “It’s beautiful but I don’t trust it.” His friend responds with, “Where there are mines lives the devil.”

Aside from the magnificence of the Altiplano, and the dreaminess of the flowing waters, the beauty of this work lies in the lyrical storytelling, silence and realization that lurking beneath every beautiful image is something else seething to get out.

No matter where the answers lie, kudos to First Run Features for releasing yet another tour de force, and to the filmmakers for incomparable artistic genius. If you see no other movie this summer, run don’t walk to “Altiplano.” It’s a film you can’t afford to miss.

Sacrifice and redemption in the Andes

Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth made their last feature, *Khadak*, in the frozen steppes of Mongolia. They won the Venice Lion of the Future, the prestigious Luigi de Laurentiis Award, and were feted on the international festival circuit for the film, which was about a young nomad facing his destiny to become a shaman at a time of huge social and industrial change in his country. Now, the filmmaking duo have switched continents for their new film, *Altiplano*, which is billed as ‘a lyrical tragedy about sacrifice and redemption in the Andes.’

By Geoffrey Macnab

Why South America? In the days before he became a filmmaker, Peter Brosens explains that he was an ‘urban geographer’ who spent several years studying migration and urban development in Ecuador and Peru. Even before that, as a geography student in Leuven, he had written a thesis on the ‘integration of invasion settlements in Lima, Peru.’

Then, when he was studying visual anthropology at Manchester University, he made a film about protest suicides in the Andes. In other words, he was already passionately interested in the themes that *Altiplano* explores - the erosion of local identity, pollution, the vexed relationship between the wealthy industrial world and remote communities like the Andean village depicted in the film.

Jessica Woodworth adds that as she and Brosens were finishing *Khadak*, they were already beginning to think about their next project. They had read an article about a cataract surgeon who had worked in Peru. This surgeon arrived in Latin America full of optimism but grew frustrated at all the logistical hurdles he encountered while trying to do his work. This gave the filmmakers the germ of the idea for the character of Max, played by Olivier Gourmet. The Belgian actor is best known for his work in films by the Dardenne brothers. Woodworth and Brosens, however, were especially struck by his performance as the book dealer/loner who runs over a kid in *La Petite Chartreuse*. ‘He is the kind of actor who can just “be” in front of the camera, do very little and be so convincing. In a way, he has this emotional honesty and integrity,’ Woodworth says of him.

In the course of their research, the filmmakers read about the 1970 earthquake in Peru, reckoned to be the worst natural disaster in the country’s history. They revisited the site of the quake, which killed more than 70,000 people.

The directors decided early on that one of the main characters in the film should be an ‘image maker’. This gave them the idea for Grace (played by German-Iranian actress Jasmin Tabatabai), the war photographer still traumatised by events in Iraq, where she was forced to take a picture of the assassination of her guide.

The third principal character is Saturnina (played by Magaly Solier, who was recently the lead in the Golden Bear winning *The Milk Of Sorrow*). She is a Peruvian woman whose plans for her wedding are thrown into upheaval by a mysterious illness in her village - an illness caused by a mercury spill.

The mercury spill is based on a true incident in a place called Turubamba in northern Peru. This spill was the subject of Ernesto Cabellos’ award winning documentary *Chroropampa*. As Cabellos revealed, when mercury spills, it evaporates. This allowed the mining company responsible for the spill to avoid responsibility.

Meanwhile, the villagers exposed to the mercury showed symptoms ranging from blindness and amnesia to liver dysfunction and heart problems. Babies in the community were born severely deformed.

Rarefied air

Brosens and Woodworth seldom take the easy path. Shooting *Khadak* in freezing temperatures in Mongolia was grueling but they suggest that *Altiplano* was an even tougher film to make. Thanks to *Khadak*’s rapturous reception at the Toronto, Venice and Sundance Festivals, their profile was relatively high and film funds were ready to support them.

‘Coming into the South American arena and building a team there that was pretty large, it helped that we had an award from Venice,’ Woodworth says. ‘It immediately established us as filmmakers with integrity who had been awarded in Europe. That opened a lot of doors for us. Really qualified people wanted to work with us.’

