



THE INHERITORS

Directed by Eugenio Polgovsky
An Icarus Films Release

Theatrical Opening: September 9, 2011
at Anthology Film Archives, NYC

Co-presented by Cinema Tropical
and the Robert Flaherty Seminar

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Serious documentaries are good for you.



FILM SYNOPSIS

One of the most highly praised and awarded Mexican documentary in many years, *The Inheritors (Los Herederos)*, by Eugenio Polgovsky, immerses us in the daily lives of children who, with their families, survive only by their unrelenting labor.

The film takes us into the agricultural fields, where children barely bigger than the buckets they carry work long hours, often in hazardous conditions. They pick tomatoes, peppers, or beans, for which they are paid by weight. Infants in baskets are left alone in the hot sun or are breast-fed by their mothers while they pick crops.

The Inheritors also observes other labor routines, including the production of earthen bricks, sugar cane cutting, firewood gathering, plowing fields with oxen, and planting crops by hand. More artistic endeavors documented include the carving of wooden figures and the weaving of baskets to sell.

A contemplative journey through the lives of the working children in the Mexican countryside as, like their forefathers, they attempt to survive a perpetual cycle of inherited poverty.

Beautifully photographed and vividly captured, this is a world where everyone works, from the frailest elders to the smallest of toddlers. *The Inheritors* depicts a cycle of poverty passed on from one generation to the next.



SELECTED FESTIVALS & AWARDS

World Premiere, Venice Film Festival
Viennale, Vienna International Film Festival
Best Documentary, Mexican Academy of Film Arts and Sciences
Best Documentary, Santiago International Documentary Festival
Faisal Prize, Guadalajara Film Festival
Award of Merit in Film, Latin American Studies Association
Grand Prize, Festival of New Latin American Cinema
Robert Flaherty Film Seminar and Flaherty on the Road
Berlin International Film Festival
Rotterdam Film Festival

FILM CREDITS

Title:	The Inheritors
Spanish title:	Los herederos
Running time:	90 minutes
Director, cinematographer, and editor:	Eugenio Polgovsky
Sound on location and production coordinator:	Camille Tauss
Sound design and Sound Mix:	Christian Manzutto
Participants:	Yazmin Anaya Xiadani Gutiérrez Macaria Tejada Guadalupe Anaya Eleuterio Díaz Candelaria Díaz Felix Hernández Chano Tapia Jesus Tapia Agustina Molina Josefina Reyes Wilfredo Tejada Noemí Flores Rosa González Oliva González Regino Contreras Adrian Contreras Graciano Muñoz Carlos Alvarado Consuelo Fuentes Alejandra Méndez Ema Hernández
Produced by:	Tecolote Films
Music:	Banda Mixe de Oaxaca
With the Production Support of:	Hubert Bals Fund Visions Sud Est Cristian Manzutto

An Icarus Films Release

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

For the past ten years, I have traveled through the mountainous zones of the Mexican south-east and felt a combination of rage and tenderness at seeing dozens of children working in the fields. Why rage? Because I have observed their lives trapped in the misery inherited over generations. These children live in the same poverty their parents and grandparents did and use the same methods of survival. They work and work and yet there are never any signs of a better future ahead. There are cases of children exploited in terrible working conditions that force us to reflect on our absurd, abusive world that subjects and exploits them. Why tenderness? Because these children are talented and they express pride at being able to do something for themselves and contribute to the family income. Rage and tenderness fuel my desire to pay homage to their capacity; denounce their living conditions and reflect on the mechanisms that have kept these families mired in poverty, generation after generation.

This documentary is a portrait of child labor in the countryside in south-eastern Mexico. There seems to be no solution to these children's poverty; their poverty is inherited. They work as their older siblings, parents and grandparents did, with children and adults supporting their homes together. In order to explore this issue and its perspectives in time, the narrative follows the jobs the children perform, from the most common ones to those imposed on them through exploitation and abuse. I also hope to portray some of the elders whose pasts are being repeated day after day in the children's lives. Many child workers use the wood and wrought iron tools of their parents and grandparents. They work in conditions of poverty similar to those of their ancestors. For them the future looks bleak. All one can envisage for them is a continuation of the present of child labor and misery. Throughout the development of the documentary I seek to elicit a reflection on the following issues. Will today's child laborers be tomorrow's abandoned old folks? Will tomorrow's children inherit the same living and working conditions of their parents and grandparents? Does this inheritance cycle have an end?

