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FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2023 OFFICIAL SELECTION

THE SETTLERS

A FILM BY FELIPE GÁLVEZ

2023 – CHILE, ARGENTINA, UK, TAIWAN, FRANCE, DENMARK, SWEDEN, GERMANY
– COLOR – 97'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Chile, beginning of the 20th century. A wealthy landowner hires three horsemen to mark out the perimeter of his extensive property and open a route to the Atlantic Ocean across vast Patagonia. The expedition, composed of a young Chilean half-blood, an American mercenary, and led by a reckless British lieutenant, soon turns into a “civilizing” raid.

INTERVIEW WITH FELIPE GÁLVEZ

Why did you decide to do a film on the colonisation of Chile and to tell this particular episode of history?

The events in the film are not part of the official version of the history of Chile. They are not included in the school curriculum either. I'd never heard of the genocide of the Selk'nam people, who the whites in our country refer to as the Ona. I read about it fifteen years ago in an article that mentioned the hidden reality of the genocide. In school, we learn the history of Chile up until 1973. There is no mention of the military dictatorship that followed. There is still no official version of the history of the authoritarian regime. Is telling that story a worthwhile endeavour? And, more importantly, how does one go about telling it? These questions led me to think about the earlier events, at the start of the 20th century, that were discounted as well. What happens to a country when an entire page of its history is erased? Why not look back to that other episode, some one hundred years earlier, rather than the present-day deletion of the military dictatorship?

Dawson Island, in Tierra del Fuego, was used by the Pinochet regime to detain and later to exterminate political prisoners, including government ministers and close friends of Salvador Allende. But an earlier slaughter of indigenous populations took place on the island and has been entirely forgotten. To understand our recent history, we need to go further back in time to the colonization of the ancestral lands of the indigenous peoples. In Chile today, the authorities want to make us forget the Pinochet dictatorship the way they tried to make us forget the earlier extermination of the indigenous peoples. It's a double discounting of history.

Ironically, the Selk'nam are part of the popular imagination of Chile today. Selk'nam dolls are sold at the airport, and the people of Tierra del Fuego are represented on wine and chocolate bar labels. What interested me in all of this, what I was going for with my film, was how the history of a population that has all but disappeared has become part of a national narrative. The film is rooted in that reality, in that paradox.

Did you and Antonia Girardi conduct extensive research while writing the screenplay? Did the characters in the film actually exist?

The film is a mix of real and make-believe characters. President Montt and Menéndez really existed. Nearly all of the land featured in the film belongs to this day to the descendants of the Menéndez family who settled in Chilean and Argentine Patagonia. The end credits feature a number of pictures of the family, including the real José Menéndez, played by Alfredo Castro in the film. Menéndez's foreman, Chanco Colorado, is a real-life character. MacLennan, who is also seen in some of the photographs, is a legendary figure in Chile today. Streets and rivers in Tierra del Fuego are named after him. Moreno, the man appointed to draw up the border between Argentina and Chile, is a factual character as well. We also know that the judge Waldo Seguel was dispatched to Punta Arenas at the end of the 19th century to carry out the first investigation into the slaughter of the indigenous populations. As neutrality at the time

was hardly an issue, the judge stayed at the house of José Menéndez. These initial legal proceedings, which never came to anything, were discovered some twenty years ago by a pair of Chilean anthropologists who located and transcribed the original records of the investigation. Hundreds of testimonies recount the slaughter and persecution of the native populations, but no convictions were ever made. The film's characters were inspired by that story, by the testimonies and interviews contained in the recently recovered archives. But the idea was to produce a fiction, as well. The film drew its inspiration from novels, popular legend, paintings, and cinema, and not just from these events alone. *The Settlers* isn't a true reconstruction of history. Rather it is a reflection on how fiction, and especially cinema, can modify and distort it, and even rewrite it.

The colonisers of Latin America are generally associated with the 16th century conquistadors of Spain. Your narrative of colonisation is set much later, at the onset of the 20th century...

