



**Daniel Lagares and Mariano Agudo.** *The Search (La Búsqueda)*. Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2018. 75 min.; color

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From 1980 until 2000, a civil war (*guerra interna*) between the government of Peru, the Communist Party (Partido Comunista del Perú – Sendero Luminoso), and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement ravaged the country. The conflict resulted in more than 69,000 individuals killed or disappeared—not to mention the countless victims of torture and rape. An estimated three out of every four victims were Quechua-speaking peasants. This has made it one of the bloodiest conflicts in Peruvian history. In June 2001, President Alejandro Toledo created the Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) to collect victims’ testimonies, investigate human rights abuses, and write a master narrative of the violence. The end result placed the *guerra interna* within the broader sweep of Peruvian history, ushering in an authoritative and compelling new dialogue with and about the past.

The film under review, *The Search (La Búsqueda)*, is noteworthy for its efforts to build upon the master narrative offered by the commission. The documentary presents a haunting, honest, and unblinking exploration of the stories of three ordinary people—Dolores Guzmán, José Carlos Agüero, and Lurgio Gavilán—swept up in the violence of the period in different ways through circumstances beyond their control. It is a story of people struggling to live a dignified human life in and against a

society that experienced unimaginable terror, trauma, and heartbreak. *The Search* teaches us that learning to listen is neither to forget the past nor to take it at face value, but to build upon it. The three protagonists all tell their own stories—by themselves, for themselves. Hope is embodied in dignity. And the dignity portrayed in this documentary is central to building a more just and equitable society.

The first protagonist, Guzmán, is a survivor of a military massacre of civilians carried out in the remote Andean village of Paccha. Displaced by the war and violence, she returns to Paccha for the first time in over three decades as a witness to help identify the people buried in the village. The second protagonist, Agüero, is the son of Sendero Luminoso militants who were murdered by a government death squad. Agüero is now a historian and writer who researches topics related to culture and memory. He is also a human rights activist and conducted field work in rural Ayacucho for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The past often torments him, opening what he calls “a window into countless stunted possibilities” of what his parents could have been had they not joined the rebels. Despite being a child at the time, Agüero still questions his complicity and involvement in a movement that killed thousands of people. The third protagonist, Gavilán, is a former child soldier

who fought for both sides: Sendero Luminoso and the military. He is searching for his brother's body (a *Senderista* killed by a military grenade). In the words of Gavilán: "Yes, it's hard to be looking for the guerrilla fighter, from Sendero Luminoso, the perpetrator, the victimizer." After the death of his brother, he joined the rebel forces but was later captured and pressed into counterinsurgent military service. The three stories reveal how ordinary people shoulder agonizing loss and face the weight of history. And while they appear different on the surface, each story is connected not only by the search for the past but by the search for a path forward.

The documentary is beautifully shot, with breathtaking landscapes. There is no narrator. Instead, the film is edited in a way that allows the audience to learn about each protagonist in short, intertwined intervals. After each interval, we learn more about their intimate thoughts, preoccupations, and fears. These are revealed both directly and through their personal conversations with family and friends. In one instance, for example, Guzmán is having a conversation with a friend in Paccha about the recurring dreams that torment her: "My sisters-in-law always tug at me and stare at me in my dreams, they even laugh." The friend responds that she too has suffered, and even thought it would be better to die: "I thought about taking poison." In another scene, we witness a powerful encounter between a mother and the bones of her disappeared son—an encounter three decades in the making. In yet another, Gavilán provides information about his missing brother to officials at an office set up to help people locate their relatives. When he reveals that they were members of Sendero Luminoso, a tense moment follows and those taking Gavilán's statement make sure to put it "on record." There are myriad examples evoking similar sentiments throughout the film. Together, they add important layers to the stories presented. But these conversations, encounters, and stories are also more than just the sum of their parts. The film effectively makes clear

that what characterized much of the *guerra interna* was its messiness, its ambiguity, its contradiction, and its diversity.

This film is highly recommended for use in the classroom. In fact, I recently screened it in a senior seminar on revolutionary and social movements. What stood out in our discussion was the lasting impression it left on the students. Many appreciated the even-handed approach of the film because it neither blamed nor passed judgement. The stories also reminded them of the human element in history, which is often lost in textual sources. In seeing and listening to people who actually lived through the conflict, my students grappled more deeply with the nature of suffering and better understood the process of reconciliation in a postwar society. The film, however, does not contain much historical context regarding the origins of war, why it was fought, and the larger impact it had on society (beyond the lives and orbit of the three protagonists). Therefore, the film should be paired with readings and/or a lecture to supplement the stories told on-screen. Overall, the film would be a welcome addition to any syllabus focusing on the Latin American experience during the twentieth century.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

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