

Kilómetro 126 (126th Kilometer)

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Abstract

Kilómetro 126 is a 16-minute hybrid short film narrating the day of a young couple as they spend their last time together in their hometown. Focusing on small intimate and fleeting moments from their everyday lives while juxtaposing these scenes with archival stills, the film intends to contrast the settlement of a town with its future, questioning the notion of development and progress in these rural areas. Kilómetro 126 portrays the dreams and aspirations of those who stayed in La Cumbre, a town that once stood for the development and progress of Colombia.

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A Space in Time

“One needs a town if only for the satisfaction of being able to leave it. A town means not feeling alone, knowing that in the people, in the trees, in the earth there is something about you that, even when you are not there, stays waiting for you.”

— Cesare Pavese (1949).



Image #1. Bieler Family in La Cumbre

Kilometro 126 stems from a desire to explore the lives of the people who stayed in La Cumbre, from the ones who were born there, to the ones who moved to the area at an earlier time. My intention is to portray what lingers between the past and present, constantly questioning the future that awaits the people of this region. My methodological approach is observational, focusing on the lives of the region's youth. The use of documentary tools such as archival photographs, a non-intrusive camera, and an elaborate sound design to speak to the environment and the bittersweet feeling that arises at the thought of leaving a place like La Cumbre behind. I began this project when I finalized my last short film titled *La Cumbre*. After capturing the space in my family's old house, I returned to embark on the task of capturing what the region preserves.

Following multiple encounters and conversations with people from the region, I decided to focus on the lives of those who stayed in the area, exploring their aspirations and conflicts. The backdrop of the train tracks, always visible in this landscape, once symbolized a better future in major cities, where opportunities flourished. Now, they lie abandoned in these mountains, leaving behind unfulfilled intentions of a unified and developed country.

Between 1985 and 2012, approximately six million people were displaced from rural areas to the main cities of Colombia: Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín, as a result of an ongoing civil war (between left armed groups, ultra-right paramilitary forces, and the government) which caused approximately nine million casualties and halted economic growth (*Narrar la verdad. Tensiones entre información, narrativa y verdad en la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad en Colombia*, 2022). This crisis led to social and economic upheaval in these areas, truncating infrastructural developments and shrinking the labour force. Today, as the civil war looms to finish, these areas strive to make up for lost time, both economically and culturally. Yet, the best way forward, especially for the youth, is to leave for the cities, seek a better education and aspire to develop a career of their own. This hybrid short is inspired by the observational approach and participatory qualities that characterize acclaimed films such as *Honeyland* (2019), while it also borrows visual elements from acclaimed narrative films such as *Life Goes On* (1992), utilizing a minimalist and natural cinematic composition. *Kilómetro 126* is an expansion of the themes and interests that categorize my work: memory and space, family and legacy, time and the body.

In his recollection of short stories and memoirs in *El Cuento de Mi Vida* (2007), Andrés Caicedo describes La Cumbre as a transitory place where his family gathered only to create distance from each other; outlining family conflicts, land disputes, and other matters. Caicedo describes his family's home in La Cumbre as a place that never served an actual purpose for his family, but rather held vague memories of his youth and his inevitable distancing from others. Caicedo even describes La Cumbre as a ghost town where he spent ten years growing up with his family.

My brother Herman recommended Caicedo's book when I went to La Cumbre to start pre-production for *Kilometro 126*. While reading its passages, I kept thinking of his descriptions of life in these mountains. They seem like distant memories – or dreams – of my own family. His words about a transitory ghost town resonated with me. I knew this was a main theme that I was tasked to uncover and/or discover. I had spent little time in that house when growing up, compared to my brother, who lived most of his early years there, being raised by my grandmother. The distance I felt from the place had always been evident to me and to the rest of my family. This sentiment became my primary intent for this project – to overcome the distance between myself and my family, our relationship with the region, and the feeling of being Colombian, living outside of the country for more than a decade.