We are all familiar with the conquistadors of the 16th century, and the barbarity of how they imposed their model of civilisation on indigenous populations. Today these accounts are included in the official version of Chilean history, explored in works by writers, historians, and artists. But one of the unique perspectives offered by the film is the idea that we, the Chilean people, were colonisers in our own land. How do newly formed countries forge national identities? And why does the horror of conquest repeat itself, inflicted, in this case, by the Chileans and not the Spaniards? There are few accounts of this period of history in Chile. In Argentina, the military's extermination of the indigenous populations, ordered by the army general and president, Julio Argentino Roca, has been thoroughly documented. In Chile, the slaughter of the indigenous peoples, perpetrated by the ranchers of Tierra del Fuego and indirectly supported by the Chilean government, have been expunged from the country's official history. The events are never mentioned. They were entirely hushed up.

The film industry has always promoted the image of the coloniser. The adventure film saw the emergence of an entire culture fascinated by the image of the foreigner, of the colonist – whether genius, scientist, or madman – who descended on Latin America. Then, the West turned the process of colonisation into a form of entertainment, in which the “Indians” were conflated with danger and barbarity to the point of being a quasi-propaganda tool for the new nation-states and their ideals of civilisation and progress.

I was interested in portraying the colonists as ordinary people. In reality, the colonisers were poor, ignorant, and uncouth. They were not heroes. There are no heroes in my film, rather a diversity of perspectives that force the viewers to take a stand, to decide which characters they can either relate to or reject.

The story is told in two parts, over two time periods, and in two distinct registers. First, the exterior scenes, with the expedition of three characters on a mission – to conquer land and exterminate the indigenous populations – and in the end, the characters in their respective homes: Menéndez in his grand residence in Punta Arenas, and the mestizo Segundo, a

member of the expedition, with his wife in their simple hut on Chiloe Island, farther to the north.

I wanted the first part to take place outdoors: a journey on horseback in the company of three characters who we either empathise with or disprove. And through them, to show the different perspectives and mindsets of the colonists, depending on the responsibilities and authority of each. This is why the story opens with Menéndez, who is the driving force behind everything that happens in the film, and why it ends with him in his home, where the wealth he acquired from his large land and sheep holdings, built on acts of barbarity and death in the name of “civilization”, is clearly visible. The breath-taking landscapes with their bright, bold colours are left behind as we enter a dark and frozen interior.

The first part shows what happened, the acts of violence. The second part is comprised of words. The violence, from then on, is in the language, in the words pronounced by Menéndez, the brutality of which he assumes with a clear conscience. It also lies in the cynical attitude of Vicuña, the envoy of the president of Chile.

The clergyman at Menéndez’s house rarely speaks and keeps a low profile.

Three groups were involved in the extermination of the indigenous populations: the men like Menéndez, who appropriated their ancestral lands; the government authorities, represented by Vicuña, whose silence or non-intervention conceded their lands; and the church, which acted as a passive accomplice. The priest is a representative of the congregation of the Salesian Mission, an educational and religious centre in Tierra del Fuego. But above all he is the embodiment of the apathy at the heart of the Menéndez household. He is there, but he remains silent.

The mercenaries and bounty hunters are of different origins. Bill is American and fought the Comanches. MacLennan, on the other hand, is from the British army.

Prior to the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, the only passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean was in the region. Tierra del Fuego attracted numerous foreigners of many different nationalities. The landowners and sheep farmers needed labour, and they imported it: Bill, who had worked as a cowboy in Texas, was among them. Bill represents the New World. And MacLennan, the Old World. Bill may or may not be more racist than the others, but unlike them, he doesn’t try to hide it. Their mission is clearly to kill the natives. It was part of the territory’s “cleansing”, to make way for the development of livestock breeding. The extermination of the native populations was tied to the preservation of the sheep farming economy, and therefore to the interests of the farmers. Anything that could potentially kill or eat a sheep, whether wild animal or indigenous person, had to be eliminated. A third character completes the triangle: Segundo, a mestizo from Chiloe Island. Mapuche on his mother’s side and Spanish on his father’s, he was chosen for his knowledge of the region’s climate. At the time in Chiloe, the ancestral land of the Mapuches, there was a large mixed population. The island was the last area of Chile colonised by the Spanish, the last region to join the newly formed nation... It was the church, in Chiloe, that convinced the native population to break

with the Spanish crown to join the nation of Chile. Most of Chile's population is mestizo. The initial triangle, comprised of Bill, MacLennan and Segundo, evolves throughout the film. There is the long scene, for example, with Colonel Martin, Bill and MacLennan, and the final scene, with Vicuña, Segundo and his wife, Kiepja.

