



CUERPO DE DETECTIVES  
POLICIA NACIONAL

ARCHIVO

# La isla

Archives of a Tragedy  
A film by Uli Stelzner

APELLIDOS FACCIOSOS  
NOMBRES  
DIRECCION

NUMERO CARPETA ASUNTO

Interior del domicilio ubicada en  
2a. calle 19-76 Zona 14, siendo es  
cas de sexo femenino, y cinco de  
... cuales no fu

Archives of a Tragedy  
A Film by ULI STELZNER  
Germany/Guatemala 2009, 85 min, HD, colour

script, direction ULI STELZNER director of photography GUILLEMO ESCALÓN  
editing ALENA TEOODRESSU music NIM ALAE, PABLO ALVARADO camera assistance  
CARLA MOLINA sound EDUARDO CACERES projection film footage JORGE MARIO MENDOZ  
still photography CECILIA PORRAS SAENZ actor JON BURN production management  
Guatemala GABRIELA MELENDEZ music arrangement GIACOMO BUONAFINA production  
Guatemala LUCIERNAGA title design MANUELA HARTEL poster design TOLEDO & DERTSCHEI  
executive producer ELKE BENZ, ULI STELZNER, ZORAN SOLOMON sound mixing MARIAN  
MENTRUP supported by HESSISCHE FILMFÖRDERUNG, DED ZFD, SCANWERK, TEO FILM,  
GTZ PCOV, SEPAZ, PNR production OHNE GEPACK FILMPRODUKTION, ISKACINE, LUCIERNAGA



ISKACINE 2009 OHNE GEPACK FILMPRODUKTION www.laaislaguatemala.com

Press Kit 2010  
www.iskacine.com

Poster design toledo i dertschei /viena

# La isla

## Archives of a tragedy

**Bomb threats** at Guatemalan Premiere

Credits

Synopsis

Title Music

The Police and our Archives

Protagonists **war and post war**

Team

Directors Biography

*Uli Stelzner has achieved something special:  
he has transformed pain and sadness into timeless poetry.*  
Jury Award Munich Documentary Film Festival, 2010





## Frontpage of the Guatemalan press on Saturday April 17, 2010

Even a bomb threat and cutting the power supply could not prevent the premiere of the movie »La Isla - Archives of a Tragedy« on Friday night at the National Theatre. An audience of 2,000 people watched in ghastly silence the film about the government crimes committed during the civil war. Tickets for the following two shows had been sold out weeks before.

Background: The film deals with the crimes against humanity, genocide and forced disappearances committed by national security forces against members of the opposition by using the secret police archive found some years ago. So far unpublished film material and CIA documents etc. incriminate among others the rightist presidential candidate and former general Perez Molina. In the days prior to the premiere his party pressurized the German Embassy and accused the Guatemalan government of a systematic smear campaign. Hence government and embassy both forbore from giving their planned welcoming speeches. On the morning of the opening night the National Theatre received a bomb threat and alarm was given, Special Forces marched up. A couple of hours before show begin unknown persons cut the power supply. In the end the film could be projected under great security measures. It was followed by quite emotional and touching moments. Altogether 6,000 spectators visited the three functions over the weekend. The event as such and breaking the silence about the film are today already regarded as historical in Guatemala.

