



April 2022

## Utama

Sheila J. Nayar

University of Utah, sheila.nayar@utah.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [Environmental Sciences Commons](#), and the [Indigenous Studies Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

### Recommended Citation

Nayar, Sheila J. (2022) "Utama," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 17.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.26.01.039>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol26/iss1/17>

This Sundance Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

## Utama

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Utama* (2022), directed by Alejandro Loayza Grisi.

### Keywords

Climate Change, Indigenous People, Bolivia

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

### Author Notes

Sheila J. Nayar teaches at the University of Utah, in the department of Film and Media Arts. Her research interests include the interplay of narrative and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. She is the author of several books on that subject, including *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* and *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religions Film*, as well as articles in such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Currently, she is working on a book project on secularism and Hindi popular cinema.



***Utama* (2022), dir. Alejandro Loayza Grisi**

*Utama* (Our Home) brings to viewers a Bolivian topography that is as unknown as it is visually stunning: breathtakingly majestic; at turns, even Martian—and also on the edge of climate-change peril. While this drought-ridden landscape unquestionably serves as one of the film’s characters, *Utama*’s spirit is decidedly human. At the film’s center is an elderly Quechua couple living in the Bolivian highlands, Virginio and Sisa, whose performances by José Calcina and Luisa Quispe are riveting because they feel so real. (They also happen to be an indigenous Antiplanos couple in real life.)

Their lives are diurnally ritualistic, following the cadences of their natural environment. Virginio drives their llamas on treks through the parched desert, occasionally bringing back interesting rocks for Sisa, as he has done for decades. Sisa, meanwhile, tends to their primitive home, preparing the meals, making the tea, and—increasingly difficult these days—gathering the water. Quietly and compellingly, the film charts the mounting distances Sisa must travel in order to find that true liquid gold. When the household well

dries up, she carts her pails to the village pump; and when that stops delivering, she, too, must trek the high-plains desert: to the river, at which the women who haven't yet abandoned their ancestral lands for the city, come now to wash—dishes, clothes, their hair, their children.

When Sisa remarks on the increasing difficulty of obtaining water, Virginio grumpily reminds her that fetching it is “her job.” Wordlessly she capitulates, more from resilience, we sense, than from submission to patriarchy. “Time has gotten tired,” Virginio is told the next day when he journeys to the village to find out what’s going on. It’s a statement that serves no less as a metaphor for his own declining health, which he continuously downplays to Sisa. We, on the other hand, fully glean his predicament, given the incessant labored breathing that, from our very first encounter with him, haunts the soundtrack like a painfully degenerating leitmotif. In fact, every sound in the film conjures a land and lifestyle that is parched and dying out: the crackling of the fry bread that the couple eats; the howling winds; the sere, rocky earth dispensed between Sisa’s fingers; even the strained breathiness of Andean wind pipes on the soundtrack. Never, too, has a cloudlessly turquoise sky felt so forbidding and hostile.

Hostility, too, clouds Virginio when his grandson, Clever (Santos Choque), arrives with supplies and what Virginio assumes will be renewed insistences, spurred by Clever’s father, that he and Sisa migrate to the city. During his extended stay, Clever joins his grandfather on several excursions with the llamas whose ears are festooned with pink ribbons (Clever, meanwhile, is in hoodie with smartphone and headphones around his neck). As they pass through blanched rocky plains that, with descending night, turn the grainy luster of Navajo sand paintings, we realize the extent to which neither man

comprehends the other. Virginio castigates Clever for the ignorant ease with which he can imagine them abandoning the ancestors: “There are sacred places, you know. ... Do you even know what sacred means, you spoiled brat?” Thus does Virginio instruct him on the sacredness of the condor: how that hallowed bird approaches its own death, thereby initiating a new life cycle. Clever, meanwhile, is onto Virginio’s attempts to hide the severity of his illness. No wonder, then, their articulated concerns—and antagonisms—regarding how Sisa is going to be taken care of. Virginio, after all, insists she’ll be going with him.

When Virginio stops to stare up at the sacred mountain that he will climb with a group of villagers to perform sacred rituals with hopes to “sow water,” we understand that his lament of “You are dying, you are dying” is not so much about the natural world as about himself and the life he has actively maintained with his wife. Such are the ways that the film’s elegiac call to action regarding climate change is never permitted to overrun the delicacy of the story’s familial triangle. Moreover, *Utama* is shot with such a grace and skill, with such a poetically visual splendor, that even the tiniest of gestures and most mundane of daily activities become pregnant with existential meaning. The cinematography leaves indelible shots in one’s mind, not unlike those most acclaimed ones in *The Searchers*. Only here, the shots feel far less symbolically staged and far more as if organically emerging from the realities of the environment.

“There’s nothing here,” Clever says at one point about his grandparent’s cherished habitat. And, indeed, the film wants us ultimately to come away asking: well, why is that? Isn’t the human exodus to the cities largely the consequence of human-derived climate change? No less, though, does *Utama* want to confirm that there *is* something here: a

culture integrally wed to its natural milieu, an ancestral past, a way of life that merits continued existence. That doesn't mean we need to obstruct progress (watch to see what happens to Sisa in the end); but hollowing out the world by erasing the Quechua cycle of life is not the answer either.