



testamento

a documentary
by Uli Stelzner and Thomas Walther

Booklet



I've seen it and keep on doing so. This film resembles life so much that it remains alive in those who see it. An honest film, with no make-up, no delusions. Things, the way they are: walking hurts and inflicts pains. This is the story of the long walk of Alfonso Bauer Paíz. He takes steps against the pain of his country. Hurt, but erect – like the country itself.

Eduardo Galeano

testamento

Germany, documentary, 93 min., beta SP/35mm, spanish with german/english subtitles, Germany 2003

TV-Version 89 min./ spanish with german voice over

Script/Direction/Edition: Uli Stelzner y Thomas Walther

Director of Photography: Thomas Walther

Sound Recording: Otto Gaytán Silva and Uli Stelzner

Composition and Music: Tito Medina and Paulo Alvarado

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Short synopsis

For more than five decades now,
the socialist and freemason Alfonso Bauer Paiz
is fighting for social justice in Guatemala.

The film depicts the ideals and the legacy
of a man, who revives the past and the present of Latin America.

Synopsis



Alfonso Bauer Paiz is 83 years old, lawyer and living in Guatemala. For more than half a century he has been fighting for social justice.

He is a man of imperturbable principles. As a convinced socialist and freemason he defends his country against intervention and dictatorships. He is persecuted, forced to exile several times which lead him to the foci of Latin American history. He puts himself completely at the service of latin american revolution in Chile, Cuba and Nicaragua. But the price he pays for his ideals is high. Wives and daughters die an untimely death...

After the end of civil war in Guatemala he returns as legal counsel of the tens of thousands of indigenous refugees returning from Mexico to Guatemala – into a country shattered by war. Four years later the first free elections after decades of dictatorship take place. And he succeeds in entering into Congress. But an old general, responsible for the genocide of the Mayan people, commandeers this.

The long battle for justice seems to be lost. But Alfonso Bauer Paíz is convinced that nothing happens in vain.

The film tells the life story of a restless man and his ideals.

A history of the Latin American revolution.

Biographical data of Alfonso Bauer Paiz



- 1918** born in Guatemala-City as the son of a renowned journalist.
- 1936 - 42** Studies of law and social science. Works as a reporter for the Guatemalan daily "*Nuestro Diario*".
- 1944 - 46** participates as a young lawyer in the overthrow of the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico. He becomes the youngest delegate and dedicates his work to the foundation of Guatemala's first unions.
- 1946 – 48** Bauer Paiz becomes professor for jurisprudence and social science. Shortly afterwards he becomes leader of the nationwide cooperative establishments. Subsequently he initialises the new Labour Acts and Courts.
- 1948 – 51** Minister for labour and economy. He subjects the big international groups against their opposition to the new Labour- and Social Legislation. Bauer Paiz supports the big strikes against the *United Fruit Company*. Elaborates act for the protection of oil resources.
- 1951 – 53** Leader of the national agricultural cooperatives. Beginning of the friendship with the young Ernesto Guevara. Bauer Paiz participates in the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York.
- 1953 - 54** Director of the National Agricultural Bank, funding the land reform of president Jacobo Arbenz. 300.000 families receive arable land.
- 1954** The US along with parts of the Guatemalan army, the agricultural oligarchy and catholic clergy throw over the revolutionary administration. Accompanied by his first wife Yolanda and their daughters Ilsa, Eleonora and Yolandita he goes into exile in Mexico. At the same time Teresa Carillo, who later is to become his second wife, gives birth to his daughter Abigail in Guatemala.

