

KINO LORBER



UTAMA

A film by Alejandro Loayza Grisi



WINNER – Grand Jury Prize, World Cinema Competition, Sundance Film Festival 2022

Bolivia / Uruguay / France | 2022 | 87 min | Color | 2:39:1 | Quechua, Spanish with English subtitles

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87 min - 2:39.1

Quechua / Spanish

World Premiere

The 2022 Sundance Film Festival - World Dramatic Competition

European Premiere

The 44th Göteborg Film Festival - Ingmar Bergman Competition

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Logline

In the Bolivian highlands, an elderly Quechua couple has been living the same daily routine for years. When an uncommonly long drought threatens their entire way of life, Virginio and Sisa face the dilemma of resisting or being defeated by the passage of time. With the arrival of their grandson Clever, the three of them will face, each in their own way, the environment, the necessity for change, and the meaning of life itself.

Synopsis

In the arid Bolivian highlands, an elderly Quechua couple has been living a tranquil life for years. While he takes their small herd of llamas out to graze, she keeps house and walks for miles with the other local women to fetch precious water. When an uncommonly long drought threatens everything they know, Virginio and Sisa must decide whether to stay and maintain their traditional way of life or admit defeat and move in with family members in the city. Their dilemma is precipitated by the arrival of their grandson Clever, who comes to visit with news. The three of them must face, each in their own way, the effects of a changing environment, the importance of tradition, and the meaning of life itself. This visually jaw-dropping debut feature by photographer-turned-filmmaker Alejandro Loayza Grisi is lensed by award-winning cinematographer Barbara Alvarez (Lucrecia Martel's *The Headless Woman*) and won the Grand Jury Prize (World Cinema Dramatic) at the Sundance Film Festival.



Cast

Virginio — *José Calcina*

Sisa — *Luisa Quispe*

Clever — *Santos Choque*

Crew

Director & Writer

Alejandro Loayza Grisi

DOP

Barbara Alvarez

Editing

Fernando Epstein

Art Direction

Valeria Wilde

Sound

Federico Moreira
Fabián Oliver

Original Music

Cergio Prudencio

Sound Director

Federico Moreira

Location Sound

Fabián Oliver

Music Participation

*Luzmila Carpio
Fernando Cabrera
Verónica Pérez*

Acting Coach

Daniel Maydana

Make-Up

Claudia Catacora

Script Supervisor

Manix Villegas

1st Assistant Director

Álvaro Manzano

Executive Producer

Marcos Loayza

Gaffers

*Fernando Calvete
Claudio Durán*

Transport

NCE Transportation

VFX

APARATO CINE

Production Coordinator

Daniel Maydana

Producers

*Santiago Layza Grisi
(Alma Films)
Federico Moreira
(La Mayor Cine)*

Co-Producer

*Jean-Baptiste Bailly-Maitre
(Alpha Violet Production)*

World Sales

Alpha Violet









Director's Biography & Filmography

Alejandro Loayza Grisi (1985) is a Bolivian filmmaker. Begins his artistic career in still photography and then enters the world of cinema through cinematography. As a director of photography he worked in documentary series *Planeta Bolivia*, and many short films such as *Aicha*, *Dochera* and *Polvo*. Attracted by the stories that can be told through the image in motion, he ventures into script and direction with his first feature film, *Utama*.

Planeta Bolivia, 2016 – (DOP)
Polvo, 2017 – (DOP)
Dochera, 2018 – (DOP)
Aicha, 2019 – (DOP)
Utama, 2021 – (Director)



Director's statement

In the Bolivian highlands, at more than 3500 meters above sea level, climate change is forcing communities to change their customary ways of life. Rainy seasons are becoming shorter and droughts are lasting longer, glaciers are thawing and water is becoming scarce, the nights are getting colder and the days hotter. It is one of the most exposed and most vulnerable territories to climate change on Earth.

The already hostile territory is becoming increasingly inhospitable, forcing native populations to migrate to cities where they do not know how to live and where they face a language that is not their own. They have very few opportunities in this new environment, particularly the oldest among them. Therefore, many elders are reluctant to join the enormous migration of recent years that has left the Bolivian countryside increasingly uninhabited.

I was born and raised in La Paz, a city that has historically received Aymara migrants from the nearby Altiplano countryside. Our city, our beliefs, and our ways of being have been strongly marked by the coexistence between both Spanish and Aymara cultures. But despite this history, very few of our inhabitants are aware that some of the first great victims of climate change are only a few kilometers away.

I believe that telling a story from the point of view of those people who are very close to us, who still live in the countryside and face

the agony of seeing their way of life disappear, is vital for understanding the human cost of climate change. It allows us to consider the collateral damage of our current way of life and to rethink our role as inhabitants of La Paz (and of other cities with similar conditions).