Segundo, who is half Mapuche and half Spanish, is on the wrong side of history. He at once betrays his people and his origins and is a victim of the racism of the bounty hunters, and Bill's, in particular. This explains Segundo's uneasiness during the massacre and rape scenes. He is the witness of what was done to the indigenous peoples, the living memory of the tragedy, of the genocide...

Mestizos were part of the colonisation process. His role, as guide and scout, is true-to-life. Segundo's role, position, and point of view adds a layer of complexity to it all. I needed him to be young. His mother, a Mapuche, was likely to have been raped by a Spaniard. Segundo, who has a Spanish given name, is at once the offspring of a victim of colonisation and is the child of the conquest. The other characters' actions are seen through his eyes. We empathise with him. He makes it possible for us to grasp the horror. He is travelling over lands whose ancestral inhabitants are being killed. The inner conflict he faces as a half white and half indigenous person allows him to understand his place in the world. I see his return to Chiloe and his renewal with the indigenous way of life – he does not have a horse; he lives from fishing – as a return to the motherland. For me, it is connected to his maternal lineage. The path he follows, considering his mixed descent, can also be seen as a personal journey, and his experience of the tragic events, as a quest for identity.

The character of Vicuña is very contemporary. He denounces the massacre of the natives and the colonists' actions. He wants the indigenous peoples to be part of the national picture, but as you clearly demonstrate, he stages the narrative, granting visibility to Chile's native populations while depriving them of a voice. He wants to achieve reconciliation at the cost of forgetting, by denying the truth and the massacre.

I'm not sure he's a contemporary character. Rather, I'd say his character existed in the past and still exists today. It's even an archetype in Chile! Bill's character too – he is persuaded he is right, confident in whatever he does and says – is very contemporary. Chile doesn't recognize Indigenous people in its constitution the way Canada does. They are deprived of their rights. Vicuña was particularly aware of the power of cinema, and of staging, as a tool for propaganda and for writing a national narrative. In the early versions of the script, the second part was shorter, it barely existed, and was set several years later. It simply recounted the three men's journey, and their story came to a violent end: Bill is killed, Martin rapes MacLennan, Segundo leaves with Kiepja – and the massacre continues. It lacked a period of reflection, the speeches, an ideology to either justify or condemn... That's why we wrote the off-screen character of the Chilean president into the script. After allotting the lands, the President of the Republic sends his envoy, Vicuña, to see how things had played out and to draw conclusions. Vicuña has a camera, the indigenous peoples do not.

The film makes ample use of violence, graphic violence that is. There is the work accident, at the beginning, in which one of Menéndez's employees' arms is cut off; the slaughter scene of the Native Americans against a fog-cloaked backdrop, and the ears cut off for the mercenaries' bonus. Then there is the rape of the indigenous woman, what happens to Bill and, later, to MacLennan... Was this a voluntary choice from the beginning?

Is there any other way to portray that kind of world? A world where life is only worth the work it is good for? The early scene with the mutilated employee is a case in point: he has become unfit for work and is therefore eliminated. The scene sets the tone for everything that follows. And the worthlessness of life applies to both the white man and native alike. This is something I wanted to emphasize, and what Bill will find out later. Violence is a bit like the film's soundtrack. It establishes the tone. To tell this hushed-up story without portraying the brutality and violence of the events would have been unpardonable, an unacceptable compromise with regards to both history and the victims. There have been very few opportunities for Chilean filmmakers to recount the story of how a peaceable people were brutally hunted down. It took me nine years to make this film and I never considered it in any other light. I felt duty-bound to show in vivid detail what really happened. It was part of my responsibility as a filmmaker.