- 1954 – 57** Exile in Mexiko. He works as a food vendor and translator. Writes the book “How the Yankee capital operated in Central America.” Renews his contact to Ernesto Guevara, whom Bauer Paiz hides in his home from the Mexican security organs. He is accepted into a freemason lodge of republican refugees from Spain.
- 1957 -63** Alfonso Bauer Paiz returns on foot to Guatemala. Weeks turning into month in the underground follow, foundation of the Party of Revolutionary Unity, several arrests. Resumes his work as a lawyer. Return of his family. 1962 student riots, beginning of the guerrilla war.
- 1963** Military coup d’etat of Colonel Peralta Azurdia. Ruthless persecution of any kind of opposition. Militarization of the country with the assistance of the US-Army. Beginning of the *dirty war* of the army.
- 1964 –67** Resumes his work as a university professor and lawyer of the banana workers’ unions. Together with other lawyers Bauer Paiz makes public the existence of a secret contract between the military government and the US-Canadian nickel company *Exmibal*. Receives first death threats by death squadrons, bombing of his family home, Bauer Paiz publishes his *Political Legacy*. Thousands of farmers and students are being killed. The guerrilla gains strength.
- 1968** The photo of Bauer Paiz appears in a leaflet distributed by the army, denouncing him as member of the guerrilla. Assassination of his son-in-law. Suicide of his 15-year old daughter Yolandita.
- 1970** Bauer Paiz is gravely injured in an attempted assassination. A second attack takes place while still at the hospital.
- 1971** Bauer Paíz is flown clandestinely to Chile. Departure of his family. Daughter Abigaíl and her mother go into Exile in Algiers. After his recovery Bauer Paiz starts to work in the planning ministry of the Allende-Administration. Representative of the ministry at the III. United Nations Conference on economy and trade.
- 1973** General Pinochet throws over the government of Salvador Allende. Thousands of Chileans are being tortured and killed. Accompanied by his son Carlos Bauer Paiz travels to Peru and seeks political asylum in Cuba. Separation from his first wife Yolanda, who returns to Guatemala. Daughter Eleonora moves to Argentina, whereas daughter Ilsa had already moved to Cuba two years previously.
- 1974 – 80** Works in Cuba first in the national meat industry and subsequently in the ministry of justice. Daughter Ilsa dies of cancer.
- 1980 – 88** Bauer Paiz becomes the close advisor of the Nicaraguan labour minister. His first wife Yolanda dies in Guatemala, marriage with Teresa Carillo, mother of his daughter Abigaíl. In Guatemala the army implements under the leadership of general Rios Montt the „Policy of Torched Earth.” Tens of thousands of Mayan people are being killed, more than 200,000 flee to Mexico.
- 1988** Bauer Paiz becomes legal counsel of the Guatemalan refugees in Mexico and participates as their representative in the early 1990s in the “National Dialogue” to end the civil war.

1993 Return of the first refugee contingents to Guatemala. Bauer Paiz returns as well to Guatemala and remains as counsel of the returnees.

1994 Within a few days his daughter Eleonora dies of cancer and his wife Teresa of pneumonia. Participates in the foundation of the Democratic Front of a New Guatemala, FDNG. Signing of the peace accord that puts an end to 36 years of war. Bauer Paiz represents the refugees in the Technical Commission for refugee intergration

1995 Marriage with Miriam Colón.



1999 In the second free elections since 1946 he is being elected into congress for the left-wing coalition *Alliance New Nation*, where is the oldest delegate. The far-right populist FRG, commandeered by general Rios Montt, possesses the absolute majority in congress.

2003 Alfonso Bauer Paiz, now 85 years old, is being caught and injured by a bus in downtown Guatemala-City. The presentations of the film *testamento* lure 14.000 spectators. The story of Alfonso Bauer Paiz is featured in various special editions of the print media. Within the course of the electoral campaign he leaves his party, the ANN.

Guatemala – Theatre of the Cold War

The Revolution 1944 – 1954

Alfonso Bauer Paiz's battle for justice always meant a battle against the hegemony and external regulation of the USA, playing an essential part in the political process of Latin America. In this manner its proceedings in the *banana republic* Guatemala are marked by economic hegemony, immediate interventions, military aid and counter-insurgency operations executed both by soldiers and civilians.

On March 17th, 2003 the Berlin daily newspaper "die tageszeitung" published a short note: "The *US-State Department* has inserted the involvement of the *CIA* in the *Guatemalan putsch* 49 years ago into the official historiography of the USA. *US-intelligence* planned the *coup d'etat* within in the scope of its *anti-communism crusade*." During a speech held 1996 in Guatemala former US president Bill Clinton had said, that for the US-aid for the Guatemalan military and intelligence had been a mistake; a mistake that should not be repeated. Assurances and admissions at the end of a century, which only conceded ten non-violent years for Guatemala: the decade 1944-1954, which coincides with the crucial period of Alfonso Bauer Paiz's political career.

