Franco García Becerra over RAIZ

"Like the landscape: strong, and firmly anchored"

Feliciano's number one passion is football. He even named his alpaca after his favourite player, Ronaldo! Feliciano is overjoyed when he hears that Peru can qualify for the World Cup, but there is not much time to dream. His father gave him one more task to fulfil: to take care of the alpacas in the mountains. But modern machinery threatens both his dream and his job. This film by Franco García Becerra doesn't draw from the excitement of football stages, but from the silence of the mountains, where life slips by slowly, like the clouds that hang around the heads of the people living on the highest Andes peaks.

Congratulations! Peru qualified for the 2018 World Cup in Russia.
Franco García Becerra: For the first time in 36 years! That caused a real euphoria in Peru. Like most Peruvians, I love football. But that national joy contrasted sharply with the social distress in our country.

In the opening scene, Feliciano walks through the field, looking for a radio signal to listen to the football match. In doing so, you illustrate a conflict between nature and modern society?
García Becerra: Nature is part of our lives. In the villages where the film is set, this connection is even stronger. Nature there is pure, and present in all aspects of life. So it wasn't so much about conflict as it was about registering everyday life.

The mining industry thoroughly disturbs that beautiful nature.
García Becerra: By showing the beauty of this region, you realise how threatened it is. Nature, the village community and the whole cosmology of the Andes are based on balance. When the outside world brutally disrupts that balance, it triggers a lot of things in the community. It also awakens mythical forces. In fact, the whole filming process was full of magic.

In what way?
García Becerra: When we found our lead actor Alberth Merma, he was too shy to talk on camera. During the workshops, we saw his self-confidence grow. For the story, we also needed a dog and a baby alpaca that was used to the presence of people. Not easy to find! Until we visited Alberth at home in his village on the mountain, almost in the snow. Suddenly a dog came running towards us, jumping up to him. It turned out to be Alberth's dog, Rambo. A little later, a young alpaca came trickling by, and Alberth climbed on its back. He had a pet alpaca! In disbelief, I looked at the production team... we had our entire main cast together. When you are respectful in life, with the belief that your wishes can come true, sometimes things happen naturally. I experienced the whole film as a gift.

Rambo the Dog and Ronaldo the Alpaca are Feliciano's only friends. Yet Feliciano does not seem to be a lonely child.
García Becerra: In the Andes, animals are part of everyday life; presumably it's like that wherever shepherds live with their animals. He seems all alone in that endless landscape, but he is not. The land, the mountains, the lakes and rivers, the plains and animals... Everything is part of our cosmology. Feliciano is always surrounded by nature.

Your film also goes by the title

THROUGH ROCKS AND CLOUDS. What did you find so special about the iconography of rocks and stones?
García Becerra: In this village, the people are like the landscape: strong, and firmly anchored. That symbolises their strength - whatever changes may come, these stones and this village are there forever. At 5,000 metres, you are almost in the clouds, and that too is a metaphor. The hard stones represent strength, the clouds represent dreams and desires that you can almost touch, but sometimes still slip through your fingers.
With stones you can build beautiful towers.
García Becerra: Feliciano collects stones; you find so many different shapes and colours there. During the shoot, I asked Alberth to build a tower with them, as people often do there. Then we discovered what a master builder he is. Building a tower like this is quite difficult, but he always found the right stone; for him, it's like playing with Lego. He also found the brick that looks like a human face. One day he slipped during a rehearsal, and that's how he found the stone that looks like an alpaca. I definitely wanted that one in the film! I told you: these were magical moments!

In essence, this is a socio-political story.
García Becerra: Social problems are usually viewed from the point of view of adults, without asking ourselves how children feel about them. It was difficult to explain the situation with the mines without changing perspective, yet our gaze consistently stayed with Feliciano, and how his life was affected by the situation. The situation forces him to act on his own and make a decision, though we don't know where it will lead him. Such is the social, geo-political reality in many Latin American countries. Throughout the story, Feliciano acts on the things that are important to him: the animals and his friendship with the alpaca.

At a people's meeting, someone says aloud, 'Who wants that gold and silver? We don't need it.' Mining companies are not inclined to take residents into account.
García Becerra: We filmed in a mining region, so the residents you see in the film are familiar with the issues. When we shot this scene, everyone came up to discuss freely. The film doesn't take a stand, but opposes irresponsible mining without respect for the environment, focused solely on economic progress. The character Grimaldo is the exception; he wants progress for himself and his family, which he hopes to find in the mines. The industry brings division within a community. Because the miners also come from this region, and this condition puts them at odds with their fellow citizens.

Many actors in the film are ordinary people from that area?
García Becerra: Almost all the actors are from Llanacancha or surrounding villages in the district. We consulted with representatives from the villag-

es so they knew what our plans were. Only the actors playing Feliciano's parents are from Puno, a town on the shores of Lake Titicaca. But mining companies operate everywhere throughout southern Peru, so everyone is familiar with the theme. By working with local actors, you also tell the story of the villages and their inhabitants, which lends extra authenticity to the film.

There is an important role for Auki Tayta, a mythical personification of nature.
García Becerra: Auki Tayta is part of the cosmology of the Andes. There are numerous divine entities that protect us, such as Pachamama and Apu, the mountain - which is why sacrifices are made to him. The film shows a free interpretation of this. Therefore, you don't get a complete picture of Auki Tayta; we only want to convey an impression of something supernatural, yet tangibly present. The fascinating thing is that such entities cannot be defined as good or evil - Andean cosmology revolves around balance and equilibrium.

Indeed... Auki Tayta offers help when Feliciano is in need, but the family is also afraid of him.
García Becerra: Out of respect! You don't want to offend such an entity; it represents the earth that gives us food, and so much more. You want to propitiate Auki Tayta and not enter his territory without respect. Mining does not take that into account; it is they who anger him. Auki Tayta has protected the alpacas, but he won't just give them back to you. You have to earn such a favour, for instance by making a sacrifice to the earth. In the Andes, reciprocity is an important concept. It indicates togetherness in a community. Today I do something for you, maybe tomorrow you will do something for me. Giving and receiving, now and later.

You yourself are from the city?
García Becerra: I live in Lima, but am originally from Cusco. From there it's about three hours by car to Ocongate, and from there another hour to the villages where we shot the film. My knowledge of the region was limited. But screenwriter Annemarie Gunkel has family in Pacchanta. She knows daily life there and how it is affected by the presence of the mines.

The miners and protesting villagers interrupt their tussle to watch a football match together.
García Becerra: In the middle of the brawl comes the news that Peru has qualified for the World Cup. What a contrast! At the moment when we should be celebrating, we are fighting. Football should unite the country, but the social situation divides us. The political conflict in Peru continues to drag on; that's why I didn't want to wrap it up in the film.

Despite those different opinions, does everyone in Peru still love football?
García Becerra: We do! Sport does tend to be used to cover social or political problems. That happens in so many countries; you can't blame sport for that.

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Jef De Bock