At the same time, the worst massacre in the film is recounted, not shown. Segundo describes it to Vicuña, who doesn't take any actions.

That is the other violent reality, that of the authorities who, after accepting the slaughter of the native populations, deny them their history, which is deliberately erased. Segundo bears the full brunt of it, first as a witness and then when Vicuña turns a deaf ear to the horror of his account. In a way, he is the viewer's double. Who commits the greatest acts of violence in the film? That's an interesting question, and the answer may well vary depending on the viewer. The closing scene, when Vicuña is shown directing Kiepka for his film, could be perceived as particularly violent. Because violence can be physical and thus visible to the naked eye, but it can also take on other forms, like the violence suffered by Kiepja when Vicuña forces her to behave in an unnatural way. Vicuña owns the camera and has the power to rewrite history. He doesn't care what happened to the native populations. He just needs to capture their image. We are less used to seeing this kind of violence than we are to the other.

Besides Alfredo Castro, who plays Menéndez, who are the other actors, and why did you choose them?

I knew early on that I wanted a cast of experienced and inexperienced actors. The actors were incredibly engaged and dedicated, so the mix was extremely successful.

Most are professional actors, except for the Argentine, Mariano Llinás, who directed *La Flor* (2018), and who plays Moreno. In the film, his character is sent to resolve the Argentine Chilean border issue. Marcelo Alonso, who plays Vicuña, is a well-known actor. He portrayed the priest in Pablo Larraín's *El Club* (2015). As for Mishell Guaña, the actor cast as Kiepja, it was her debut film performance, as it was for Adriana Stiven, who plays Menéndez's

daughter. Bill was played by Benjamin Westfall, who acted in my short film, *Rapaz*. The English actors, Sam Spruell and Mark Stanley, played Colonel Martin and MacLennan, respectively. Mark is 35 but has already appeared in a number of films. He had to embody a very dark and complicated character who spoke both English and Spanish. We spent a lot of time working together on his role, and Mark was very open and inventive in his interpretation of MacLennan.

We were looking for a very young actor to play Segundo. When we cast Camilo Arancibia, we asked him to recite the closing monologue, when he recounts the natives' massacre on the beach to Vicuña. There is something hypnotic and mysterious about Camilo's face. We are able to experience the story through his eyes.

How do you think *The Settlers* will be received in Chile?

I get the feeling I have set off another firestorm with the film. *Rapaz*, my earlier short film which won a prize at the Critics' Week, caused a controversy. And it's going to be pretty much the same I imagine. A repeat performance of the discussions and viewpoints. In *Rapaz*, some people were outraged by the way a minor news item escalated into violence, when a crowd captures and lynches a man for stealing a mobile. Other people saw it as the thief's just deserts. I showed *Rapaz* to middle school students. For them, there is nothing wrong with taking the law into your own hands and punishing a thief on the spot. Some went so far as to say that his arm should be cut off. Chile is a very divided country. Some people will tell you even today that Menéndez, despite the massacres, had good reason to do what he did. Others will chime in with a "Bravo Vicuña!" Segundo may be a central figure in the film, on account of the stand he takes and his perception of reality, but he is a minority figure in Chilean society today. Segundo is the mirror into which Chilean society has no desire to look.

I like to think of *The Settlers* as a film that reflects the present by recounting a story from the past. I am very eager to see how the closing scene will be received in Chile, how the character of Kiepja, who changes her name to Rosa when she is in a relationship with Segundo, will be interpreted. I have the feeling that her character, to Chileans, is the embodiment of a long-standing debate. A deep wound.

This is your debut feature film – tell us a bit about your background and how you came to filmmaking?

I am a passionate cinephile, completely in love with cinema. I studied at the Universidad del Cine in Buenos Aires, where I was lucky enough to share my time with a generation of Latin American filmmakers who have become great friends for life. My formation comes from that place, from watching films and discussing them with them. Almost 15 years ago, I started working as an editor. The idea of cutting, pasting and erasing is something I am deeply obsessed with in film. I love creating narrative devices and artifacts that have an original structure. Through editing, I learned how to write screenplays and direct. Filmmaking is a craft that is passed down, and from every film I've edited, I've learned something new.

