

Film Review: Between Midnight and the Rooster's Crow (2005), Nadja Drost

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In *Between Midnight and The Rooster's Crow* (2005), a determined first-time Canadian filmmaker Nadja Drost gets up close to the domination of the natural environment of Ecuador and its beautiful people. Her documentary, which was filmed in Ecuador in 2003, gives the viewer a piercing glimpse at how the Calgary based EnCana Corporation tries to portray itself as a good corporate citizen, while at the same time behaving as a shameless oil and gas giant that has lost its moral compass. In her documentary, which is a timely object lesson in corporate led globalization, Drost takes the viewer to regions within the Amazon rainforest where oil is presently being extracted, and then visits portions of a controversial new 500 km pipeline that runs through the Andes to the Pacific Ocean. Those who are not acquainted with Ecuador's recent past will no doubt be aghast at the environmental and human rights abuses involved in the brutal plundering of Ecuador's black gold.

The story behind her movie is as complicated as it is distressing. For reasons that remain disputed, Ecuador suffered an economic crisis in the late 1990s and was bailed out by international creditors such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As a result, Ecuador—which is Latin America's second largest oil producer—now has a crushing amount of debt. Although the country possesses oil reserves worth billions of dollars, over half the country's citizens still live in poverty. With the structural adjustment policies currently in place, a major portion of Ecuador's oil wealth must leave the country to pay off the IMF and other creditors. Furthermore, while the people can legitimately own the land and its bounty, the Ecuadorian government owns what wealth is found under the surface. Consequently, since oil revenues constitute about half of Ecuador's budget, the government tends to be cozy with corporations who will help quench Ecuador's thirst for foreign investment. Drost's film, which was made on a shoestring budget of \$35,000, seems to confirm what some claim: that this has led to a destructive climate of opportunistic cronyism in which the Ecuadorian government will aid and abet transnational corporations in the trampling of human rights and the natural environment.

To begin with, it has long been known that Ecuador has vast resources of petroleum wealth, and although the locus of Drost's film is Canada's largest corporation, EnCana (which at the time of her shooting was Ecuador's largest investor), other companies have been involved in the com-

plex scramble for Ecuador's oil. Besides Petroecuador (Ecuador's state oil company), Shell Oil received a concession to operate in Ecuador in 1937, in 1964 Ecuador gave the Texaco Petroleum and Gulf Oil consortium a concession, and Texaco (now ChevronTexaco) actively produced oil in the Ecuadorian Oriente from 1972–1990. At the outset of *Between Midnight and The Rooster's Crow* the viewer beholds the marvels of the Amazon Rainforest in and around the stunning Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve unpleasantly juxtaposed with pools of oil waste, gas flares, and the foul stench of crude oil bubbling up from the ground. This part of the Ecuadorian Amazon (the Tarapoa block) was under the influence of City, the Cayman Company, and the Southern Union Production Company, after they made an agreement with the government of Ecuador in 1973.

But now the story gets really complex. In 1977, The Cayman Company and the Southern Union Production Company left the project, and City became City Ecuadorian Production Company (CEPCO). In 1996 Canadian Pacalta Resources Ltd bought out CEPCO, and in 1999 Alberta Energy Company (AEC) bought out Pacalta. Then, in April of 2002, AEC and PanCanadian Energy merged to form Encana, which is now Canada's biggest company. If the story concerning the right to drill for oil in the Tarapoa region of the Amazon seems dizzying and hard to follow, one must wonder what must it seem like to the indigenous peoples who have seen the rights to their traditional lands change in a rapid and stupefying series of mergers and buyouts made by executives thousands of miles away who could not possibly appreciate the value of the wilderness being despoiled. Drost's film documents that the locals are often confused themselves as to who is the actual operator. How ironic it is that the lexicon of today's corporate management is filled with phrases such as "corporate responsibility," and "stewardship." One must ask: wouldn't being a responsible steward entail the ability to maintain and sustain good relationships with important corporate stakeholders such as members of the local community and the natural environment? The habitual capitalist pattern of make-a-quick-buck-and-run continued in 2005 when EnCana—whose 2004 earnings were a whopping \$3.5 billion (U.S.)—sold its assets in Ecuador to the Chinese for \$1.42 billion (U.S.).

