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## Lapü

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# Lapü

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of Lapü (2019), directed by Juan Pablo Polanco and César Alejandro Jaimes.

## **Keywords**

Wayúu, Native Americans, Columbia, Death, Rituals, Exhumation, Documentary

## **Author Notes**

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



**Lapü (2019), dir. Juan Pablo Polanco, César Alejandro Jaimes**

Doris is a young Wayúu woman in Columbia who has a dream of her dead cousin. She tells her grandmother that her cousin appeared but did not speak to her in the dream, which her grandmother interprets to mean that Doris must reach out to her so that her cousin as well as Doris can have peace and be united in the next world. This film outlines the ritual she conducts with the help of her community to speak with her cousin and be reconciled to her, which involves physically exhuming the body in order to contact her spirit.

While this is classified as a documentary, it does not follow the classic western colonialist narrative for ethnographic study. If it was that sort of film, it would include voiceovers supplied by a white European or American who would “explain” what the people are doing, reinforcing a distance from them as exotic objects. It would also likely be confined to long shots, except perhaps for interviews with the participants if they even permitted such. Instead, this film uses lots of closeups to connect to the people doing and observing the ritual. It does not interview them “about”

the ritual but instead films them doing it. It also includes Doris's dreams, represented realistically and without special effects as she would experience them, as ordinary conversations with the other world. It is said that native peoples do not make big distinctions between this world and the next, or between the sacred and the profane. These are western dichotomies, imported into the analysis of religion by those who believe in a great gap between the immanent and the transcendent. Doris talks to her cousin as she would have when she was alive, remembering how they played together as children. It is also impressive that the people being observed seem totally unselfconscious about being filmed. At one point, when a spirit is speaking through a medium, the participants inform her that they are "taking pictures" and she replies: "Fine. It's not as if you were hitting me." Even the spirits have a sense of humor, and accept the camera as non-intrusive as it does not interfere with them.

The film has a leisurely pace and not much speaking; it contains no explanations of what is occurring, so the viewer must interpret events from the visuals and brief descriptions by participants. The most quotidian details of the ritual become important: men debate how best to kill a steer that they must butcher to hang its meat from a tree; others break into the grave to exhume the cousin's body, tearing through tile and masonry (see photo above); women bathe Doris before and after the exhumation; and Doris is directed how to deconstruct the body from the grave, which includes actually twisting the skull until it separates from the spine. One woman bossily tells her not to forget all the teeth, and to clean the bones properly. The body is placed in a hammock for the conversation, and afterwards is reinterred. The entire community is also involved in this ritual, showing how her personal and family journey to reconciliation occurs in a communal context.

Doris seems satisfied at the end, suggesting that this was not only about giving the dead peace but also the living. Her cousin tells her that she is happy and that she will visit her, reassuring her that they will be together in the next life. This eases the pain of separation, especially because her cousin took her own life, suggesting the community needs a resolution such as this to obtain catharsis. This is an unusual documentary for its realism and for its participatory quality, which convey the practices and beliefs of the people in it with simplicity, sensitivity, and reverence.