I see this story as a contemplative journey through the working lives of child laborers in the Mexican countryside as well as through the lives of the elderly who remember and talk about their own lives. Over twenty portraits of children and old people are progressively intertwined and integrated. The camera explores each situation as a silent, astonished viewer. Children and old people come into contact like two ends of a string joined together.

The film portrays a world where history is cyclical, for the testimonies of the old people about the past describe the types of child labor that exist in the present.

The setting is natural and real, with no artifice. The sound is meant to enhance the atmosphere of the spaces, emphasizing the details and the small sounds that the characters create when they perform their activities. Children's perception is more delicate. At times, the sound emphasizes their sensitivity, fragility and innocence. Since children are often obliged to work in the midst of unbearable noise, I attempt to depict the oppressive sounds of this adult world.

The camera records events driven by astonishment; it tries to portray a cycle of inheritance. Like a ritual, this documentary attempts to merge symbols and images to awaken forces. These reveal the reality of the child workers in the Mexican southeast and encourage viewer reflection on the human condition.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Marisol: Aged 7. This girl is like an angel on earth; her hands, weaving thin cotton thread, emerge from the clouds. In a state of intense concentration, she weaves something that is unknown, an extremely complex piece of cloth. She spins, gradually creating a metaphor of the life and history of this film. She writes a human story with her hands, gradually accumulating details. She represents something hieratic: Marisol, with her deep concentration, bright, innocent eyes and hands, reveals a sacred aspect of life. She lends shape to the mechanism that constructs time, to the details that make a whole. She does not say a single word, and simply works among the adults that walk, rest and talk around her. Her loom consists of hundreds of threads that she deftly manipulates. Marisol spends countless hours sewing while her environment changes: people come and go, talk and leave. She just spins, every day, gradually creating a white cloth. Sometimes her mother sits next to her and helps her finish a piece. Afterwards, these white cloths are hung up to dry in the sun so that they can be sold in the village later. Life goes on; then she starts weaving a new piece of cloth out of nothing.

Three brothers: Aged 5, 7 and 12, live in the mountains. The three form a single character because they are always together. They are active, agile and fast; they talk little and smile a lot. Every day they leave home early, crossing stony streams and go up the mountains with their donkey to chop firewood and take it to their home in a small village in a foggy mountain range. They tie up the donkey and clamber down a slope to gather firewood. They bundle it up, put it on their shoulders and pile it up on the donkey until it cannot carry any more. Then they go back to the village, where they will make a fire to cook the tortillas.

Wilfredo: Aged 7, is responsible for looking after the family goats. Thin and silent, but cheerful despite his constant hunger, he sleeps on a mat of palm leaves (used in hot places) on the dirt floor of his room, rises at dawn and immediately begins work. Before he leaves, he takes wood into the kitchen so that his mother can make tortillas. For breakfast, he has a piece of plain tortilla and goes out to get the donkey ready, by putting a saddle on it. Then with his small, weak but agile body, he struggles with the goats to untie them. He takes them through the mountains, walking for four hours until he reaches an area of green ferns where the goats can graze. There they keep a large bull, the family treasure. They look after it as though it were made of gold, since it is what they use to open up the hard earth to sow the maize. There, sitting next to his brother, he keeps watch over the animals as the day goes by; all they have is a bottle of unpurified water. They go back at night to eat another tortilla and so on, day in and day out.

Lidia: Aged 6, happy to be working with her family, although she shows signs of extreme poverty and neglect of her basic needs. She does her work with dedication and pleasure, but eats very little. Her blistered feet peep out of her little plastic shoes when she scrapes up the dirt to cover the maize and bean seeds that she throws into a furrow. Over and over again she takes a seed out of the bucket held by her mother who is walking behind her, carrying a baby on her back, tied up in a shawl. The baby rocks to the rhythm of her work. Ahead of them, the young father walks along, opening up the ground with a long-handled narrow spade pulled by two large bulls. The father is calm but taciturn, with a distrustful gaze; he looks imperturbable. He stops and, like Lidia and her mother, throws the seeds into the furrow, which he then covers up by sweeping the earth with his large sandals. When the seeds have been used up, he shouts to Lidia, "Bring me the bucket!" Lidia reacts, stops throwing seeds and runs swiftly over the ground, avoiding the stones until she comes to a heavy bucket loaded with seeds. She takes it to her father, and both of them go on planting maize and bean seeds. Within a few months, after the rains, the family will harvest these two crops here and Lidia will pick and store the maize in baskets and help with the transport and loading.