Utama is a cautionary tale. Elderly people can represent a lost consciousness and a wisdom that is seldom heard. They can represent the warnings we overlook. The characters of Virginio and Sisa, with all the wisdom gained through their years, represents a culture that has seen its younger generations lose their language and beliefs as they assimilate with an increasingly globalized world. The Quechua culture, and its views on death, life, and nature, is one we know very well in La Paz, but it is disappearing.

Utama is also a love story. The intimacy of Virginio and Sisa's relationship can be felt through the minimal gestures between them, and the silences that dominate them – silences that can develop in decades-long relationships. Regardless of the cultural differences between these characters and the audience, I wanted to show their love as a universal force.

Aesthetically, I come from the world of still photography, and I am interested in working in the intersections of image and silence, where the most profound meanings are found: loss, acculturation, and degradation of nature. Stylistically, each shot means something unto itself, but within the context of a film they enrich the narrative. The wide landscapes, the portraits highlighting the characters'

deep gazes, and the moments of silence are my tools to tell a story that deeply questions the social, environmental, and human issues in these times of change.

Utama is ultimately a story about one of the most underrepresented places on Earth, but it is also a universal story that could be set in any community that is facing similar social and environmental problems. It is a story told through the eyes of a humble couple who face death and the loss of their values and customs. But there is still the possibility of perseverance and preservation. Although it seems like a tragedy, I want the film to bring hope.





Producer's statement

Alma Films, a prestigious company with more than 20 years of experience and 7 full-length titles, has produced the movie. I have been the head producer of the company for the past 8 years and have not only produced all the company's projects but I have also produced the last 3 movies (including *Utama*). The one before *Utama*, called *Averno*, won best Latin American Film at BAFICI, has been exhibit in more than 20 Film Festivals and has been sold to HBO Eastern Europe.

Utama, an official co-production between Bolivia and Uruguay with La Mayor Cine, is a film that in a way examines the consequences of human behaviour to the environment. Explaining climate change from another angle. A story based on realistic situations, we are working with a tale in a universe that is particular to this film to a much greater extent; the Latin American countryside indigenous reality. The bond of the locals with Mother Nature, greatly affected by the miss actions and irresponsibility of the huge populated cities.

For a producer, it is a challenging pleasure to work in a film that hopefully will deliver a message of conscience while telling a nice story. The challenge and the pleasure both lie in the fact that we are constantly striving to find that which is unique, whether it'll be in the story, in the film's expression or in the emotional dimension. The beautiful Altiplano landscapes are the perfect location to show the climate change consequences and how it affects to the most

vulnerable population in Bolivia, a population that still lives practicing ancient traditions that have been preserved until today but are now threatened by the inclemency of the changing climate and the migration to the cities. The characters in the movie face a serious drought that will make them change their ways. They find themselves in the dilemma of staying or migrating to the city, the arrival of their grandson a city born indigenous who doesn't even speak their native language will spice things up.

Shooting *Utama* was a real challenge because we shot in the middle of the Bolivian highlands in an altitude of 4.200 meters above the sea level, with harsh climate conditions. Despite of the difficulties of the location we had the perfect conditions to shoot the movie meaning we had an excellent crew of professionals. Since it is a first time director, I managed to get the best and most experienced DOP as possible. We worked with Bárbara Alvarez an experienced and really talented cinematographer; she made the photography of Lucrecia Martel's *The Headless Woman* amongst other great films. The sound direction was in charge of Federico Moreira, head of La Mayor Cine, a renowned uruguayan musician and producer, who has participated in successful projects recognized in different festivals worldwide. The Edition has been trusted to Fernando Epstein, who recently edited the awarded film *The Heiresses*.



A conversation with director Alejandro Loayza Grisi

Can you explain how you developed the idea for the film? *Utama* is quite mature, especially for a first film, as you portray climate change and how it affects an aging Quechua couple. What were the most important themes for you to convey?

When the project was born and it was just a sentence, I wanted to tell a story of pure love in the middle of the Bolivian Altiplano. I put the idea on hold while I was lucky enough to travel all over Bolivia making documentaries, many of them with environmental and social themes. I think that traveling around your country and getting to know in depth all the realities that can exist in a territory as varied as Bolivia, makes you understand the country and life from a very different perspective. Those trips were huge sources of inspiration and gave me an urgent need to tell stories. So this love story that I wanted to tell was then nourished by this considerable environmental and social context in which I would be able to explore issues that concern me about my country and the consequences of climate change. These issues seem very far away, but in fact they are shockingly very close and are something we are facing in many parts of the world: the loss of languages and cultures,

forced migration of rural peoples, and intergenerational clashes between tradition and assimilation.

What made you decide to move from still photography towards directing your first feature film?