***The most important film in Guatemala of the last decades*** Siglo XXI

***La isla – The fire of our history*** Prensa Libre

***The end of the silence!*** El Periodico

## Credits

**Script and Direction** Uli Stelzner

**Director of Photography** Guillermo Escalón

**Edition** Alina Teodorescu

**Illumination and Camera Assistance** Carla Molina

**Sound** Eduardo Cáceres

**Second Camera** Carla Molina, Uli Stelzner

**Actor** Jon Dunn

**Composition and Music** Nim Ala (Rap), Paulo Alvarado (Cello)

**Reproduction Photography** Cecilia Porras Saenz

**Archive Projection** Jorge Mario Mendez

**Sound Mixing** Marian Mentrup

**Title Design** Manuela Hartel

**Colour Grading** Peter Deinas

**Postproduction/Avid** Georg Haas

**Production Guatemala** Gabriela Melendez

**Producers** Uli Stelzner, Elke Benz, Zoran Solomun

**Production** iskacine (Germany), ohne gepäck filmproduktion (Germany)  
Asociación Luciernaga (Guatemala)

**Funding** Hessische Filmförderung, Zfd/DED, Sepaz/PNR, Scanwerk, GtZ-PCON  
Guatemala/Germany 2009, HD, 85', colour/b/w, spanish/english OV  
with english/german subtitles, Contact: iskacine@yahoo.de and  
info@ohnegepaeck.de, Berlin/Germany, © 2009 www.iskacine.com

**Festivals:** IDFA Amsterdam, Kassel International Documentary Festival, BAFICI  
Buenos Aires Independant Filmfestival, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival,  
Chicago Latino Film Festival, EDOC Ecuador, Munich International Documentary  
Film Festival, AFI/Silverdocs.

**Award:** Mimikri Film Price Munich Documentary Film Festival, 2010



## Synopsis

From behind protective masks, almost two hundred, mostly young people look through and clean stacks upon stacks of papers and documents at long tables in a cold and run down building in Guatemala City. The mountains of folders are one of the most unbelievable findings in Latin American history.

Guatemala at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – army and police kill and abduct hundreds and thousands of people. But the unprecedented genocide in America's modern History goes unpunished. To this day a system of terror and impunity relies on silence being kept and the lack of evidence. There is no justice in Guatemala, just unresolved crimes.

But in July 2005 a huge explosion in the Guatemalan capital leads to the discovery of the historic archive of Guatemala's National Police. On the grounds of today's Police Academy used to be located the *Island*, the secret prison of notorious *Policia Nacional* squads. And here millions of documents appeared. Aided by an extraordinary visual and emotional interaction, the film traces the story of a tragedy and finds prove for inconceivable atrocities committed by police, army and businessmen, supported by the CIA during several decades. It is also a movie about a young generation of archive workers, willing to free a society from the stranglehold of its own history.



## **Intro poetry and title music**

*by Nim Alae*

*The hour of truth has arrived  
the past is not forgotten,  
war passed by here mortal results,  
lethal annihilation.  
After so many years, dark pages fall open so many  
of the dead demand justice from above,  
Welcome to Guatemalan reality!  
Thousands of survivors are talking  
millions of papers are telling what happened.  
That's the hidden story of the island:  
illegal police files.  
Your nation filled with violation, execution, disappeared.  
Repressive plans, against subversives,  
policy of genocide  
so many familiar deaths on the streets.  
So many devastated souls.  
You feel the cold, look out,  
how evil! Saying, Lord have mercy, won't do Gentlemen.  
Looking away is not allowed you see, latent impunity  
The names of students, teachers, workers, peasants are  
buried in the conscience of the army, their camouflage  
suits hiding the blood stains, pigeonholed in secret mazes  
censored by some mestizos.  
The hour of truth has arrived, the past will not be forgotten...*



## The National Police and other archives

The archive was found on the outskirts of Guatemala City in the police compound. Three years ago, in 2005, some explosives detonated and building parts landed on surrounding houses. Since the police usually does not react, the neighbors informed the human rights office. During the inspection the human rights workers found not only boxes of ammunition but another kind of explosive material: bags upon bags filled with documents, folders and index cards.

The ombudsman for human rights obtained a court order, reasoning that the evidence present could be involved in ongoing investigations and within hours received authority over the archive. Historians were called on and experts flown in and they quickly came to the same conclusion: not only is it the always archive of the central police, whose existence had always been denied by the government and army, but also the most complete archive of the entire American continent, nearly 80 millions files.