Rosa: An old woman who does not know how old she is and Oliva, her daughter, aged 50. Mother and daughter live together in a derelict hut, together with a chicken and the firewood they have gathered for cooking. Some maps of Mexico are stuck on the walls. This place is the clearest metaphor of the status of the poor in Mexico. Oliva does various jobs, arranging the firewood and cooking for her mother. Rosa gets up slowly to pick up some pieces of firewood: she lifts them up very slowly, one by one, and takes them to a clay oven full of ash, where she builds a fire. Oliva and Rosa remained seated in silence, the light of the hut changes and they remain motionless.

Luis: Aged 9, is a builder from a village. It is a cold, cloudy day. Luis, wearing a torn shirt, breaks some stones in the mud with his small, dirty hands. He bangs them together to produce smaller pieces so that he can carry them in a sack. He is the youngest of the construction workers on the job. The foreman tells him to hurry up, since they are laying the foundations of the house. When he has a lot of small stones, he puts them into a sack, carrying them over muddy ground and ditches, just a few inches from very deep gullies. Luis fetches various loads, after which he is given more orders. He runs off to pick up a hoe which he uses to scrape up the earth to cover the ditches where the foundations have been completed. He is very efficient, sensitive and delicate; sometimes he seems scared, but he reacts like a soldier, when the older men tell him to perform the various construction tasks. He does a lot of the jobs the older men do not like to do. The church bells ring in the distance: he is surrounded by the sounds of animals and half-built houses. His hoe breaks and he goes back to the men for them to repair the tool, after which he returns to work. He strikes the earth, which makes a low, dull sound.

Don Pablo: An old man, aged 88, tells of the work he used to do when he was very small, the same kind many of the village boys do now. He describes the poverty he lived in and continues to live in to this day. As did his parents and grandparents. With a wistful smile but a catch in his voice, he says, "Yes, they were poor too...as we are..." Nearby, a couple of turkeys mate...Don Pablo grabs a chair and there is clock that mysteriously goes backwards. A child picks herbs, don Pablo smiles and the clock keeps going backwards.

José: Aged 12, carves wooden animals. When he does his work, his face expresses innocence and intense concentration. The accuracy with which he handles the knives is astonishing. He could be a heart surgeon, but instead he uses his talent to cut pieces of wood and make animal figures that he subsequently paints and sells. Today he is sitting in the shade of a tree. He fetches a piece of tree trunk and takes a machete. He cuts it on a large wooden base he leans on to shape the piece of wood out of which he has cut a square. José asks his younger brother for another knife, which with he keeps carving the piece of wood. Suddenly he makes a mistake and cuts his finger; blood spurts out but he remains seated and calm, although his eyes fill with tears. With adhesive he covers the wound; his skill and control of the knife continue to shape the wood. José carves a small figure of a cat.

Jesús: Aged 13, a brickmaker, works all day in the sun in a small brick factory. His task is to push the stones and gravel into a mixing machine. The machinery is very rudimentary and three adults fill the molds with the mixture and place them in the noisy machine, which compresses them and turns them into monoblock bricks, commonly used in poor areas. Jesús carries the gravel. There are no clouds and the sun beats down. The circular machinery does not stop.

There are various other characters in this story, including *Emma:* Aged 8, who is mute and helps by taking water to the workers in the corn field. *Lorenzo:* Aged 8, who helps in the tomato fields. *Julio:* Aged 8, who paints wooden animal figures. The brothers *Rey* and *Félix* pick coffee beans, dry them, and take them to be ground. Elders also participate, including *María*, *Anastasia*, *Rubén Díaz*, *Filiberto*, *Macario* and *doña Inés*.