The process came very naturally. I think my desire to explore narrative forced me to change media and experiment with new formats. The moving image allows you to capture emotions and moments in a different way. My still photography was always more documentary in tone and at the beginning as a cinematographer I also started down that path, but then I learned about the possibilities of artificial lighting and of staging in controlled situations. And above all, I was drawn to narrative storytelling. Eventually, after watching the process of different directors at work (mainly my father and friends), I realized that I preferred to have more responsibilities and decisions about everything that happened during the shooting process, so I started directing.

Although the road to becoming a director has been long, it has had its benefits. I think the experience of having taken so many photos and experimenting with so many optical techniques helped me better understand cinematic framing and composition, while my experience working as a cinematographer and an assistant director allowed me to understand the production process and the pressures that the director can face.



**Can you talk about working with DOP Barbara Alvarez?
What was your collaboration like?**

We were very lucky to have one of the best DOPs in Latin America work on the film. Barbara is an amazing professional and working with her was great. We got along from day one, and most importantly, we had the same film in our heads. She has a beautiful sensitivity and we both share the same values and thoughts on how a shoot should be.

I had storyboarded the entire film, and in our pre-production, when she was already in location, we went through it together, discussing it frame by frame. During this process we added some frames and removed some others. So going into production we had everything very well planned while still leaving room for improvisation within the structure.

How did you cast the film? What was it like working with your actors?

From the beginning we knew that finding actors to play Virginio and Sisa was going to be difficult, as there are no professional actors I knew of with that profile. On a location scouting trip, I saw José Calcina and Luisa Quispe standing outside their house and told the driver to stop. We had not yet started the search for actors, but they really caught my attention. I approached them and told them about the film but they weren't the least bit interested. After that we looked



for actors in La Paz through a more traditional casting process, but no one met my expectations. Then we went back to the shooting location and visited all the surrounding towns, where we did a thorough scouting process, visiting all the elderly people in each town. It's not a very populated area, and the drives were long just to see one or two people. We met lovely people, but no one who managed to act like I'd need them to. So we decided to try again with José and Luisa, who still couldn't bring themselves to do it. Finally, and after much insistence and with the help of their nephew Estanislao, we managed to convince them.

From then on the work was wonderful, we formed a very good relationship that has lasted through today. The most important thing about the whole process was that we had fun. Working with them was easy because of their human quality and sense of commitment. They gave their best for the film and the characters and I will be eternally grateful for that. In real life they are a couple and they are even more tender than in the movie. In fact for the movie I had to add some mischief to them and that was what they had the hardest time doing, "getting mad" at each other or yelling at each other.

Since they are not professional actors I knew we had to rehearse a lot. We spent about two months prior to the film methodically working together. In the mornings they worked with an acting trainer who had them perform acting exercises such as improvising, shouting, modulating, role playing, body games, etc. And in the afternoons we rehearsed the film scene by scene, even the ones without dialogue, where there were only looks or walks across the

landscape. By the time we finished rehearsals, they knew the story by heart, so they knew perfectly the emotional state of their characters for each scene.

On the other hand, Santos Choque, who plays Clever, is an actor with more experience, and that helped a lot. In order to deepen his relationship with José and Luisa, Santos spent full days accompanying them in their daily activities. They formed a wonderful team.

Why do you think it's important to showcase the unique aspects of the different cultures, and the ways in which it is different from your culture?

In Bolivia it is very difficult to distinguish where one culture begins and the other ends. That is the beauty of my country, an amalgam of cultures that interact and live peacefully despite their differences. But as you travel away from the big cities and into the countryside, you realize what is happening throughout Latin America, and even globally: that the ways of life and beliefs of the countryside are eroding at worrying rates. This is what globalization does, and it forces us to be much more attentive to prevent this from happening, because otherwise we will lose intangible cultural riches. I think it is something that is happening all over the world and if we do not want these cultures to be museum artifacts or historical documents, we have to actively embrace them, sustain them, and preserve them.

What is the significance of the imagery of the condor? Why is its life cycle so important for Virginio to explain to Clever?

The condor is a sacred animal in Bolivia. It is the protector of the mountains and represents the source of life, as the yearly thaw in the mountain heights gives life to the surrounding countryside. It is also associated with immortality and the change of cycle. Because of the way it dies, where it returns to its nest in the mountains for the beginning of a new cycle, it is traditionally thought to be a symbolic death and not a real one. That is why the condor is so important to Virginio, who understands that it is time to start a new cycle for himself and Sisa.

On the other hand, the condor is on the way to extinction. This is a metaphor for what is happening in the mountains; with the accelerated thaw, the environmental cycle is also on its way to extinction. If the condor dies, there will be no new cycle, there will be no protector of the mountains, and there will be no more life in the mountains. It sounds apocalyptic, but it is the reality.