Initially the revolutionary movement had been rather pro-USA. The first public demonstration took place in 1942 in protest of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. The revolutionaries' ideology consisted predominantly in liberal views. The *leitmotif* were the four freedoms proclaimed by president Roosevelt in his 1941 address to Congress: freedom of speech and expression, religious liberty, economic freedom and the freedom from fear, "which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbour – anywhere in the world."



Guatemala wanted to get rid of dictatorship, feudalism, analphabetism and economic dependency. „*Colony* strived to become the fatherland,“ writes Eduardo Galeano; „till 1944 the nation was witness and victim but no protagonist of its history.“ But when the young revolution went ahead with the Rooseveltian freedoms by taking competitive measures against US-

transportation and infrastructure monopolies, first destabilisation attempts were made. Finally the land reform in 1952, aiming to diminish the economic dependency on the *United Fruit Company* and to help destitute farmers in getting land, caused the USA to overthrow the government.

Numerous government officials, including the film's protagonists Bauer Paiz and Marco Antonio Villamar, were forced to leave the country. The new military government repealed the progressive laws and the UFCo. received restitution; union members were mercilessly persecuted and their organisations forbidden.

The overthrow of the revolution in 1954 signified a harsh shock for a whole generation in Latin America. It triggered the young Ernesto *Che* Guevara, who visited Guatemala during that era, into taking radical measures: he consequently observed the armed conflict as the only solution. Only a couple of years later the first Guatemalan opponents will take up arms. The country won't come to rest any more – and neither will Alfonso Bauer Paíz.

The Sixties – Beginning of a Dirty War

The overthrow of the Arbenz administration leads to a civil war that begins in 1960 and will last till 1996. The Cuban revolution of 1959 gives new impulses. In Guatemala the social misery leads young officers, trained in US-military camps, to start the guerrilla war. Young Cesar Montes, also featuring in this film, is one of the heads of the insurgents.

After col. Peralta Azurdia's coup d'état in 1963 constitutional laws are being annulled, opponents persecuted and tortured. Guatemala becomes the first laboratory of the Dirty War in Latin America. The USA increase their military aid and send advisors. They participate in creating paramilitary units. More than 8,000 people die between 1966 and 1968. The death squads alone killed more than 1,000 people, including numerous trade unionists, university professors, teachers and students. Alfonso Bauer Paíz survives three attacks on his life between 1963 and 1970. Another one in 1971 leaves him so gravely injured that he is forced into exile again. His return will take almost the quarter of a century.

The genocide/ethnocide of the Mayan people

Since the revolution of 1944 it was predominantly the petty bourgeoisie that opposed to the injustice. Starting with the 1970s the indigenous people of Guatemala (who amount to 60 per cent of the total population and descend from the Mayan people) turned more and more into the protagonists of the resistance. The racism stirred up for centuries by the *ladinos* of Spanish descent, the ever-increasing land theft of the oligarchy, military and multinational enterprises drove the indigenous people initially into the political

but later on as well into the military resistance of the guerrilla. In the early Eighties the military government led by general Rios Montt decided upon the policy of *Scorched Earth* turning Guatemala into a bloodbath. With the international public focussed on the conflicts of El Salvador and Nicaragua, an insidious genocide took its course in Guatemala: over 400 indigenous villages were razed to the ground. 200,000 people fled to Mexico, where by 1989 Alfonso Bauer Paiz became the legal adviser of the refugee organisations. In the late 80s Guatemala had become a country of widows and orphans. At that time a democratic process started throughout Latin America, which included Guatemala. The military regimes had paid their anticommunist dues, wiped out a whole generation of opponents continent wide, and enriched itself recklessly. The USA recognized that controlled democracies in its backyard were the better long-term solution. In 1996 a badly debilitated Guatemala guerrilla signed a peace accord with the government that put an end to a brutal 36 years-lasting war, which claimed 200,000 lives.