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

Eugenio Polgovsky was born in Mexico City in 1977. In 1994, at the age of 17, he won the UNESCO-sponsored photography contest *Living Together*. He studied film directing and cinematography at the CCC film school. His thesis project and first documentary, *Tropic of Cancer*, won numerous awards around the world (Best Documentary at the Morelia International Film Festival 2004; Ariel for Best First Feature; Joris Ivens Prize at the Festival Cinéma du Réel; Best Documentary at DocuDays in Beirut, Corea and FICCO, and Golden Prize at the Al Jazeera Festival in Qatar). *Tropic of Cancer* also had a screening during the International Critics' Week at Cannes in 2005, and was included in the Frontier section at the Sundance Film Festival. It has been screened in over 100 festivals around the world.

In 2004, Polgovsky received the National Youth Award in Mexico. He has worked as a cinematographer in a number of documentary, narrative feature, and visual arts projects, collaborating with artist Jae Eu Choi and renowned butoh dancer Yuzhio Amagatzu in Japan, among others.

In 2008, with this production company Tecolote Films and the support of the Hubert Bals Foundation and Vision Sud Est in Switzerland, Polgovsky directed, photographed and edited *The Inheritors*, a documentary about the children who work in the Mexican countryside. He spent three years working on the project, which premiered at the 65th Venice International Film Festival. *The Inheritors* was the first documentary invited to participate in the competition section Generation Kplus at the Berlin Film Festival. It has garnered a number of awards, among these, two Ariel Awards (Best Documentary and Best Editing), the Coral at the 30th Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana, Best Documentary at FIDOCS, Chile, the Zapata Award at the Festival of Memory, and two awards from Amnesty International (Slovenia and Lisbon). In 2009, the documentary received the support of UNICEF for its distribution in Mexico and the world as part of an effort to raise awareness about child labor in the countryside.

Polgovsky is currently working on a documentary about children suffering from parasitic infections in Africa, which will be part of a campaign to combat this widespread health problem.



SELECTED PUBLICITY

THE NEW YORK TIMES
CRITIC'S PICK!
BY JEANETTE CATSOULIS
08 SEPTEMBER 2011

No one eats free, but children eat least of all in "The Inheritors," Eugenio Polgovsky's unvarnished portrait of the rural poor in modern-day Mexico.

Expanding his view from the single family featured in his remarkable 2004 debut, "Tropic of Cancer," the director travels across the often beautiful, always unforgiving countryside to watch children work. His film opens with a lullaby, and while there is indeed something soothing in his images of repetitive, backbreaking toil, the music also serves as a reminder of childhood lost. Herding goats and picking tomatoes, sowing seeds and lugging buckets of beans to be weighed, even the tiniest youngsters work with mechanical precision. There is no school, no games, no idle conversation — just chores.

The style is Spartan, but "The Inheritors" unfolds in glowing digital colors, familiar faces cycling around and connecting one segment to another. Filming without narration or musical flourishes — after that lullaby, the only tunes come from the tinny speakers of cheap radios — Mr. Polgovsky creeps in so close that we can feel the threads sliding beneath a girl's tirelessly weaving fingers, smell the gray drinking water carried by a toddler from a scummy creek. Individual exertions — tying firewood onto a donkey or tramping mud for bricks — are stitched into a larger quilt of human survival: even a boy's fantastical figurines, lovingly carved and painted, are destined for some faraway gift shop.

At the center of this dusty poem to grind and graft, the children seem older than their years, their small, serious faces stamped with acceptance of their lot. To them, this is the only life there is — and, if nothing changes, the only one their own children will inherit.

THE VILLAGE VOICE
BY MARK HOLCOMB
07 SEPTEMBER 2011

Unadulterated labor is the focus of this blistering, beautifully modulated documentary from Mexican auteur Eugenio Polgovsky. Its prime subjects are child workers, toiling away in states from Sinaloa to Oaxaca on tasks ranging from brick making and water hauling to woodcarving. Some of the jobs are less physically punishing than others, but each involves high levels of tedium and are implicitly life-long. Polgovsky isn't out to wring guilt from his movie's comparatively lazy audience, though it'd take monstrous will not to feel some measure of culpability or complain about your cushy job anytime soon afterward. Instead, *The Inheritors* inspires a progression of conflicting responses, from anger over the circumscribed childhoods on display to admiration for the kids' perseverance to, finally, a kind of sympathetic exhaustion. It also leaves room for envy, of all things, as well as nagging questions about our reflexive vilification of labor and, yes, the meaning of life: Health hazards and physical toll aside, isn't existence a grind regardless of how we're required to spend our days? Polgovsky leaves such philosophical inquiry wide open, and as his fluid, inquisitive camera follows the daily routines, he