My Family's Home

In 2018, five years after leaving the country of my birth, I returned to Colombia for the first time. While in transit to Peru for a documentary workshop, I visited Santiago de Cali, where most of my family lives today. I stayed with my paternal grandparents and decided to document their lives, focusing entirely on the house they lived in then. For me, that house was the place where I spent most of my childhood. Every summer, we returned to Cali to be with the rest of the family. However, I stopped going when I became an adult.

During the filming, the documentary slowly shifted from being about a space to being about my grandparents' relationship within this space. In this short documentary, my grandmother spoke about my grandfather's double life and the secrets he kept hidden from her and the rest of the family. The resulting documentary, *Pampalinda* became a project about the house where my family lived and the routines they carried out in their older age as a place that kept those secrets within the family. It also became a document of a 60-year-old relationship and the hardships they have faced throughout it.

My fascination and interest grew in focusing on these spaces and the lives that inhabit them, quickly becoming a constant theme for my work. Little of the house was shown in the film, but its essence remains, capturing what it meant to have lived in Pampalinda. The space is not just the walls and facades but also the energies and memories that travel within those walls. When I showed *Pampalinda* to my family, their response was varied. At first, they were unaware

of the story that my grandparents had kept within the house walls. It finally released the weight of what they had known for years and it allowed them to finally speak about it openly. Some of the responses to the film were welcoming and opened even more topics (such as hidden truths) about my family, especially the idea of the place we thought we always knew.

My brother, who has produced most of my projects, later asked me about our other house - the one he spent a good portion of his childhood in. Memories of that house had faded for me, and I could only recall them by looking at photographs and videos. During our conversations, we discussed the place and its current condition, asking each other questions about La Cumbre and its current state. A year later, in 2019, I returned to La Cumbre, my family's childhood home, after more than two decades. The house had been abandoned for over ten years, when my grandparents decided to close its doors and leave the region. Still, everything seemed the same to my brother, who remembered the house well. He had visited a few months prior to me and had described it as a space where time took over the house, but its essence prevailed. For me, it was challenging to visualize the house again. I remembered only a few glimpses of it; without photographs, it would have been almost impossible to recall those memories. I brought a camera to capture as much footage as possible. Gabriela Osio Vanden, a friend and collaborator, accompanied me as a cinematographer for this project and, later, for the production of *Kilometro 126*. As I walked around the house, memories of my family flooded my mind—the place where my grandparents once lived, nestled in the mountains. I had planned to capture their memories here, but unfortunately, my grandmother fell ill and couldn't join us. However, my grandfather was able to recount stories of our time there.

While filming, we consciously decided to focus on what remained of the space, rather than imposing any preconceived ideas on my grandfather. We followed him as he wandered through his old home, his body weaving through the rooms like a thread connecting past and present. Gabriela and I agreed that the film's tone should reflect a dream-like memory, capturing an idyllic place suspended between the past and present. We named the film *La Cumbre* in recognition of the town where it is located. The house served as the sole protagonist of the film, with my grandmother's voice-over narration providing relevance to this place, which had remained abandoned for ten years. With this film we explored the concept of home by dissecting and examining it closely, which evoked memories for many of my family members. It was inevitable for us to reflect on our childhood memories when we were happiest and never imagined losing what we held dear.



Image #2. Maruja & Felix, my grandparents, watching short film *La Cumbre*

The Coral We Brought from Brazil is a short film that impacted my creative vision for this project. It revolves around an artist and his wife who rediscovered lost 16mm home movies after 45 years. The film is divided into two parts. In the first half, we see footage of the filmmaker's family spending their summer days by the swimming pool. As we watch that footage, we hear the same family, now older, commenting in voice over on what they are viewing. This approach in the film helps create a time connection between the viewer and the images. In the second half, we observe the faces of those family members as they screen the footage again. They repeat the same comments, but this time, we see their reactions to the footage, which they thought was lost. What captivated me the most about this film was its simplicity and effectiveness in capturing the importance of memory and its process of recollection. This film has significantly influenced the editing of *La Cumbre* and *Pampalinda*, as it highlights the importance of timing in activating not just personal but collective memory.