After giving her viewers a crash course in Canadian oil development in Ecuador and acclimating them to the unpleasant sights of the destruction of the Amazonian

Rainforest, Drost focuses in on what is undoubtedly one of the saddest stories of Ecuador's forty-year-old oil rush: namely, that of the indigenous peoples of the Northeastern Amazon. As *Between Midnight and The Rooster's Crow* demonstrates, the environmental impact on the local people is truly appalling. The Aguarico and the Napo rivers, which have sustained the native tribes—the Cofan, the Secoya, and the Siona—for thousands of years, have been systematically contaminated since intense oil extraction began in the 1970s. Drost documents crude oil leaking into the now noxious rivers, and interviews locals swearing that eating river fish tastes like eating pure crude. It appears as though while the oil companies have reaped their record profits, skyrocketing cancer, broken promises, miscarriage, and skin disease have been the dividends paid to the local populace.

When the Amazonian locals decide to take direct action to ensure that their interests are not overlooked, the military and police step in with an excessive amount of force to ensure that nothing stops corporate profit (oil) from flowing. Drost—giving the viewer a candid glimpse at the seedy underbelly of corporate globalization—interviews a man who, while peacefully protesting at a roadblock with a group of locals who were demanding clean water, sewage, electricity, and jobs, was shot by Ecuadorian soldiers. Given that the soldiers who shot him were flown into EnCana's private airport, picked up by EnCana trucks who were driven by EnCana drivers, one must wonder how Gwyn Morgan (President and CEO of EnCana—and before that President and CEO of AEC since 1994) keeps a straight face when he comments, at the end of the film: "People fail to understand how little influence companies have on government."

The viewer witnesses a fiery Nadja Drost evading EnCana security guards and poking through oil spills that EnCana covered up in shoddy fashion by simply planting grass and trees. According to the natives, who were directed on the local radio by the Mayor of Cuyabeno not to aid or assist the filmmakers, EnCana's slapdash efforts to clean up the mess in the Amazon jungle have been ineffective. Drost also interviews Delio Payaguaje, President of the Council of Elders from the Siona tribe, whose historical lands within the Amazon are being defiled in the reckless pursuit of Ecuador's black gold. The tribe is not unfamiliar with dealing with oil companies: they, along with the Secoya tribe, sued Texaco for over a billion U.S. dollars in 1993. Dressed in traditional vestments, he somberly indicates to Nadja that the tribe was divided on giving their permission to EnCana. According to him, the Siona people reluctantly gave EnCana permission to drill on their land because they understood that the military would have forced them into compliance anyway, and at least this way they would receive some remuneration.

The viewer gets the full flavor of bureaucratic crony capitalism when a local man gives Nadja contaminated water from a recent EnCana spill. He laments that EnCana—who claims it wants to be a good corporate citizen—placed the community in harm's way by failing to notify the local resi-

dents after the spill. Drost then takes the polluted water to the Ecuadorian Ministry of Environment, but is told that they no longer handle such spills and that she should go to the Ecuadorian Ministry of Energy and Mines. When Drost interviews an official at the Ministry of Energy and Mines, she is told that there are sanctions that *could* be given, but that the Ministry of Energy and Mines cannot enforce them. It is almost farcical when, at the same time, EnCana admits that there are environmental problems, but contends that previous owners brought them all about. Not only is the Ecuadorian wilderness being despoiled by EnCana, the frustrated citizens do not have any real legal channel available to defend themselves from the corporate leviathan. One of the most preposterous events documented in *Between Midnight and The Rooster's Crow*, then, is when EnCana appears to be quite proud of an award it received from the Ecuadorian Ministry of Environment for its excellent community and environmental work. The natives take it to be a farce and pure blandishment—they were not consulted to see if EnCana deserved the award. The local explanation for how EnCana could possibly receive such an award is that: "it happened between midnight and a rooster's crow."