captures moments of joy amid the monotony. The culmination isn't a harangue, then, but more a symphonic entreaty—to acknowledge who really pays for those cheap tomatoes we gobble obliviously. But also to concede that no matter how privileged many of us in the "developed" world are to be able to apply our lives to high-paying brainwork, we know practically nothing.

VARIETY

BY ROBERT KOEHLER

29 JANUARY 2009

The harsh, relentlessly arduous conditions experienced by children toiling in the Mexican countryside are observed with striking vision and cinematic poetry by filmmaker Eugenio Polgovsky in "The Inheritors." Though this new doc is a natural extension of his highly regarded debut, "Tropic of Cancer," especially in its intimate view of Mexico's poorest of the poor, it's also a leap forward in technique and powered by a stronger emotional pull. A tour of some of the world's top fests and strong critical support should land the pic in a prestige spot for tube and vid sales.

Trusting in images, natural sound and a fine, rhythmic sense of editing to tell his story, Polgovsky (along with sound recordist Camille Tauss) spent three years with subsistence farmers in the Mexican states of Guerrero, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Sinaloa, Puebla and Veracruz. Rejecting a pity-the-poor perspective, his approach relies on a physical, roving DV cam keeping up with the child workers and -- like in *Tropic of Cancer*, though with a far better video image results -- watching them so closely that the viewer can feel their exertion. An angry sense of injustice is never insisted upon; instead, it emerges organically, like the harvested crops themselves, from the film's material.

Gone are any of the standard explanatory graphic cards, voiceover intros or music cues designed to push emotional buttons, making *The Inheritors* part of an enthralling global trend in nonfiction films committed to unvarnished realism, treating both auds and subjects respectfully and without condescension. Early passages may seem randomly sampled, as pic shows goat herders, a truckload of farm workers harvesting chiles, tomatoes and green beans, and other farm activities.

Yet a solid structure does emerge, with each location and sequence meticulously edited, broken up into small sections that are either regularly revisited or stitched together into montages that recall the silent-era Soviet docs of Dziga Vertov. Crucially, Polgovsky never makes the kids' tough existences into something beautiful for its own sake, even though some of the lushly green hillside settings are gorgeous. Instead, the film trains on the detailed work each child does: the skill demanded to make bricks from scratch, or the right way to use rope to tie a bundle of wood and secure it to a burro.

So mesmerizing is the world Polgovsky homes in on that it may take a while for it to sink in that the child laborers are stuck in sub-Third World conditions, deprived of any education and seemingly condemned to a life of subsistence farming. Title's meaning draws from this, as well as the underlying point that these conditions are precisely the cause of population flight north of the border. Camerawork is sharp and extraordinarily nimble in some physically demanding conditions, and provides a fine demonstration of the outstanding picture quality that can now be delivered by small DV cams. Highly selective use of traditional *conjunto* band music serves to celebrate life rather than to elicit easy sympathy.

FILMMAKER MAGAZINE
BY HOWARD FEINSTEIN
29 AUGUST 2011

Mexico remains a heavily stratified society, despite the strides made over the past 50 years in bridging an enormous socio-economic gap. A non-centralized wave of films has been building there over the past decade, and cinema, the most accessible of art forms, reflects the divide. One could argue that the directors make a choice: poverty or the bourgeoisie.

You can observe the schism for yourself in the excellent 10-film series GenMex: Recent Films from Mexico, running September 9-22 at New York's Anthology Film Archives. The exhibition begins with a one-week run of Eugenio Polgovsky's *The Inheritors*, September 9-15. The other titles each screen twice from September 16-22. Four that stand out for me strongly address the rupture. The first two described below are set among the poor, one without hope (*The Inheritors*), the other a tad more optimistic (*Northless*). The third (*Parque Via*) and fourth (*Intimacies of Shakespeare and Victor Hugo*) take place in middle- and upper-middle-class milieus, even if the have-nots occasionally rear their ugly heads.