(See background article: *The Guatemalan Police Archives* by Kate Doyle).



Contract murders, abductions of the opposition by the police and, some cases also the military, are documented in the gigantic 14-room archive. The oldest documents date back to 1905. The human rights state representative wants, however, to manly use the archive to solve a thousand crimes committed by the police during the darkest time of the civil war between 1960 and 1996. There were about 250.000 people killed and some 45.000 people missing until today. 20.000 people killed and buried at the Guatemala-City *La Verbena* Cementery as XX. Those who have committed genocide and their accomplices are still free like Grl. Rios Montt, ex-minister of interior Donaldo, Alvarez Ruiz, Grl. Benedicto Lucas Garcia and others.

The documents in the archive show how the information came together, how army and intelligence services took control by persecuting and murdering the opposition. Processing the archive is a delicate and highly political venture. Here the orders can be found – the evidence for future investigations.

Two people received the privilege of access to the archive, Guatemalan author Rodrigo Rey Rosa (*‘El Material Humano’*) and myself. In the past two years I have made two films in Guatemala that are considered important components in working through Guatemala's history. The administration of the archive knows that the documentation of their work is also an important part of the historical record. Three years of investigation and preparation, long and difficult political discussions with the Archive managers as well as a careful selection of the protagonists began before shooting the film.



I knew that I could not make a film only with the archive documents, I needed a visual concept trying to put in visual evidence what happened.

**La isla** should be a film about searching for understanding for history.

Two years ago I looked for and found archive material in Europe and the USA for a film archive that is to be created in Guatemala. I came across unpublished material of the US army about the history and intervention in Guatemala – counter-insurgency measures, military training... The causes and mechanisms of repression are largely unknown to the generation of today. I decided to introduce another archive into the archive. That's how the film footage found his way to the gray concrete walls. Most of the film footage is not known in Guatemala. US and European filmmakers shot their films and went back to their countries where the films disappeared in TV archives. Now we bring back these images within a new context.

Together with the police archive files, declassified CIA documents, army documents and the stories of the protagonists we can explain the terror system.

## The protagonists

### The war generation



The siblings **Armando and Veronica** Morales. Armando returned from his French exile to Guatemala to tell his family story together with his sister Veronica, who lives with his mother in poor conditions in Chimaltenango. After the killing of his uncle, Armando joined the Guerrilla Army Of The Poor; he was 19 years old. During the following two years, 13 family members were killed and disappeared by army and police, one uncle was killed by the EGP. Veronica was a 13 year old girl when she was arrested and beaten in prison. After escaping, she lived in the streets of Guatemala City and had two children. They were taken away from her and one was given up for adoption. She is looking for them until this very day. Today the Morales family survivors are dispersed over several countries. Armando and Veronica were the first victims getting access to the archive for the documentary. They are exemplary for the fate of thousands of Guatemalans war victims, looking for their disappeared family members and justice

#### **Armando explains why he joined the guerilla movement.**

*At that moment, I understood what went on in this country. And without saying a thing to anyone, I joined the revolutionary movement We want to respond to an injustice, worse, to a crime (killing of his uncle), to the incapability of the judiciary and the state to stop that. We have always said, if the state and the judiciary had accomplished their tasks, maybe we wouldn't have to moan now the additional killings that followed.*

#### **Armando after seeing the archive files of their family members**

*We got access to a series of police documents that confirm, for instance, the capture of my brother Otto Raúl Morales and my cousin Noé Salomón. Next they are transferred. But a little note attached says that after leaving the courthouse the two policemen, who accompanied them, could not prevent their abduction and deportation. Obviously we won't accept that, that are false pretences. It was simply the police mode for killing people. It re-confirms, what my uncle had assumed upon leaving prison, namely that they killed my dad and my brother.*

#### **Veronica about her trauma suffered in prison as a 13-year old girl**

*Since then I have suffered a lot. Never again have I been happy.*



**Elias Barahona** was press secretary to the Interior Ministry from 1976 to 1980, years of brutal repression in Guatemala. Barahona was infiltrated by the EGP as a spy. He gathered information about police and army members for the guerrilla and witnessed important meetings between Interior Minister Donaldto Alvarez and President Lucas García, where important decisions, like e.g. the killing of Manuel Colom Argueta and the burning of the Spanish Embassy in 1980 were made. In the same year he went into exile in Costa Rica and held a press conference reporting the atrocities committed by the government and its entities as well as their links to the death squads.

