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Documentary review

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Documentary review

After the Collapse: Heddy Honigmann's 'Metal and Melancholy' 30 Years On

What remains of a society after its collapse? That is the central question posed by Dutch-Peruvian filmmaker Heddy Honigmann in *Metal and Melancholy* (1994). An ethnographic documentary following taxi drivers around Lima, the film captures the atmosphere of early 1990s Peru, a society torn apart by more than a decade of economic crisis and bloody armed conflict. Honigmann, who passed away in Amsterdam in 2022, offers us a window into a time and place defined by collapse. Thirty years on, as Peru returns to the abyss in the wake of a prolonged political crisis while global capitalism marches towards planetary catastrophe, revisiting *Metal and Melancholy* is revelatory.

Honigmann, the daughter of European Jewish refugees, was born and raised in Lima before leaving for Rome to study filmmaking and eventually settling in Amsterdam. She directed several films before *Metal and Melancholy*, but this was her first feature-length documentary. She would go on to become a renowned documentarian. Her range was radically diverse, extending from Brazilian erotic poetry in *O Amor Natural* (1996) to the aftermath of the Bosnian genocide in *Good Husband, Dear Son* (2002). What remained constant in her oeuvre were the compelling portraits of the people in her films, something already front and centre in *Metal and Melancholy*.

Formally, it is hard to place *Metal and Melancholy* in a national film tradition. The film was made for Dutch public television, although the dialogue is in Spanish and everyone on camera is Peruvian. There is no narration, as all scenes are

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conversations between Honigmann and taxi drivers. The camera's point of view is that of a passenger sitting next to the driver. The film is cut as mostly self-contained conversations with individual taxi drivers, although a few make recurring appearances. While we hear Honigmann often, we barely ever see her. This gives a certain sense of candour, and indeed rawness, to the film.

The title alludes to a conversation Honigmann has with Jorge Rodríguez Paz. He is an elderly actor who, after featuring in many prominent Peruvian films, is forced to work as a taxi driver to make ends meet. Referencing Federico García Lorca, Rodríguez Paz says:

A famous Spanish poet once said Peru is made of metal and melancholy. He was right. [Why metal and melancholy?] Maybe because pain and poverty made us as hard as our metals. And melancholy because we are also tender, and we cherish better times which have been lost to oblivion.

Although García Lorca was writing at the beginning of the 20th century, at no time has his description of Peru been more accurate than in the early 1990s. By then the country was reeling from a protracted economic crisis going back two decades. Remarkably, by some metrics in 1992 Peru's GDP per capita was 32% lower than in 1975 (World Bank, 2024). The developmentalist dreams of the Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces (1968-1980) had degenerated into hyperinflation, deindustrialisation and an international credit blockade. Meanwhile, the Shining Path, an ultra-Maoist offshoot of the Peruvian Communist Party, had made a mockery of José Carlos Mariátegui's hopes for an Indo-American revolution. Starting in 1980 they led a bloody insurgency against Peruvian society. The death toll from the ensuing conflict is fiercely contested, but by the turn of the millennium the Shining Path had killed approximately thirty one thousand Peruvians, mostly indigenous peasants but also community leaders and other Marxists (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, 2003). The military was not far behind, killing approximately twenty thousand in a brutal, often indiscriminate counter-insurgency campaign.

The taxi-driving in *Metal and Melancholy* is a result of these interlocking crises. Many if not most of the interviewees are middle-class professionals: a medical publicist, a judicial bureaucrat, a retired air force officer, a policeman, and so on. They have been forced to moonlight as taxi drivers to get by, for their primary wages are no longer enough. Not even taxi-driving is sufficient: many are also forced to sell snacks and trinkets. In an uncomfortable moment Rodríguez Paz awkwardly attempts to sell pens to Honigmann, who politely refuses. The film's narrative is of downward mobility, of adapting to increasingly more precarious material circumstances.

Yet, if somewhat perversely, the film is also a story of creativity and ingenuity. One taxi driver removes the gear stick every night to make his car harder to steal. A different driver, when faced with an engine that will not start unless it is hot-wired, responds by ironically reframing that shortcoming as another anti-theft feature. We visit the house of a driver who has installed a generator to make sure lights remain on during blackouts. Most interestingly, we encounter several women who have entered the traditionally male profession of taxi-driving. They too have to subsist, so they too go out to the streets with their cars.