An accomplished photographer and cinematographer, Polgovsky proved in *Tropic of Cancer* (2004) his ability to capture in gorgeous visual images, without condescension, the day-to-day minutiae of the rural poor, who hunt down wild animals to sell at the side of the highway. In the beautiful but shocking *The Inheritors*, there is even less dynamism. Polgovsky follows closely the mundane work—picking vegetables, making bricks, tilling the soil—of very young children in four Mexican provinces.

He compensates with asymmetrical framing, a moving camera, and rapid montages of faces, some young, others extremely old. Without narration, we understand the implication: These kids are fated to endure harsh lives similar to those of their grandparents and great-grandparents. Occasional organ-grinder-like carnival music and dancing punctuate the monotony.

Polgovsky never overaestheticizes. He endows these youths with a grace the outside world would never grant them. In order to achieve this in a film in which the subjects appear almost unaware of a camera in their midst, he spent a lot of time among them and earned their trust. He pulls the lower depths higher, even if it's but a temporary respite.

TIME OUT NEW YORK
BY KEITH UHLICH
07 SEPTEMBER 2011

Everybody works. That's the dismaying takeaway from Eugenio Polgovsky's haunting documentary, which he filmed over the course of two years in dirt-poor rural regions of Mexico. What you remember most are the children, many of them barely past toddler age, herding animals, gathering wood and slogging buckets of vegetables picked from sunburnt fields. In a particularly harrowing scene, a young boy carves a cat-shaped sculpture—probably bound for a tourist shop—with a machete, the blade barely missing his exposed hand time and again. (When he does finally slice his finger with a whittling knife, the boy barely flinches and uses Scotch tape to cover the wound.)

While the kids are the primary focus of Polgovsky's intimate and probing DV compositions, the grown-ups are usually pushed to the side—their backs turned or their bodies clipped from the

waist up as if this were a UNESCO-approved *Peanuts* cartoon. It's a bold stylistic choice that initially gives the proceedings the feel of an innocent lark, which only slowly reveals itself as an inescapable nightmare. When adults are shown full face and body, they tend to be elderly workers who hobble around on crutches while toiling at tasks from chicken-feeding to loom knitting. Toward the end of the film, a few hard-hitting cuts between young and old brings the title's meaning home: These children have an inescapable life of drudgery before them, and there's little likelihood it will change anytime soon.

SCREEN DAILY
BY LEE MARSHALL
10 FEBRUARY 2009

Eugenio Polgovsky's remarkable documentary, made on a budget of just \$35,000, is a day-by-day study of the lives of several groups of child laborers in rural Mexico. Filmed in the sort of up-close detail that only one-man productions shot over long timespans can manage, the un-narrated, un-captioned *The Inheritors / Los Herederos* observes its subjects without comment or polemic. The result is a sometimes harrowing but also poetic and thoughtful film which galvanizes its audience without resorting to shock tactics or facile finger-pointing. Polgovsky's documentary seems sure to continue its festival march, and may secure some one-off theatrical bookings, followed by an afterlife on DVD as an educational and consciousness-raising tool.

Filmed in the provinces of Veracruz, Oaxaca, Pueblo and Guerrero provinces, *Los Herederos* charts every variety of job that children are pressed into, willingly or not, in these grindingly poor areas. Opening with a lullaby on blackscreen, the film cuts to a view of clouds scudding over densely forested mountain spurs, before homing in on a group of young boys with holes in their shoes, running along a mountain track to a clearing where we will see them gathering firewood and laboriously binding and hauling it in bundles that seem too large for their slender boyish frames.

The coexistence of grind and beauty is a constant feature. We're rapt and shocked at the same time as we see kids of no more than ten (and often a lot less) shoveling soil, picking tomatoes, making bricks, all with deft movements that seem generationally hardwired. Adults are not absent, and there's no cruelty on display; kids work alongside their parents, while a baby, brought to work with the rest of the family, is distracted by a piece of tinfoil hung between the tomato rows. Polgovsky's handheld digital camera stays close to the action; sometimes his subjects will look into the lens and smile, or stare, but mostly they seem completely used to his presence. The obvious ease of this coexistence wins our sympathy for the observing eye – though there are moments when we will the director to put down his camera and lend a hand. Occasional bursts of raucous carnival band music accompany some sequences, culminating in a joyous collective 'dance of the devils' which ends the film on a note of faith in the irrepressible spirit of childhood.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
GOD NEVER DIES: EUGENIO POLGOVSKY'S *THE INHERITORS*
BY POLLY BRESNICK
6 SEPTEMBER 2011

