**¡Viva! Spanish & Latin American Festival 2017: UK Premiere/ *El Cristo ciego (The Blind Christ)***

**Dir Christopher Murray / CL FR / 2016 / 85 mins / Mon 3 Apr 2017**

Michael believes he is Christ, everyone else thinks he’s a fool: only a miracle can repair their faith. Receiving news of an old friend in desperate need, he embarks on a barefoot pilgrimage through the Atacama Desert, an area blighted by an exploitative mining industry and in dire need of faith in something.

**With thanks to the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester.**

*El Cristo Ciego* is the second fiction feature from Christopher Murray, one of the most prominent young directors of both fiction and documentary currently working in Chile. When the film premiered at Venice Film Festival last summer, festival director Alberto Barbera lauded Murray as the year's "big discovery", an auteur not to be missed. This critical acclaim is part of a much bigger picture over the last decade or so, which has been something of a boom period for Chilean cinema, among art-house audiences at least. Murray and his contemporaries mark a new generation of directors breaking into the international festival scene – enthusiastically taken up by audiences and critics hungry for fresh talent and unheard voices.

After studying filmmaking at the prestigious Universidad Católica in Santiago de Chile, Christopher Murray's career was launched with 2010's *Manuel de Ribera*, which he co-directed with former classmate Pablo Carrera. This first feature, which like *El Cristo Ciego* blends fiction with elements of documentary, established the pair as breakout directors, screening at international festivals across Latin America, Europe and North America, gathering critical acclaim both at home and abroad and taking home the prize for Best Chilean Film at the Santiago Film Festival.

Away from the traditional cinema setting, Murray is also the co-founder of the web-based documentary project MAFI (Mapa Fílmico de un País - Film Map of a Country). The project has gathered together dozens of short documentary films, forming a mosaic of footage from the length and breadth of the nation and depicting a multifaceted view of life in 21st century Chile, from a roller derby team in Santiago, to a tsunami alert in the Atacama Desert city of Iquique, to a hunger strike by former political prisoners in Chile's southernmost region on the edge of the Antarctic.

2014 saw the release of *Propaganda*, a political documentary from the MAFI collective under Murray's lead. This film covered the 2013 presidential elections, which took place amid a period of marked social unrest in Chile, as deep-seated discontent with the profound socioeconomic inequalities of Chilean society crystallised around massive student marches for education reform. The path, then, that brings us to *The Blind Christ* encompasses both truth and fiction, invention and observation, combining both a critical look at the state of the nation and a sharp eye for resonant and sensual imagery.

*The Blind Christ* was both written and directed by Murray and was shot over a 5-week period on location. The film, with both narrative and visual echoes of Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, is built around the story of Michael, a young mechanic convinced since boyhood that God dwells within him. When he hears that an old friend has been injured while working in the mines, he sets off in search of him, believing that he can provide a miracle cure. During his journey, he is mocked as a false prophet and berated as an iconoclast by some of those he meets, but is embraced by others as a Chilean Christ.

The lead role is the cinematic debut for Michael Silva, a Chilean television actor and the only professional actor employed for the project. Embedded within this overarching narrative are Michael's own parables, played out with Silva's voiceover by non-professional actors, real inhabitants of the Pampa del Tamarugal, a vast plain of the Atacama Desert caught between the Chilean Coastal Range to the west and the Andes to the east.

My own research as a film academic tackles questions about the representation of Chilean landscapes in cinema, so I feel somewhat compelled to call attention to this aspect - not that it could be missed by anyone viewing *The Blind Christ*, with its vast desert panoramas captured in light swirling with Atacama dust. The location was carefully selected by Murray who, over the course of two years, visited small towns and villages across the Atacama.

The film's striking cinematography was overseen by the renowned Inti Briones, a Peruvian-born cinematographer who has worked alongside many of Chile's most exciting emerging directors over the last decade, including Alejandro Fernández Almendras, Marcela Said and José Luis Torres Leiva, as well as established filmmakers such as Raul Ruiz. In this collaboration with Murray, Briones' talents are put to work capturing the barely spoken anxieties of the film's characters, projected outwards into the contrast of brighter exteriors bathed in crisp natural light and the inescapable shadows of ramshackle interiors. The film is steeped in a palette of sandy tones, as thought all is lightly dusted with the Atacama sand, blown in on the strains of a restless score from Russian composer Alexander Zekke.

It is not for purely aesthetic reasons, however, that *The Blind Christ*'s questions about faith, uncertainty and purpose echo into the emptiness of the Atacama. In 2010, the eyes of the world were on Northern Chile as television cameras broadcast the dramatic rescue of the 33 Chilean miners trapped in the San José copper mine. Murray's camera, however, registers a landscape not of heroism but of neglect, whose communities have been abandoned to the perils of the mining industry. The north of Chile is a landscape from which great mineral wealth is extracted - the country produces almost a third of the world's copper - but the region sees comparatively little return investment from the state.

In interviews, Murray has commented on the appearance of a Chilean Christ as something belonging emphatically to the North, a region of religious syncretism between indigenous beliefs and the Catholicism brought by the Spanish Empire. Meanwhile, the region's poorest inhabitants have arguably seen little benefit from what economist Milton Friedman referred to as the "Miracle of Chile" - the rapid growth of the national economy after neoliberal restructuring in the 1980s. "Behind the idea of Chile as a developed nation with a stable economic system", Murray has said, "there are statistics, there are inequalities. And behind those statistics, there are people". Viewed in this context of both faith and forsakenness, where the metaphysical meets the political, Michael seems to emerge into a landscape primed for the appearance of a saviour.

Amidst the myth-like narrative and the mystical imagery framed so strikingly by Murray, non-professional actors brought their own lived experiences of poverty, isolation and crisis to Michael's parables, some from as recently as a week before filming began. Michael's barefoot pilgrimage across the desert thus serves not only its own narrative ends but also as a means of exposing the reality of life in these overlooked settlements, directing our gaze towards the conflicts and injustices that lie beneath the surface of the nation.

The use of non-professional actors is something which *The Blind Christ* has in common with Murray's previous work of docufiction, *Manuel de Ribera*. This earlier film used a professional actor, Eugenio Morales, in the lead role who was then filmed in his interactions with islanders in the Calbuco archipelago in Southern Chile - these interactions then became the building blocks for Murray's invented fable. Lead actor Michael Silva has said that the experience of filming *The Blind Christ* alongside non-professional actors was difficult, partly because of the conditions on location, but also because it forced him to confront questions about the very nature of acting, of representing somebody else's truth and reality.

What Christopher Murray offers in *The Blind Christ* - to both actor and spectator alike, it would seem - is an intriguing but challenging proposal; a fiction woven from truths and a fable that uncovers the hidden realities of lives that go otherwise unnoticed.

**Film notes by Nicola Runciman, University of Manchester.**