Solidarity and collective action do not feature as possibilities. The mechanisms for survival we encounter are individualistic. Indeed, taxi-driving in Peru is an individual undertaking. Drivers are overwhelmingly self-employed, using their own cars and getting customers by driving around the city until hailed. In a country as poor as 1990s Peru car owners are a minority, but if one does own a car, all one really needs is a sign on the windshield. In this sense the film captures Uberisation decades before Uber and without corporate intermediaries. To borrow the romanticising frames of Hernando de Soto, Peru's foremost neoliberal thinker, the taxi drivers belong to the informal sector. They are micro-entrepreneurs for whom the way out of economic crisis passes through the market. Collapse does not mechanistically create revolutionaries.

The lack of collective action in 1990s Peru should not be surprising. Many social leaders had been murdered or intimidated into silence by the Shining Path and the military. One of the taxi drivers, a former policeman, admits to working undercover as a secondary school student informing on the teachers' union. For the driver this is a quaint story rather than a confession, but given the Peruvian state's occasionally murderous track record, it is also slightly unsettling. More unsettling is when another taxi driver recalls an acquaintance murdered for breaking an armed strike called by the Shining Path. Not only was collective action met by repression, but self-declared revolutionary action was frequently repression itself.

Honigmann sporadically experiences the latent dangers of existing in early 1990s Peru. At one point she asks a taxi driver to stop. The taxi driver declines her request, since they are close to a police station and stopping there is likely to be met by violent counter-terrorism measures. Another time a stern-looking policeman at a stoplight notices the camera and asks Honigmann for her permit to record. He takes a while checking all papers are in order, never abandoning his slightly menacing expression. He eventually asks what the documentary is about. When told, he abruptly smiles. He is a taxi driver too and he wants to be interviewed. In him the threat of repression and the precarity of existence are entwined.

Futures only possible in the past haunt interviewees. A taxi driver looks back fondly on her relationship with her ex-husband. They got together young, and they had a long love story full of happiness and excitement. None of this stopped him from cheating on her when she was pregnant, so the relationship collapsed. Now she is a single mother living with her own father, who is sexist and abusive. She cries in desperation in front of the camera. Towards the end, yet another taxi driver recounts meeting a young Italian woman holidaying in Peru. They spent an intense few weeks travelling together and fell in love, but the woman had to return to Italy. She begged him to go with her but he refused, afraid of how her white family might react to a brown partner. After decades all he has left of their relationship is a music cassette she gifted him, which he keeps in his car at all times. He plays it for Honigmann. One cannot help but ask: were his concerns justified? Or did he deny himself a radiant tomorrow? Could things have turned out differently, if only we had had the right consciousness? And why do alternative futures come in the form of love, and not politics?

Of course, the picture that emerges out of *Metal and Melancholy* is incomplete. For many in 1990s Peru the situation was even more dire than for our protagonists. Many indigenous peasants lived under the iron fists of the Shining Path and the Peruvian military. Leftist students were being abducted from university halls and murdered. In Honigmann's film we do not encounter the wretched of the Earth. Nor do we encounter its rulers. We do not meet the high bourgeoisie, insulated from despair by virtue of a submissive state, private property and savings accounts in US dollars. This is a vision of collapse from a particular lower-middle-class angle.

Fujimorismo, moreover, is conspicuously absent. The local form of neoliberalism which emerged in the 1990s, Fujimorismo articulated a neoliberalism in which populism and authoritarianism were central. It would go on to frame Peruvian politics for the next three decades. In *Metal and Melancholy* Alberto Fujimori is barely mentioned beyond a passing reference to taxi drivers' votes being responsible for bringing him to power. This is a puzzling absence. *Metal and Melancholy* was filmed in the months following Fujimori's widely popular self-coup, when tensions were high yet people on the street were mostly allowed to speak their mind. In that context the passing reference to Fujimori gains new meaning. The driver who made the claim does not elaborate, but our protagonists belong to the social base for Fujimorismo. Many are former members of the repressive state apparatus, but they are nonetheless exposed to economic crisis. They all find themselves in a precarious material position. Yet, out of choice or out of necessity, for them the solution to precarity is self-entrepreneurship, not

collective struggle. *Metal and Melancholy* illuminates the social environment in which Fujimorismo was born.