*Sleep, my child, sleep
Don't wake up my little one
My child, my little child,
Don't wake up my little one
Have sweet dreams,
Sleep my child, sleep,
Don't wake up my little one,
Don't wake up my little one.
Sleep my child,
my little child.*

The film opens with this lullaby. A sweet, motherly voice sings it, but the melody is haunting. Then, the world appears, unrelenting and vast, the people in it tiny and insignificant. The long, slow tracking shot of the misty mountains is magnificent, reminiscent of a travelogue.¹ But the harsh reality of human-scale life within the mountains reveals itself quickly, with a view of small feet in torn shoes maneuvering frantically through tangled underbrush. Soon we see the dirty, worn hooves of a gaunt pack-mule and understand that the boys and the animal share a life of constant labor. Later, a very small boy carries two jugs of water with a yolk over his shoulders, and the film cuts to cattle yoked to a rickety wooden plow. A young goatherd playfully imitates the animals he's leading by holding his makeshift staff over his shoulders, mocking alongside the animals. The children in *The Inheritors* are beasts of burden.

Feet are emphasized throughout, giving the sense of a slogging march through life. It is a steep, and slippery uphill journey, and there is no break or "retirement" at the end. As evinced by an old woman feeding her chickens and making tortillas from scratch, whose individual steps seem to require a great effort, the subjects of the film work until the day they die.

The camera integrates into its surroundings, observing the world through what often seem like the eyes of a co-laborer. The long and meticulous processes of production, harvest, gathering, and hauling are documented with a patience that matches the steady, acquiescent pace of the film's subjects, who never complain or rush. Polgovsky's camera stays close to them—hiking up mountain paths and weaving through cane fields; being jostled on the crowded truck to the field at the break of day; down in the dirt with harvesters, plowmen, and seed-droppers—though it never reaches into the scene with a helping hand, as the viewer may sometimes want it to. The camera's gaze is absent of pity. It respects its subjects for their ingenuity and their perseverance in the face of difficulty. When a boy on a mountain path drops the load of wood he worked meticulously to bundle and hoist onto his back, the camera turns to the other two boys hauling wood. One smiles at the camera (not at the other boy's expense, but more in a gesture of familiarity with the situation) while the other catches up and stops. Both boys watch their cohort patiently, without running to the rescue. The film avoids a maudlin or pitying tone through moments like this: instead it trusts, like his co-laborers, that he can take care of himself.

This scene's patient observation demonstrates (perhaps with a bit of awe) the self-sufficiency of its subjects, who support each other when they can but are mostly on their own, without the help of any charitable hand to relieve them. This moment also captures a stark cruelty and injustice to which these world-worn children have grown accustomed. As the film continues, the viewer may start to understand that the disparity between his or her own comfortable childhood

and the laborious one experienced by the children on screen may be a cause and effect situation. Without being explicitly told to feel this way, the viewer may catch a glimpse of the reality that some work so that others don't have to.

Cutting between various daylong labors in progress, Polgovsky's film reflects upon the omnipresent, never-ending nature of work in these rural lands. One scene shows a young boy carving a piece of wood with tools that, outside of the culture being depicted, would be considered far too sharp for a young boy to use. A tension builds within the tight frame of the boy's hands. As the viewer has been led to fear, the boy cuts himself. But instead of this being the dramatic moment the viewer anticipated, the boy looks briefly at his bleeding finger then presses it against his pants in an attempt to stanch the blood before turning back to his work. It isn't long before the blood starts interfering with the time-sensitive task at hand, dirtying the wood and making his knife too slippery to grip. He asks a smaller boy to fetch him some tape which he then wraps tightly, but haphazardly around his finger. He looks up from his work for only a moment, to smile sheepishly—almost apologetically—at the camera. As with the boy who drops his load of logs, the setback is familiar to him, and it doesn't deserve much time or attention. A later shot reveals that the wood he is carving will be painted to join a bright menagerie of hand-carved dragons and birds and horses. This seems a direct demonstration of the blood and sweat that literally go into this labor.