Pathetic Peace

After wrapping up the peace treaty two independent truth commissions reached the conclusion that the army and their paramilitary organisations committed 98% of the violent crimes in Guatemala. The continuous impunity for any kind of human rights violation to this very day can be explained by the fact, that contrary to, for instance South Africa, the commissions did not provide for a legal prosecution of the persons responsible. Tragedy of this history is that today general Rios Montt, author of the massacres, is president of the congress. It is quite possible, that by the time this booklet is published in fall 2003, he will even be the new president elect of Guatemala. The only democratic period Guatemala experienced was during the revolution 1944-1954, an era referred to as Guatemalan Spring. Thus far the country has not recovered politically and economically from that; not to mention the majority of the population, still traumatized by the atrocities of war. The story of Alfonso Bauer Paiz is the story of many people in Latin America, who paid dearly for their commitment to social justice. In Guatemala his ongoing battle stands for the continuous validity of the ideals of the 1944 revolution.

Tears of history

Excerpts from an interview with Guatemalan daily newspaper *La Hora* with Uli Stelzner, a few days before starting the mobile cinema filmtour “*Living the History*”, the presentation of *testamento* in Guatemala.

LH: How did you get the idea for *testamento*?

US: *In 1992 we made „Ojalá“, a film about the Guatemalan refugees in Mexico. In this context we met Alfonso Bauer, who then was the legal counsel of the refugees. Our interview with him succeeded by far the subject of our film. We spotted biographical data that we reckoned to be extremely interesting, sufficient material for a film worth seeing. We had, however, already started the preparations for “The Civilizers”, so the project had to be put off for a couple of years. During the film festival in Havana in 1999 Thomas and I decided to resume the idea. From today’s point of view, I’d say that the long wait has been worth its while.*

LH: What were the biographical data that made such an impact on you?

US: *First of all of course his participation in the revolution of 1944, a crucial date for Guatemala. Furthermore his involvement in the Latin American revolutions, his friendship with Che Guevara, his exiles, the attempted assassinations, all of them characteristics for several generations of Latin American revolutionaries. But above all it was the image of a charismatic man, who – in spite of his quite old age - had stayed very young and chosen a simple life at the service of the refugees. And it was this quijotesque obstinacy of his efforts for justice, his ideals, his stamina...this impression with all its contradictions, that was decisive for our determination.*

LH: Everbody is entitled to a worthy portrait. This is a difficult task that requires sincerity and a certain obligation...

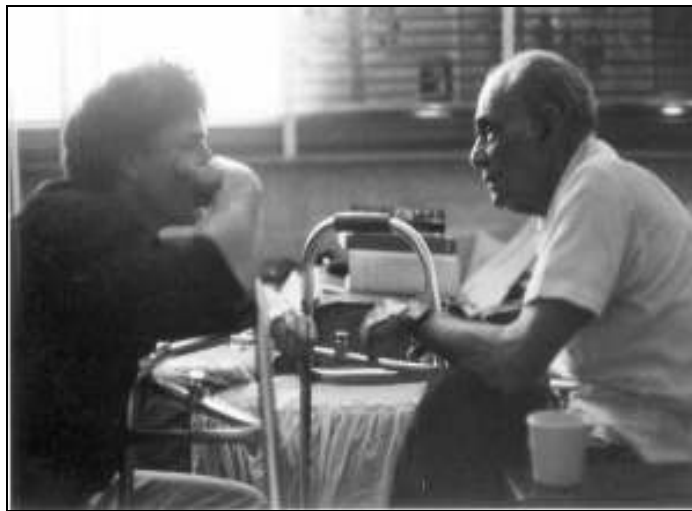
US: *We knew right from the start that it would be no simple task. Notwithstanding our sympathy, we didn’t want it to result into a linear story or a social hero or a living myth. The biggest challenge consisted in making a sincere and honest film, without losing the necessary distance.*

LH: What were your first steps?

US: *First of all it was a question of deciphering the history of Guatemala and the life of Alfonso. Then he had to put the necessary trust in us. He is a very introverted character, even if it doesn’t appear like that at the first glance. Moreover he was and remains a public figure, so he had to choose his words carefully. In terms of cinematography we were confronted with the question how to transfer his story and the Guatemalan history in images. Fortunately Alfonso is a person, who is all day long in perpetual motion. That helped us in finding the structure and rhythm of the film.*

LH: Is this film a matter of a private portrait of a public figure or the public portrait of a private individual?