In 2022, I tried, once again, to recreate this method that was so effective in *The Coral We Brought from Brazil*. My grandfather has been suffering from severe dementia. I wanted to bring back some of his memories by showing him the work we had done together and trying to recreate the same space and time we had shared as a family. The experience with my grandfather was significant to me because preserving and capturing memories is one of the main reasons I want to make films. I have aimed to portray its simplicity by focusing on intimate moments. I encountered complex emotions throughout the process of making these films. These emotions have led to family disputes, and discussion about the secrets and personal lives, which should remain within the family. As a matter of fact, because of my interest in focusing on my family

history, I have been questioned and judged by my family members about the career path I have chosen. Placing a camera in front of them I allowed myself to open about subjects which otherwise would have never been spoken of. I showed my own vulnerability to my family, and confronted all our mistakes we have made from the past. My films have opened conversations about the secrets and lies we had covered for years, making it easier to address them, first through images, and then, through our voices.

A Home for a Family

In 2018, I participated in a filmmaking workshop in the Peruvian Amazon with the director Werner Herzog. During this workshop, my idea of documentary filmmaking expanded from simply capturing reality to portraying it more profoundly. One of our main objectives was to distinguish between reality and truth. According to Herzog, there is a poetic truth that he seeks to uncover, rather than merely representing an idea of reality that external factors have influenced, beyond what Herzog called “the truth of the accountants” (Minnesota Declaration, 1999). Inspired by his words, I set out to look for honest images that were meant to capture the essence of life itself without worrying about their technical quality. During the workshop, I made a short film called *Un Sueño Joven*, which follows a day in the life of a twelve-year-old Venezuelan boy and his baby sister.

The film depicts the children's day-to-day routines and the boy's dream of returning to his home in Venezuela, their country of origin which they fled due to the harsh economic conditions they faced. Although the children are not alone in the house, the framing device in the film makes it seem as though they are all by themselves, with a twelve-year old as the sole authority figure. *Un Sueño Joven* explores family values using documentary techniques and language. I have always strived to create honest and authentic moments while preserving the integrity of the people in front of the camera. Although I found documentary work closer to the honesty I sought out, I also realized that creating a pure honest moment in someone else's life is impossible.

Nonetheless, I continue to embark on unfamiliar places and make them familiar, using fictitious moments to reveal the truth that lies beneath the surface.

This same thought and practice took me to *Kilómetro 126*. In 2022, I traveled to Colombia and met the Galindo Murillo family, land workers who had settled in my family's home in La Cumbre. I developed a relationship with their oldest son, Cristian, and began discussing what I would like to capture of the region. However distant from filmmaking, Cristian became interested and accompanied me around the region, looking for places and themes. Guided by Herzog's words during his workshop in Peru, "Don't create worlds, go and find them," I began developing the idea for *Kilómetro 126*, looking for inspiration and stories from this area. I needed to ask people still living in the region questions about their livelihood. To relate to the town with honesty and authenticity, I had to first overcome the distance that was created during the years after my departure. I was bound to live again in the very same house I grew up in twenty-five years ago, and spend time with the new family that moved in.

Cristian became my guide around the area, not just the town but all the places where the train used to connect. It was a mutual time of growth as we were fond of learning from each other. I was very interested in what gave the people in the region a livelihood, and the activities and routines that take place now in the town. Cristian was curious about places outside of his home in La Cumbre, and Colombia. During our conversations, we looked for locations and people who might become part of a film. It was inevitable to speak about our past and future

here, and outside of the region. After this conversation, I knew Cristian would be a significant figure in the making of this film.

Cristian spoke to me about moving to Cali, the region's largest city, where he believed he would find a better future for himself, or at least have more opportunities. Despite this belief, he didn't want to abandon his current home, as he was convinced that he would never find the peace these mountains give him. Colombia, despite being one of the fastest-developing countries in South America, continues to suffer dramatically in rural areas due to ongoing violence, the endless civil war, and drug trafficking. Opportunities in these areas have decreased drastically, and most of these small towns in Valle del Cauca region are expected to become ghost towns in the next fifty years. The civil war that took place from the mid-twentieth century until today has weakened rural areas. Over six million people migrated from these areas to the major cities of Bogotá, Barranquilla, Medellín, and Cali. The government tried new incentive programs to stop the flow and repopulate rural areas after the conflict with the guerilla group FARC ended in 2016. Despite those efforts, the reintegration of families turned out to be futile, as resources and means for people to make a living in the country remain scarce.