It helped, too, that the filmmakers have a core team of trusted collaborators, among them editor Nico Leunen and director of sound Michel Shöpping who had worked on *Khadak*. The real challenge was physical and logistical. *Altiplano* was shot high in the Andes. ‘Every day, two or three people were sick because of the altitude,’ Brosens recalls. He adds that it was easier to adjust to the cold of Mongolia (which reached minus 37°C) than to deal with the altitude.

In the rarefied air, any kind of ailment was immediately magnified. Crew members were at risk of becoming dehydrated unless they took plentiful liquids. Brosens and Woodworth had a doctor on set at all times. Oxygen tanks were kept ready to hand. The filmmakers were shooting six days a week, working 14- or 15-hour days.

The film was made on 35mm. No, the directors explain, they didn't consider using digital cameras to make their job easier. The downside to using 35mm was that their lab was in Belgium and that they were shooting in a remote part of Peru. Their rushes had to be flown across the Atlantic. They didn't see the first rushes until three weeks after shooting had begun.

'It could only be 35mm. Only that could carry these kind of landscapes and light,' Woodworth says. Brosens agrees that the film stock gave them the texture they wanted in their visuals.

New extremes

In *Altiplano*, the filmmakers push their storytelling style to new extremes. *Khadak* had 400 images. The new film, which is roughly the same length, has only 250. 'We're dealing with a cinema whose graphic language is very unusual,' notes Woodworth.

At one stage, the local villagers turned against the film crew in their midst. 'They wanted more money,' Woodworth says. The combination of a conniving mayor and a difficult priest didn't help. It was a point of principle for Brosens and Woodworth that they hired as many Peruvians as possible.

'We are very, very careful about making sure that the local people are treated correctly,' Woodworth says. 'We also wanted to contribute something back to the village because we were disrupting their lives a little bit.' The filmmakers established training schemes, employed many locals, contributed a fee to the church community and donated all their props and costumes to the village.

Their hope now is that *Altiplano* - which is being sold internationally by London-based Helen Lovridge's new company Meridiana Films - will have the same charmed life on the festival circuit as *Khadak*. Beyond the festival, Brosens and Woodworth are very keen that *Altiplano* is given a better chance to reach audiences than its predecessor.

'We make films for an audience and it is very hard to get to the audience because of the whole distribution mechanism,' Brosens says. The filmmakers note that *Khadak* wasn't as widely distributed as might have been expected, given its reception in Toronto, Venice and Sundance.

'It was neglected and then it was mistreated,' Woodworth laments. She and Brosens weren't happy with the way their film was publicised and marketed. They acknowledge that distributors who had read the script of *Khadak* in advance may have anticipated 'a different kind of film... those who were expecting an adventurous love story were disappointed.'

It wasn't that the directors strayed from what they had written - more that their approach to their own material was lyrical and deeply personal. They were not making an ethnographic crowd pleaser full of picture postcard imagery. *Khadak* was not their answer to *The Story Of The Weeping Camel*.

Mortified

The filmmakers' frustration at the way they believe the film was mishandled is still palpable. There were distributors who wanted to buy the film but were scared away by the high price that they were quoted. Nonetheless, *Khadak* is not a film that will age. The consolation is that it is likely to be revived often. Meanwhile, in Mongolia itself, the response was very enthusiastic when Woodworth organised a private screening. 'We arranged a premiere for all the crew, the family, cast and diplomatic community,' the director recalls. Sitting in front of her at the screening were 25 shamen. 'I was mortified!' she recalls. In the event, the shamen admired *Khadak*. They formally thanked the filmmakers for their integrity and for offering 'a truthful vision of shamanism - an accurate and rich portrayal of their cosmology.' Young and old Mongolians alike respected what Brosens and Woodworth had done with *Khadak*. Now, the filmmakers are planning to take *Altiplano* to Peru. 'It's always a nonnegotiable principle for us, when we shoot a film in Mongolia and now in Peru, that our local partner always gets all the territorial rights. Symbolically, we will come with a 35mm print and all the tapes and so on.'