US: Due to our own socialisation we don't separate between the political and the private or vice versa. So, if we portrait and possibly question a political persona, this includes as well a glance into that person's mind. But at the same time, Latin America is a continent, where the political reality compelled people to make very different decisions. We were interested in the consequences brought about by the decision for a life dedicated to political and social struggles, the price for the ideals. During the three periods of filming between 1999 and 2001, we smoothly approached this subject until the very moment, when Poncho and his children were ready to talk about the pain. Those were the most difficult moments, accompanied by tears – our one included...



LH: Tears of history?

US: ...and because of the words unspoken. We hope that the film will help to start talking about a generation, that was completely dedicated to the political struggle, and in doing so made immense sacrifices and simultaneously inflicted deep pain. And about the post-war generation, who probably understood this fight, but still wants to keep it all at a distance.

LH: Does tracing history imply for you to sow the seed of hope?

US: The documentary film shows the inner and outer reality of the filmmakers. We consciously made the story of Alfonso Bauer and his family emotional, explicitly so because there was very little room for that in the political history of Guatemala and his own life. To make history conceivable for the younger generation it has breathe and grow silent, laugh and cry, it works through moments of identification. At least in Alfonso's family the film has set a lot of numbness afoot. Maybe it succeeds in having the same effect on the audience.

People and Pictures in Motion



In Spring 2003 the world premiere of the film takes place in Guatemala City. Following that the two German directors, accompanied by a Guatemalan team, went on a four-week tour through the country, looking for the immediate encounter with the audience. A report on the potential importance of film for the assessment of history in a post-war society.

The History of Guatemala – “*silent Asthma*“

300 people are sitting in the civic centre of the little tropical forest town of Cantabál, in the North of Guatemala. Most of them are victims of the Guatemalan army terror, which razed this region to the ground in the early 80s. The room is dark and people watch in silence the documentary *testamento* on the screen. Suddenly tropical rains lash down onto the roof. A metal sheet gets loose and severs a circuit line – the pictures onscreen fade out. Still, nobody leaves the room. For more than an hour the spectators remain patient, till a generator has been organised and the pictures move again. After the show long candle-lit lines are queuing up in front of the opinion books: “This film stands for the re-appropriation of our collective memory. Our social pulse and our breath, yearning for democracy, are slowly replacing the silent asthma, we suffered from for so many years, “ said one of the comments.

This is one of over thirty film presentations organised by the two independent media groups ISKA (Berlin) and Luciérnaga (Guatemala), in spite of the difficult conditions. Apart from a movie theatre and the *Grand Lodge* in the capital public and private universities, schools civic centres, public places as well as refugee camps and farm communities are mostly the locations where the film is being shown and discussed.

War destroys Culture

With the end of the 36-year civil war truth commissions similar to those of South Africa were installed. Apart from investigating the violent crimes the commissions came to the conclusion that assessing the history and recognizing the causes of the war ought to be an essential constituent in the construction of a democratic society. The subject documentary film (an appropriate means to tackle the history and politics of any society) was nonexistent at that time. Like many others engaged on the cultural sector, filmmakers were persecuted as well during the war and went into exile. To this date no fund or any other kind of support exists for that medium. Some few groups slowly attempt to produce and distribute individual films. So far there exists no autonomous and independent cinematic culture to speak of. Amidst the prevailing corruption and economic crisis, the élan and departure fever that followed the conclusion of peace gave way to an apolitical pragmatism, which doesn't interfere and turns history into an alleged triviality.

Most successful documentary in Guatemala

The strong general interest in the film demonstrates the desire for the own past. During the first month the number of spectators of „*testamento*“ defied those of the Hollywood productions *Gangs of New York* and *Frida* that opened at the same time in the cinemas. The press printed special editions; the radio stations raffled off tickets and it is probably the most successful documentary in the history of Guatemala. But the main achievement of the film is something else: it triggered discussions, insights and hope among the different social strata and caused people to talk about the traumata of war. The film permitted in particular younger spectators to get quite an emotional idea of their history and reality. This is an important contribution in a difficult peace process after decades of dictatorship. Bitter tinge adds to this success that still only foreign filmmakers can make such films due to a lack of political intent and money in Guatemala. One needs money and education to make films, but also models and stimulation. Therefore comments like the one a student made after a presentation, who said: “*This film combines everything I ever dreamt of. Thank you for the inspiration, we meet again in a better world*”, are an encouragement.