Due to its proximity to Cali, La Cumbre in Valle del Cauca was not severely affected by the Colombian Civil War. However, the government's political instability and lack of presence in these areas of the country resulted in a lack of economic development in those towns. For decades, there was little attention by the government in areas that weren't affected by the war. The lack of government presence allowed paramilitary groups to take control. La Cumbre is an

example of how people responded during these times when families leave their homes hoping to return one day, while settlers from other regions of Colombia took possession of and worked the land as their sole source of stability. In the path from their region to the big cities, migrating families came across towns like La Cumbre, and settled in the abandoned homes. Despite their efforts in farming, they soon faced the fact that there was no government economic support in the region. With no markets to sell their harvest, these families now produce only what they would consume themselves. The town's economy stagnated to a state where nothing could be purchased, and nothing could be sold. This has been La Cumbre's economy for the past twenty years. Despite its close distance to Cali, the town's population is unable to incorporate into the economic system of the region and depends entirely on its own. The question has become how long this land will remain fertile to be able to harvest any food, and for how long the region's youth will understand there are other places to live. These notions and ideas led me to further develop *Kilómetro 126*, and to creatively explore the inevitability of people migrating. The film's backdrop had been handed to us; the task became how to populate it, and with whom.

While showing me the region, Cristian was accompanied by his girlfriend, Diana. I couldn't resist filming them together and recording their conversations. Observing the two making fun of each other and Cristian narrating stories about the town gave me an approach for the film: the two young lovers guide us through an abandoned town and raise questions about its future, and their own. During this time, the three of us walked to many different locations: the old watch tower, the abandoned bridge, and the railway tunnel. On these journeys, I kept looking for a way to connect the history of the town to the story of these two lovers. However, during

these scouts, it became apparent to me that to be in front of the camera for the actual film, Cristian needed to feel more secure. After all, originally, he didn't even want to be part of the filming. This issue forced me to re-imagine the film quickly.

Solecito (2013), short film directed by Oscar Ruiz Navia, tells the story of two young lovers who meet again during a casting call for a feature film. When the director discovers that both lovers have separated, he attempts to use fiction in the short's narrative structure to reunite them. This film and the purity of its essence guided me in the casting process for *Kilómetro 126*. I met with Edwin Salinas, the municipality's head of cultural events. He mentioned he knew students who would be interested in being part of our project. I went to the elementary school Simon Bolivar and introduced myself to a group of teenagers. As I was on my way to hold the casting sessions at the school, Cristian arrived on his motorcycle wanting to see who I would chose to be the protagonists of the film. I didn't hesitate to welcome him for the casting session, knowing Cristian understood the situation well and could help me. The casting session was held in an open space where I tried to capture the interactions between the students and their response to my questions. I asked 25 students about their lives in the region, their aspirations, and their plans for the future. Only one girl expressed her desire to stay in the region after school and work to sustain their family and their home. Her response captivated me immediately, as the others wanted to leave as soon as school was over. They spoke about the need for more opportunities, and how people in town only think about their self-interests, with no consideration for the future of the community. The casting session was a success helping me solidify the idea of a town abandoned by the descendants of the people who built it. After the session, Cristian and I

discussed the experience, realizing we had found what we sought. However, we were still not clear who among the youth, beside the girl who wanted to stay in the region, would be the other ideal character for the documentary.