Afterwards he lived for two decades in exile before returning to Guatemala. Since the Spanish Justice started proceedings against several army and police members for crimes against humanity and genocide, he became a crucial and protected witness. When I asked him to participate in the film, he immediately accepted.

### **Elias Barahona**

*Its main task (the police) consisted in countering the insurgency. And under this pretext it committed incredible crimes against the civilian Population. During the 1960s and 1970s the Guatemalan army and police had almost no experience in counter-insurgency, so the United States took the lead.*

*There was a political murder programme directed against intellectuals, professionals, peasant leaders, and labour leaders; the political opposition was to be eliminated. The army was in charge of that. The National Police and the Political Police were merely supplementary stooges of the armed forces, who in turn operated with both, uniformed agents as well as death squads, composed of plainclothes soldiers in unmarked cars.*

*In addition to military advisers from the US, there were Chilean, Argentine, and Uruguayan advisers, and out of America Taiwan collaborated a lot. Israel provided the famous Arava, civil aircrafts equipped with artillery and the Galil automatic weapons, the official army machine gun.*

*You have to understand that in Guatemala the oligarchy always had the power. Their main instruments were the army, the police and the death squads too. Now, what can the Archive achieve? It can help to contextualize things, to determine names and connect them to specific events. And once you have the names, it goes without saying that they were spiritual and even material fathers.*



**Jon Dunn**, US film professor living in Guatemala, is the only actor in the film, reading the CIA documents. Trying to find the truth, you have to indicate the maximum of responsibilities. In the Police Archive, you can find the police responsibilities. But the police agents who performed abductions and torture are the material actors of human rights violations. Who taught them and who were the spiritual fathers? Police Archive files prove that US Aid and other programs were involved since the late 1950s in Guatemalan Police activities. I didn't get access to many documents I asked for, but I found answers in the declassified CIA documents from the 1960 to 1990s. Jon Dunn also cites an amazing document of a female Guatemalan businesswoman with direct connection to US-President Ronald Reagan and who asks the Director of Police *to blitz her whole estate, because the peasants help the guerrillas*. The film footage we used in these scenes is from National Archive Washington, shot by US military film teams based in Panama US- barracks as well as the Finnish documentary "*Headline Today: Guatemala*" written and shot by Mikael Wallfors.

#### **CIA documents** (extracts)

*I met with Col. Peralta and recommended the following general plan of action. That I meet immediately with the directors of the National Police, Judicial Police to determine both overt and covert means. Basically the plan was as follows: combined uniformed police raids in Guatemala-City to force some of the wanted communists into police hands. Establish report with the various police agencies that would lead to US advisors being able to influence police officials and give them day to day operational advice. We fully support and initiate military psychological warfare training and additional counter insurgency operations training (1963).*

*People are killed or disappeared the basis of simple accusations. The official squads are guilty of atrocities. Interrogations are brutal, tortures are used and bodies are mutilated. How tragic that the tactics of our side would be in any way be responsible or that event. Murder, torture and mutilation are alright if our side is doing it and the victims are communists. The point is, that the society is being rent apart and polarized. Emotions, desire for revenge and personal bitterness are being sucked in. The tactics have just deepened and continued the proclivity of Guatemalans to operate outside the law. It says in effect to people that the law, the constitution, the institutions mean nothing, the fastest guns counts. How fortunate to us that there is no charismatic leader around yet to spark an explosion (1967).*