Ironically, metals eventually ‘saved’ Peru. After Fujimori ‘stabilised’ the economy in the 1990s, in the twenty years between the turn of the millennium and the pandemic the commodities boom was responsible for an impressive growth rate and a massive reduction in poverty. This salvation was only partial, as even during the peak of the boom many Peruvians were forced to endure food insecurity, inadequate healthcare and high levels of inequality. Regardless, macroeconomic developments outside the control of ordinary Peruvians helped them overcome the very worst of the 1990s. Collapse, however, has lingering spectres.

Today, Peru is reeling from the aftermath of Pedro Castillo’s turbulent left-wing presidency. After a prolonged fight with an obstructionist right-wing Congress, on December 7th, 2022, Castillo illegally tried to close down the legislature in a self-coup reminiscent of Fujimori’s thirty years prior. Unlike Fujimori, Castillo failed to gain the support of Peru’s masses or its armed forces beforehand. He was quickly impeached and then arrested. After this, however, protests against Castillo’s replacement, Dina Boluarte, flared up across the country. Some protestors demanded Castillo’s release and reinstatement. Many more demanded a general election and a constituent assembly to replace Peru’s neoliberal 1993 constitution. The new right-wing regime met them with severe repression. A nationwide state of emergency was called and the armed forces killed 49 civilians, while one policeman died in unclear circumstances. The protests have since died down, but the new government has further eroded Peru’s democratic institutions and has become embroiled in corruption scandals. The ghosts of the 1990s are coming back to life. *Metal and Melancholy* foreshadows some important aspects of the current crisis.

The conflict between Castillo and Congress was complicated and often confusing, but a large factor was the Peruvian right’s rabid backlash against Castillo. As soon as he qualified to the presidential run-off in April 2021 right-wing politicians and the media went on an anti-communist crusade straight out of the Cold War. This crusade was assisted by the events of the 1990s, when self-described Marxists almost brought Peruvian society to its knees. Additionally, the enduring support for Fujimorismo inside and outside Congress, a crucial pillar of the new right-wing regime, has to be understood relative to the desperate situation Peru found itself in the 1990s. In the Fujimorista imagination, it was Alberto Fujimori who brought Peru back from the edge of the precipice. *Metal and Melancholy* helps us understand how steep a precipice that was. Indeed, the severe repression against the recent protests is justified by unfounded accusations of terrorism.

On another level, *Metal and Melancholy* presages the impasses of the Peruvian left, which struggled through the short presidency of Castillo. The entrepreneurial disposition of the taxi drivers in *Metal and Melancholy* is now widespread in Peruvian society. Much of the left, including Castillo's post-inauguration economic team, proposes a popular economy with markets in which the state redistributes mineral wealth while promoting small and medium-sized business. This 'modern' left operates within the parameters of neoliberal self-entrepreneurship. Others on the left, like the founder of the party that brought Castillo to power, Vladimir Cerrón, propose more active economic intervention, but their thought has evolved little since the developmentalism of the 1970s. Acquiescing to the post-collapse mood and ignoring the collapse ever happened are both bad alternatives. During his term Castillo was unable to articulate a compelling alternative to Peru's existing economic system, which contributed to his isolation and eventual downfall. Another way forward has to be conceptualised, one that centres solidarity, cooperation and economic democracy while offering a more edifying alternative to neoliberal self-entrepreneurship. However, this happening is now unlikely, with reaction on the rise and the left discredited by Castillo's authoritarian streak.

Ultimately, *Metal and Melancholy* is an accomplished, revealing documentary. Revealing, evidently, of Peru's past and present. But also revealing of the general experience of collapse. As Mark Fisher (2003) attributed to J.G. Ballard, 'the periphery is where the future reveals itself'. In the 1990s, as the systems of production and reproduction started to fail, Peruvians adapted in any way they could. They were ingenious, but they adopted ingenuity without solidarity. They learnt to live with repression, but they could not free themselves from the weight of their dead dreams. Today, as capitalism marches towards ecological catastrophe, as systems of care limp along after years of coronavirus, and as millions in the Global North and parts of the Global South face downward mobility, *Metal and Melancholy* is a window into a possible future. In Peru, exogenous developments eventually ameliorated the very worst of the crisis. But waiting for accidents of fate is a bad approach to tackling collapse. For even if they eventually occur, there is no guarantee collapse will be permanently vanquished, nor that it will fade away without traumatic aftermaths. And the wait still consists of metal and melancholy.

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