During the pre-production stage of *Kilómetro 126*, I met Johanna Cote, the granddaughter of one of the first settlers in the region that arrived in the early 20th century. She shared her family story with me and described relevant events that have occurred in the town, providing me with a vivid image of how La Cumbre used to look like and how people lived. Like many in the region, Johanna holds onto the town's memory by sharing its stories through photographs she kept, and stories her grandmother once told her. Many of the photographs were taken in the 1990's. They took me back to my childhood when I used to watch the train passing by our house. I used to place coins on the tracks for the train to squeeze them and listen to the different sounds it made. Johanna told me it was a common way for children to have fun back in the day. Johanna's story of returning to La Cumbre in the late 1990s and early 2000s to open the doors of her childhood home encouraged me to face what I had to do myself – to overcome the distance I felt from my hometown and its people. A recurring thought I had during the process of planning the film was to reconstruct my family home, and what it would take for me to do so. Meeting Johanna gave me the strength to embark on these dreams of making a film.

While in La Cumbre, I tried to locate a local Archive. The town municipal office kept telling me that such a place did not exist. It was frustrating: every time I asked, they would send me to another bureaucrat who would just give me the same answer. Eventually, I went to Johanna

who opened her entire family archive. Even though I suspected she would not have what I was looking for – images of the construction of the town and railway – I went through 100 years of her family's archives. I found images from her family's departure from Germany at the beginning of the 20th century, and pictures as recent as 15 years ago. Although I was hoping to find these images of the development of the region, what I saw was Johanna's family history. As much as I wanted my own family's history to also be included, there was none that was kept, since no one in my family had an interest in preserving these photographs. I had wanted to use my family photographs and re-contextualize them with archival images of our original shooting in the following weeks. I had been influenced by Phil Hoffman's Process Cinema course, where we discussed the purpose of archives, and the idea of remediation by removing archival footage from its setting and placing it in a new external context. What would the archive express differently? How would it speak to the viewer? These were questions I would need to address in post-production. Through Johanna's family images, I could see the town and the area, how it was settled, and what it had become, through time. That approach to the film would move into a deeper personal realm, and become a reflection of my inner self. I started writing moments from memories from my or Cristian's childhood, and moments that unfolded in the present tense. During this writing process, I wasn't bound to search for a narrative structure. My main goal was to focus on capturing the place through its people and the passing of time.

Despite being immersed in Johanna's family archive, I kept persisting that there should be a place in town where I could find photographs or film that would reveal what the place used to be. I couldn't believe there was no archive of the region but that it was the local authorities who

were not eager to step out of their comfort zone and properly inform me about other paths I could embark to find local archives. Every response demoralized me further as it was evident no one knew if that archive ever existed or if it had been destroyed. At that moment I realized that the failed search mirrored the state of La Cumbre itself – a town that is abandoned and forgotten. If no one takes care of the memory of a place, what remains of it once everyone is gone? I knew at that moment that the story about the youth in town who left would not provide a complete narrative of abandonment. As the film is in its final stages of production, the work that Johanna had done to record her family has made her the sole keeper of our town's memory. It convinced me that her material needed to be included in my film.

A few weeks before the start of principal photography, while we were locking the teenagers' availability, Edwin Salinas told us we could not work with the students in the mornings, but only between 1:30 pm and 6:00 pm, when the sun set. Due to the nature of the film stock, we would not have enough time to film in sufficient daylight. I tried to convince the head of the school by arguing that the students could count their involvement in the project as their hours of mandatory social service. That request was denied. When I explained this to Cristian, he saw how defeated I felt and offered to speak to Diana, his girlfriend, to see if both would be willing to be in front of the camera, which had been the original plan. This moment reminded me of a conversation at Tabakalera¹ in San Sebastian where Oliver Laxe speaks about the casting process of his film, *Fire Will Come* (2019). Laxe reported that the very first people he encountered during the casting session had been his choice. But his producers insisted that Laxe interviewed as many people as possible. After almost a month of casting, Laxe was even more

confident to return to his original casting choices. In the same conversation at Tabakalera in San Sebastian, Laxe describes his work as "an act of following the signs that life gives you" (2019). I was highly encouraged by this method, yet talking to the teenagers had given me an insight into the town's people and widened my perspective.