In a later scene, when a girl begins spinning the wheels of a large loom, intricate and beautiful music seems to burst forth from the mechanism of the loom. In a striking manipulation of reality (and a departure from Polgovsky's predominantly direct-cinema style, which is absent of voiceover narration, title-cards, or interviews), the music is non-diegetic, but this distinction is blurred because of the way the music starts up in time with the loom. Slow and distorted at first, the song soon becomes clear-toned, matching the rhythm of the loom's spinning wheels, as though the girl were operating a hand-crank gramophone. The song is the de facto anthem of the state of Oaxaca, "Dios Nunca Muere," and its lyrics celebrate the ability to survive life's trials through faith that help is offered by God when needed, suggesting a more hopeful side of life, as brightly colorful as the painted wooden animals. But all this brightness conflicts with the dull reality that these children sweat and bleed through their labor. Later, this same waltz plays as the field workers make their journey home at the end of their long day. It sounds celebratory and funereal at once, the bass-line plodding as heavily as the feet of the workers, but with a brassy quality that hints at a moment of joy.

Back home, in the dust and dark that follows the sun-blasted day, the spirited group of goatherds in horned masks dances to the "Danza de los Diablos." The faces we can see, of other children watching and dancing, are smiling in the flickering firelight. The scene cuts away to a quick glimpse of the bright fabric being produced by an older woman at a spidery-limbed loom, and the film ends on a brief note of hope: these children will inherit a life loaded high with work, but they will also inherit this dance, this music, a flashing glimpse of the kind of childhood the viewer may wish upon them.

1 This shot could be a nod to Buñuel's *Land Without Bread*, which Polgovsky's film parallels in its depiction of a rural culture, though without Buñuel's irony, morbidity, or condemnation of the European travelogue's condescending perspective of "primitive" cultures.

THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER
BY NEIL YOUNG
18 NOVEMBER 2008

BOTTOM LINE: AN AUDACIOUSLY STARK AND COMPELLINGLY UP-CLOSE DOCUMENTARY ON CHILD-LABOR IN MODERN RURAL MEXICO

Four years after his shattering debut *Tropic of Cancer*, photographer-turned-director Eugenio Polgovsky returns with another tough, rewarding glimpse into northern Mexico's hard-scrabble realities with "The Inheritors." Though a notch below his first movie -- a genuine masterpiece -- the picture confirms Polgovsky as a major talent. Commercial prospects for such unadorned, uncompromising, video-shot fare may be regrettably dim in the current economic climate, but festivals and adventurous TV-buyers must check it out.

Whereas *Tropic* concentrated on a single family in a single geographic location, *The Inheritors / Los herederos* ranges across the countryside. Here we find children as laborers, toiling in oft-hazardous conditions long regarded as unacceptable in numerous wealthier countries worldwide, but depressingly prevalent in many corners of the 21st-century globe. As with *Tropic*, Polgovsky's approach is spartan in its simplicity: no score, narration or title-cards, and little dialogue and even then only partially English-subtitled.

But the sights and sounds he intimately captures speak, most eloquently, for themselves, and the viewer is able to glean much about the general and specific situations via deduction, context and implication. For example, there's the fact that the children themselves generally seem pretty content, happily smiling into the camera, in the manner of kids in all types of societies.

But rather than being a reassurance, this detail is, we realize, chilling: These lads and lasses have clearly never known any other kind of life, and so don't know that another world, one involving education, relaxation and carefree play, exists. The film is, above all, a sobering a tribute to their persistence, patience, resilience and resourcefulness. The mere existence of the movie itself is an indictment: Those in charge of employing the children (for unspecified wages) clearly don't see anything wrong with the activity. We deduce that what we're seeing is probably entirely "lawful" and perhaps regarded as an economic necessity, with countless working-age adults presumably having crossed the Mexico/U.S. border in search of better opportunities. That doesn't make it any less shameful. This is awareness-raising documentary cinema at its most urgent and necessary.

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Icarus Films
32 Court Street, Floor 21
Brooklyn, NY 11201
(718) 488-8900
mail@IcarusFilms.com
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