*The commanding officers of the units involved have been instructed to destroy all towns and villages, and according to reports, the soldiers were forced to fire at anything that moved (1982).*

## The protagonists

### The post war generation



**Rolando** is a 28 year old Guatemalan who works since its discovery in the Archive in the investigation department. He and Ajpuu/Nim Ala represent the post-war- generation. They are often called the lost generation, distinguished by traumas, exile and no interest for current political affairs in Guatemala. I became acquainted with a lot of them in the last few years and had an open eye and ear for their issues in managing the presence and the past. Historical Memory makes no sense for me if you do not focus on the young generation. They have the hard job to learn more about their parents and the causes of the conflict, about the “why” everything happened. In some cases they don’t even know where they are. Rolando took several weeks in deciding if he should participate in the film or not. He says he has 8 siblings and it is not usual to talk about feelings and to challenge the family past. In the end he accepted the interview, although narrow-minded archive bureaucracy prohibited him to talk about family issues and his killed father. Finally, on the last shooting day on a Sunday afternoon, he talked about everything. He never returned to his work after our meeting.

#### **Rolando**

*190 people work here and it's not unusual, if someone comes across documents member of a family I am not here for personal reasons, but if you work here, you obviously won't say I don't care.*

*There are no innocents among the disappeared. They were all guilty of dreaming about a better world. I am proud that my father was not just an impassive onlooker. He believed that things could change and died for that. But it is also vital – not only for me personally but for the collective memory - to know the names of the people responsible. Our family was lucky enough to know that they had killed him, to be able to bury him. But the great majority of the families of the disappeared never found out what happened. And nobody can live easy with that uncertainty: kids, who believe they will find their parents alive. Mothers clinging to the idea of seeing their children again, And this is where justice begins: to find out the truth, and completely so!*



*It really hits you when you enter this terrible building, with its dark aisles, which at that time were dark and without windows...People probably died or were tortured here. It's hard to be here, subjected to this fucked up energy. Then again it reaffirms that you're alive. Though there is no justice here and the attempt is made to bury the truth, it is an important contribution to history. And it is of great significance that it comes from this place, where so many disappeared were held.*





**Ajpuu** is a young Mayan working in the data security. He was born in the Sololá countryside, where he experienced army repression as a small boy. His community supported the rebels and after the army massacres his family had to move to the South Coast working on an estate. Ajpuu always suffered the discrimination from the landowners and was punished for not speaking Spanish. When army members killed his father, he moved to Guatemala-City looking for work in the streets, until he met members of HIJOS. This is a political organization of young people who try to find their killed or disappeared parents, demanding justice and legal proceedings. He became a young Rapper (Nim Ala), singing in Spanish and the Mayan language Kak'chikel. Rap at its most original: expressing oneself and political statements. I met him together with Mela, a mutual friend who also well in the archive and tragically died in 2009. Ajpuu composed the Rap *La isla 13-85* for the film. The film starts with his words spoken in K'akchikel, the Rap, and at the end of the film we shot the Rap directly in the archive. Ajpuu finished working in the archive, looking for new horizons outside of Guatemala.

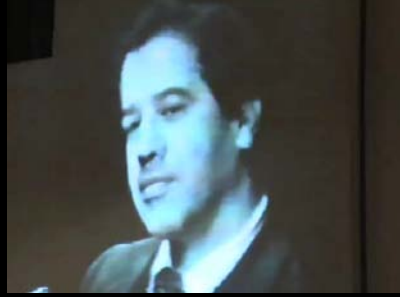
### **Ajpuu**

*My father was killed for political reasons His death, the memory of him and my disappeared uncles are pressing down on me. When I had the chance to work here in the archive, it was like a ray of light, a path opening up to me. Maybe I'd come across my uncles' names or reports by people, who know my family. But it took a lot of courage to face history.*