Los Ponchos

Looking further ahead, they're planning their first stab at comedy. *Los Ponchos* started as a project about Mongolians coming to Belgium. Now, Brosens and Woodworth are rethinking it as a film about Peruvians going to Mongolia. The new idea is partly based on a true story about some Bolivians who ended up in Mongolia by accident. The challenge now - as Woodworth admits - is 'writing a script that makes you laugh. That's pretty hard.' The filmmakers are also developing another project called *The Book of Edon*, which is to be set between Albania and Italy.

As few profiles of Brosens and Woodworth fail to mention, the filmmakers do more than just make movies. They have their own bed and breakfast in an idyllic village in Wallonia. Casa Bo, as it is called, isn't currently open. As its website proclaims, 'WE ARE TEMPORARILY CLOSED BECAUSE OF FILM PRODUCTION'. The prospects are that it will stay shut for good. 'We don't have time,' says Woodworth. 'We will only reopen if we can't finance our projects.'

'It was actually meant to fill the gaps between productions,' Brosens adds. Partly thanks to the Belgian tax shelter for film, it seems that his days as a hotelier may be numbered. 'The turnover is much higher now. Because of the tax shelter, it is easier to finance a film. Production goes much faster than before... there are no gaps.'

Magnum

Brosens + Woodworth recruited celebrated Magnum photographer Carl De Keyzer as their stills photographer. De Keyzer is best known for his large tableau projects, chronicling infrastructures on the verge of collapse in communities ranging from India to the Soviet Union. 'We knew of Carl before going to Peru,' Woodworth recalls. 'As our ideas developed we knew we wanted a top class photographer in our midst. He is simply the finest in Belgium. So we contacted him, hung out a bit and then set up a structure for the cooperation.' De Keyzer took around 13,000 photos.

If it's possible, the filmmakers hope to arrange an exhibition of the best of this work to coincide with the release of *Altiplano* in Belgium in the autumn.

CREDITS

Drama / 109 min. / 35mm / 1,1:85 / 3081 m. / Dolby Digital
Languages: Spanish, Quechua, English, French, Persian
Locations: Peru & Belgium

A Belgian-German-Dutch Co-production, 2009

www.altiplano.info

Written & Directed by Brosens & Woodworth
Delegate Producer: Heino Deckert, Ma.Ja.De Fiction
Belgian Producers: Peter Brosens & Jessica Woodworth, Bo Films
Belgian Producers: Diana Elbaum & Sébastien Delloye, Entre Chien et Loup
Dutch Producers: Leontine Petit & Joost de Vries, Lemming Film
Associate Producer: Daniel Ró, CineCorp (Lima)

Music: H. Górecki, R. Einhorn, V. Komitas, A. Redouane, Ignatz, Jatun Cajambe & Michel Schöpping

CREW

Director of Photography Francisco Gózon
Editor Nico Leunen
Director of Sound Michel Schöpping
Art Director Peru Guillermo Isa
Art Director Belgium Anne Fournier
1st Ass. Director Peru Gastón Vizcarra
1st Ass. Director Belgium Arnout André de la Porte
Make-up Artist Garance Van Rossum
Sound Recordist Pepijn Aben
Re-recording Mixer Mathieu Cox
Still Photographer Carl De Keyzer
Line Producer Martin Schlüter
Line Producer Peru Mercedes de la Cadena

CAST

Saturnina Magaly Solier
Grace Jasmin Tabatabai
Max Olivier Gourmet
Sami Behi Djanati Atai
Nilo/Omar Edgar Condori
Mother Sonia Loaiza
Ignacio Edgar Quispe
Female Doctor Norma Martinez
Raúl Rodolfo Rodríguez
Rufina Hermelinda Luján
Orlando Arturo Zárate
Paul Andreas Pietschmann
Soldier Antonio Quevedo
Malku Malku-Lin Choquehuillca
Félix Félix Cáceres
Healer Raymundo Chillihuani
Reza Kian Khalili