Drost then gives the viewer a look at the real cost of North America's appetite for oil—an appetite now shared with China—when she investigates the development of the recently completed OCP (Oleoducto Crudos Pesados) pipeline which carries heated crude oil from the Ecuadorian Amazon, through the Andes, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. In the case of the contentious OCP heavy crude pipeline, Canadian borders do not limit moral accountability. Although EnCana owns the biggest share of the OCP consortium (over 30%), other international companies, such as Repsol-YPF, Pecom Energia, Occidental Petroleum, ENI-AGIP, Techint, and Perenco, are involved in the project. While developers justify the building of the OCP pipeline by claiming that it would double the amount of oil that Ecuador can produce and bring vigor back into Ecuador's economy, Drost shows that many Ecuadorians are not convinced that the benefits outweigh the costs.

As *Between Midnight and The Rooster's Crow* reveals, corporate profits trump environmental concerns as the OCP pipeline parallels the older Trans-Ecuadorian Pipeline running close to active volcanoes, cutting across farms, through environmentally protected areas, and across active fault lines. North of Quito, Drost interviews eco-saboteurs who, by staging tree-sits and hijacking OCP trucks, take direct action to prevent mudslides in and around the Mindo Nambillo Cloud Forest Reserve. Even though they were on private land they had purchased themselves, the protesters were jailed after sitting in trees for three months, and twenty-one landslides occurred within a 3.5 km stretch of the rain-drenched jungle after the project was finally completed in 2003. Elsewhere along the pipeline, which enters into over a half dozen national parks, Drost films exasperated locals who reveal shoddy construction in the pipeline, and expose it in areas where it is supposed to be one meter deep. The

Ecuadorians are rightly nervous: an earthquake knocked out forty kilometers of the old Trans-Ecuadorian Pipeline, which was built in 1972, and since then has spilled more oil than the Exxon Valdez. Should the local populace feel more comfortable with the new OCP pipeline, which does not conform to the World Bank's environmental standards?

Ecuador, like many similar countries, has a national military and police force that the oil industry can hire to do its bidding, and thus Drost's movie is a must-see for anyone interested in the morally questionable relationships (often legitimized though secret agreements) which multinational corporations now frequently have with military and police forces of developing countries. In her *Between Midnight and The Rooster's Crow*, Drost obtains an interview with an officer who (without his face being shown) admits the OCP consortium pays a fee to the national police. The documentary contains footage of the OCP hired Ecuadorian military and police forces in combat gear securing the consortium's right-of-way from local farmers who do not accept the OCP's deal. The viewer cannot help feel sympathy for a frustrated farming family who bemoan that the pipeline was forcibly built on their land even though they never made an agreement with the OCP consortium. The mother was brutally beaten and jailed, and her children were kicked and tear gassed. To add insult to injury, since they failed to sign with OCP, they were not compensated.

Some have found a parallel with Spanish Colonialism. Whether or not this is true, Drost's film, which was completed in January 2005, demonstrates how multinational oil companies in a corrupt multi-polar world can simply hire

national police and military to be their flunkies. Thus, *Between Midnight and The Rooster's Crow* is an important and timely film, and its message is not just relevant for Canadians, but for all citizens of the global village. Her expose should remind us that our social and environmental problems are broader than just U.S. crony capitalism—the traditional target of environmental and human rights activists. With a running time of 66 minutes, the film not only demonstrates how it is possible for transnational corporations, under the guise of “national security,” to usurp the power of elected governments and their agents, it reveals that the proper role of government, within the context of global capitalism, is ultimately to cover for industry and, assist, when necessary, in repressing citizens, and collaborating in the rapacious plundering of the natural environment.

The film has won the following awards:

- Best Canadian Documentary (short to mid-length), Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, Toronto, 2005
- Audience Award, Recontres Internationales de Documentaire du Montreal, 2005
- Best Documentary, Festival International du Film d'Environnement, Paris, 2005
- Best Documentary, Festival de Cine, Bogotá, Colombia, October 2005
- Honourable Mention, Best Canadian long form film, Planet in Focus International Environmental Film Festival, Toronto, 2005