*We were the children of the war, had the same history: a fucked up childhood, the parents in the movement, many people dead. We also had to try to find happiness again, which is something that I personally hardly ever knew.*

*The archive is more than a memory of what happened. It is an important element to bring those responsible for all the dead and disappeared to trial.*





**Rodolfo** is a young police archive investigator working the case of the assassination of Manuel Colom Argueta, who was mayor of Guatemala City and an important progressive leader of the opposition in Guatemala. He would have been the winner of elections in 1980. However, Colom was assassinated by 36 gunshots in March 1979 in his car, being the target of a carefully planned military operation that included army helicopters and several military and police resources. We screened the film footage of his death on the wall outside of the archive, because Colom Argueta was the last democratic hope before the decade of massacres began. We hear his voice in the dark night of Guatemala City, promising hope shortly before his killing. The CIA document we had heard before: *How fortunate for us (the US), that there is no charismatic leader around yet to spark an explosion.* Without any doubt, Colom Argueta was the most charismatic leader in the last decades. His nephew Alvaro Colom became President of Guatemala in 2008. Rodolfo doesn't work in the archive any more.

### **Manuel Colom Argueta**

*Only during the decade of democratic spring(1944-1954) attempts were made to introduce progress via a democratic system and a social process. A minority, ruling outside the democratic process and responsible for the high level of violence, has prevented that the Guatemalan people are protagonists of their proper history. The extreme right claims that any kind of opposition is rebellion; that all social and labour issues are rebellion. Meanwhile Guatemala sheds more and more innocent blood solely due to the blindness and intransigence of those, who restrict freedom in favour of factious and foreign interests!*

### **Rodolfo**

*Guatemala was deeply affected by all those disappearances, by the extermination of more than one generation of students, academics professors and university lecturers, who were killed simply on the grounds of being opposed to the regime not necessarily radicals in the sense of armed insurgents. In many cases we are talking about the legal opposition.*



# Team



Carla Molina



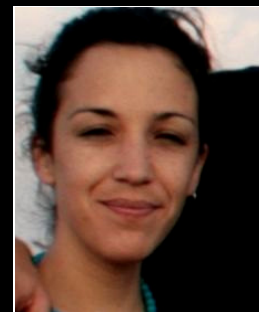
Gabriela Melendez



Eduardo Cáceres



Guillermo Escalón



Cecilia Porras Saenz



Jorge Mario Mendez



Paulo Alvarado

## Biography



Uli Stelzner

**1961-1980** childhood in Central Germany (kindergarten, School, street soccer) and Franconia (high school, semi-pro footballer, mailman, garbage man, A-levels)  
**1981-1982** teacher in a rural community in Bolivia **1983** Baker in Switzerland  
**1984 – 1991** sojourns in Nicaragua, Cuba, Peru and Siberia. University (pedagogics and visual communication) in Kassel. Teaching position for social photography at a miners' university in Bolivia. Travelled with Dynamo Windrad Kassel (football for fun) to Cuba, the USSR, and GDR. Co-founded the independent media group **ISKA**.

**Since 1992** documentaries, *Mobile Cinema*, teaching positions for documentaries in Latin America as well as permanent cooperation with the *Visual Remembrance* project in Guatemala. Member of the German Association of documentarists **agdok** and co-founder of the Guatemalan Association of Audiovisuals **AgaCine**. Founder of The Guatemalan Film Festival *Memory, Truth and Justice* in Guatemala 2010. Lives as author, director and producer between Berlin and Central America.

### Documentaries \* with Thomas Walther

Somos ambulantes, 1987

Ojalá, 1992 \*

Romper el cerco – Refugees of a hidden war, 1994 \*

The Civilizers – Germans in Guatemala, 1998 \*

The adventures of a cat, 2000 \*

Testamento, 2003 \*

Assaulted Dream, 2006

La isla – Archives of a tragedy, 2009