The cinematography is particularly striking – how did you work with your DP, and what were some visual inspirations for you?

The first thing I need to write a story is an image that obsesses me. Black and white photographs of men killing Selk'nams struck me with their brutality. At first, I had the urge to make a black and white film, as I felt that this erased history did not exist in color. However, along the way I discovered that black and white put me in a realistic place. My goal was to make a film that talked about cinema, artifice and questioned the idea of truth that cinema sometimes proposes. That's why I decided to base it on the first experiments in color photography. Together with cinematographer Simone d'Arcangelo, we started by building the color palette from the wardrobe and, with that premise, we began to work on the image of the film. We wanted to create something particular and visceral that would transport the viewers to that moment in history and provoke a strangeness in them. We were not looking to be precious, but to build a different image. That's why we chose the aspect ratio 3:2, the new full frame of digital cameras, which refers to photography and also to the western and its need to always be using the latest technology of its time.

The locations in the film are stunning as well, where did you shoot in Chile and how did you select them?

When I write a scene, the first thing I consider is the place, the location. *The Settlers* was filmed in Tierra del Fuego, an island in Chile that we consider the end of the world. It's a beautiful but inhospitable place. Tierra del Fuego is still mostly owned by the Menendez family to this day. It was not easy to find locations that would allow us to film. Tierra del Fuego is an extensive island of 47,992 km². We looked for locations where we could work with some comfort. Although the landscapes are beautiful, being there is quite hostile. We filmed in winds of up to 70 kilometers and very cold. We tried to build a picture of the island by filming only a small part of it. As we searched for locations, new scenes came up in the film. For me, the script is always finished on location. You arrive on set with a guide, but it's there, in the territory, with the actors and the whole crew, that you finish writing a scene. The first idea was always to start on location with the construction of the fences, then to film forests and the sea. The film had to start in yellow, go to green, pass through blue and end in red.

FELIPE GÁLVEZ

Felipe Gálvez (b. 1983) is a Chilean filmmaker, writer and editor based in Paris.

THE SETTLERS (2023) is his debut feature.

His previous works includes the short film RAPAZ (2018), which also premiered in Cannes as part of the Critics' Week programme. His other short films have been awarded by festivals around the world.

As an editor, Felipe collaborated with filmmakers such as Marialy Rivas, Kiro Russo and Alex Anwandter, among others.

CAST

Mark Stanley

Camilo Arancibia

Benjamín Westfall

Alfredo Castro

Mishell Guaña

Agustín Rittano

Mariano Llinás

Sam Spruell

Adriana Stiven

Luis Machín

Marcelo Alonso

MacLenan

Segundo

Bill

Menéndez

Kiepja

Ambrosio

Moreno

Colonel Martin

Josefina

Priest

Vicuña

CREW

Director	Felipe Gálvez
Screenplay	Felipe Gálvez, Antonia Girardi
Cinematographer	Simone D’Arcangelo
Production designer	Sebastián Orgambide
Costume Designer	Muriel Parra
Editor	Matthieu Taponier
Sound designers	Tu Duu-Chih & Tu Tse Kang
Composer	Harry Allouche
Line Producer	Carolina Agunin, Nicolás San Martín
Assistant Director	Lula Varsky
Casting	Roberto Matus, Jessie Frost, Verónica Souto
Make up & Hair	Damián Brissio
Producers	Giancarlo Nasi, Benjamín Domenech, Santiago Gallelli, Matías Roveda, Emily Morgan, Thierry Lenouvel, Stefano Centini
Associate Producers	Matías Gutiérrez, Daniela Mendoza, Juan José Erenchun
Executive Producer	Fernando Bascuñán, Alex C. Lo, Constanza Erenchun, Amy Gardner
Co-producers	Katrin Pors, Eva Jakobsen, Mikkel Jersin, Kristina Börjeson, Anthony Muir, Ingmar Trost, Fernando Bascuñán

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