

PUEBLOS UNIDOS: SWINE FLU GROUND ZERO IN MEXICO, FELIPE CASANOVA AND MIGUEL ANGEL DAZ (2009)

Mexico: Sotavento Creación Interdisciplinaria, AC, Agraviados Films/Chiapas Media Project/Promedios

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The Chiapas Media Project/Promedios is a bi-national partnership that provides worldwide promotion and distribution for the films of indigenous and under-represented film-makers. The distribution strategy modelled by the Chiapas Media Project/Promedios maps a new cultural sphere in which indigenous issues are situated in relation to transnational rather than local or national audiences. Though the Chiapas Media Project/Promedios has historically focused on providing training, equipment, and distribution to the Zapatistas of Chiapas, they have recently begun distributing works from other regions in an effort to diversify their holdings and expand the global reach of their distribution network. Among their new acquisitions is *Pueblos Unidos: Swine Flu Ground Zero in Mexico*, a documentary by Felipe Casanova and Miguel Angel Daz that recently screened at the *7th Festival Internacional de Cine de Morelia*. *Pueblos Unidos* raises urgent questions about the profoundly transnational effects of local political struggles.

The beautiful Perote valley of Veracruz, Mexico is home to several endorheic lagoons: water sources particularly susceptible to pollution due to their lack of access to drainage. It is also home to an industrial pig farm that is a joint venture of the multinational company Agroindustrias de Mexico and US-based Smithfield Farms, the world's largest pork producer. Close to a million hogs a year are raised and slaughtered in this remote farming region, which lies in the shadow of the Cofre de Perote mountain. In 2009, reports began to circulate of a strange flu-like illness infecting close to 60 per cent of the inhabitants of the town of La Gloria in the Perote valley. Though public health officials deny any connection between water contamination caused by industrial farms and the respiratory illnesses that plague the local population, 5 year old Édgar Hernández, a La Gloria resident, was identified as patient zero for the recent global H1N1 'swine flu' pandemic.

Pueblos Unidos: Swine Flu Ground Zero in Mexico documents the relationship between the evaporating lagoons, the industrial farms, and the outraged and sickened farmers of the La Gloria community. The documentary argues that the Mexican government's rush to quell the organization of grassroots labour contributed to the conditions that bred the global pandemic. From the opening scenes of a family travelling over a rutted farm road in a burro cart to the scenes of local organizers blocking a highway in an effort to rouse the local authorities, who have failed to regulate the farm's squalid waste removal practices, the film emphasizes transportation and distribution networks both figuratively and literally.

The farmers of the Perote valley were told that the arrival of the pig farms would invigorate their local economy and bring new jobs to the region. Their hopes were quickly dashed as they found the small number of jobs created paled in comparison to the effects of contamination bred by industrial pig farming. As we see in several surreptitiously filmed sequences, large stagnant

pools of pig waste, ringed with maggots, began to spring up within a few metres of the farmers' irrigation and drinking water wells. Piles of dead pigs were left in the open air, and houses were invaded by an infestation of black flies. In scene after scene, farmers with their hands to their faces describe the unbearable stench.

Frustrated by the company's lack of transparency and clear violations of environmental standards, the farmers organize: the film charts their lack of progress with footage of protests, meetings, interviews, and acts of civil disobedience. In one of the film's evocative sequences, local politicians and farm representatives, who have gathered to speak with the community, refuse to continue speaking when they are confronted with trays of pig waste. When they propose a removal of the trays, a member of the crowd says: 'What we want is that you smell for one or two hours the environment in which we live 24 hours a day.'

The film moves forward dialectically, with frequent cuts between images of farmers living in desperate poverty and stunning, verdant views of the Perote valley. Hand-held shots documenting dusty, crowded demonstrations are intercut with sequences of labour organizers commenting on the events while watching the sequences on laptops in farm kitchens. Emotional interviews with the distraught parents of children who have died of the flu-like illness are followed by the bemused commentary of a German reporter, in town to cover the pandemic, who is frustrated by the townspeople's reluctance to speak with him about the flu. In this way, the film can be read as an inheritor of the political aesthetics of the 'third cinema'. Felipe Casanova and Miguel Angel Daz's work, however, represents an important step forward in the evolution of those political aesthetics. The film's thematic focus on the viral distribution of cultural hybridity and The Chiapas Media Project/Promedios' transnational distribution network reflect emerging trends in transnational film distribution and the new cinematic cultural sphere.