The film-tour “Living the History” was financed by the Heinrich Böll-Foundation (Germany), Evangelian Churches of Switzerland (HEKS), Hivos (Netherlands), GTZ (Germany), German Development Service DED (Germany), University of San Carlos (Guatemala).

Press voices from guatemalan newspapers

A Living history conquers the screen.

La Hora

A film that emotians without arousing compassion. It is a portrait of Guatemala.

Moreover, it is a tribute to dignity.

El Periodico

Go see this documentary!

El Acordeón

This film best reflects our society. It helps explain our terrible solitude and emptiness.

El Periódico

Images that bring history to life. This film should be shown in every school.

Siglo XXI

Comments of the Guatemalan public

A film, that rescues a bit of the Guatemalan and Latin American history. Furthermore a film with a message of hope, in these days of globalisation it's important to know that there are decent and determined people like Alfonso Bauer Paíz.

Thank you for minding, because we young people are so unaware of our history.

The film reflects the true suffering of a nation that dared to dream of social justice.

My respects to the son with the courage to show Alfonso Bauer Paíz as the human being and not as the icon only. Refreshing that it should be foreigners to take the initiative, because they achieved an intimate and balanced angle, devoid of ideologizing messages.

This is an extraordinary work, a lesson in history and humanity.

Bio-and filmographies



Uli Stelzner

Born 1961 in Hilstrup/Westphalia. After high school he worked for a year as a soccer pro, later with Rudi Krüll and Frank Schilling as forward for *Dynamo Windrad Kassel*. Adult education in Bolivia as well as stays in Cuba und Nicaragua. In 1987 he begins to study social sciences and visual communication in Kassel. One of the founder members of the ISKA group (International Solidarity and Cultural Exchange). Within in the scope of his studies first video experiences and directs a two months photography workshop at the miner's university of Llallagua/Bolivia. Since 1992 independent documentaries and mobile cinema with Thomas Walther from autofocus videogroup. Lives and works as a author, producer and director in Berlin.

Films:

- 1986 **The dream ´s finished**
- 1989 **Somos ambulantes – street sellers in in Lima** (Peru)
- 1993 **Ojalá – The hope for a new land** (About guatemalan refugees in Mexico)
- 1994 **Romper el cerco – refugees of a hidden war** (Guatemala)
- 1998 **The Civilizers – Germans in Guatemala** (Guatemala)
- 2000 **The adventures of a cat – footnotes on a projection in post war times** (Guatemala)
Competition of the International Short film Festival Oberhausen 2000
Production of **NN - Giving a voice to the disappeared (Colombia)**
- 2001 Winner of the “One World-“Award of the XX. Development Politics TV-Workshop 2001 for the TV version of **The Civilizers**
- 2003 **Testamento**
Film tour “Living The History” in Guatemala, 14.000 spectators
- 2004 Preparation of **Frontera** (central and south american inmigration at the South-mexican border)



Thomas Walther

Born 1958 in Rostock. After high school diploma in Celle travelled the GFR as a hoe cane regulator. Apprenticeship as a carpenter in Berlin, then studied sociology at University. Studied cinematography at University of Applied Sciences (Audiovisual Media). Formation of the *autofocus* video group. Camera work i. a. for german television, arte, independent productions. Lives as author, director and cameraman in Berlin.

Films:

- 1987 **Germany – Chile, an intimate relation** (Germany)
- 1988 **In the autumn of the beast** (Germany)
- 1991 **Stahl- Your future** (Germany)
- 1993 **Ojalá – The hope for a new land** (Guatemala)
- 1994 **Romper el cerco – refugees of a hidden war** (Guatemala)
- 1998 **The Civilizers – Germans in Guatemala** (Guatemala)
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