When Cristian and Diana gave their go-ahead to be my protagonists, I sat down with Cristian and started writing down moments that we both wanted to capture. We began collecting memories of his life with Diana, and from our time together during our scouting trips. My experience making films has always included creating a collaborative space between director, crew and cast. I understand my main job is not to lead, but to remind myself and the others of our goal and move forward to reach it, collectively. My focus was to capture the life and experiences of the character in front of the camera, without manipulating them to perform for me. We planned to shoot the film over six days, including one day to scout and film the abandoned tracks in the area. The film editor, Lucas Casolo, stressed the importance of the tunnel and its symbolic relevance in the lovers' story. Cristian also mentioned that the tunnel marks the entry point to the region from Cali, the closest major city in the region.

In 2019, I had the opportunity to take a small workshop on acting with Jane Campion during the Il Cinema Ritrovato Festival. It became my escape from a documentary workshop I needed to take. Knowing little about Campion's work at first, I became more intrigued by screen performance than any theoretical talk about documentary filmmaking could offer. This workshop made various assignments, like writing a short scene where we cast other participants to act in,

and direct them. The following day, Campion interrupted each scene by having the director switch to become one of the performers and having her, with little knowledge about the scenes, direct. It was an exercise in spontaneity that gave us a profound understanding of performance and character. Campion mentioned that the main purpose was to get used to the idea of being displaced and find your way out of it. This exercise is seen as understanding the difference between belonging and being. I remember this moment where I understood it was more valuable to focus on being oneself rather than looking to fit into an already determined idea of oneself. The motivation for *Kilometro 126* was for me to reconnect with a place where my family once lived. My relationship with the place at the beginning was distant; however, throughout the process of making this film, I stopped being a foreigner. During my first days in La Cumbre, when I walked by the train tracks and streets, it was inevitable that I would fall into memories of what the place used to be. Now, when I am back in these same mountains, I can stop dreaming about what it could be. This project has opened the possibility of a future there, of a place I could call home once again. Every night during the making of this film, it was impossible to think about building a home back here. It is the same as Cristian does in the film, lying down and dreaming of what the place would look like and what I would do in it. I could sketch again and think of a space for me and the ones who will follow, hoping that there is still a future in this town, this region, and this country.

For my recent films, I have used analog film instead of digital media. The motivation to shoot *Kilómetro 126* on 16mm film came from my desire to capture the immediacy of a moment with minimal intervention or modification. In an interview I did with the granddaughter of

Argentinian photographer Pablo ‘Pupeto’ Mastrospasqua, Rita Ferrando, in 2023, she quotes her grandfather on the difference between analog and digital photography as an act of faith (Personal Notes, 2023). Using analog film requires trust in the resulting image once it comes back from development. At the same time, Rita and I spoke about our indescribable desire to capture images on analog film and the task it requires to do so. I have found that working with analogue media has helped me be more present and careful with the material we decide to record. I wish to further continue growing and learning from what the medium brings to each film I create. Capturing their beauty and humanity on 16mm film wasn’t easy because of the required technical setup to expose the celluloid. The two also had not been in front of a camera before. We tried hard to minimize the crew’s presence. At some point, we just didn’t tell them that we were rolling to allow their naturalness to come through. It was a risky move as we had a limited amount of film stock.

Capturing a space and time

*You said: "I'll go to another country, go to another shore,
find another city better than this one.
Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong
and my heart lies buried like something dead.
How long can I let my mind moulder in this place?
Wherever I turn, wherever I look,
I see the black ruins of my life, here,
where I've spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally."*

*You won't find a new country, won't find another shore.
This city will always pursue you.
You'll walk the same streets, grow old
in the same neighbourhoods, turn gray in these same houses.
You'll always end up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere:
there's no ship for you, there's no road.
Now that you've wasted your life here, in this small corner,
you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.*

C. P. Cavafy. *The City* (1910)

While making my films in Colombia, I have questioned why I live in Canada and have not returned to live there. How will my work change if I look at the country of my birth from the inside? Abbas Kiarostami² once spoke in a dialogue at the TIFF Bell Lightbox in 2016 about the quality of fruit from a single tree, describing that uprooting a tree from its original soil and placing it in a different ground, the quality of the fruit will be different. I have responded to this question with a naive sense of belonging to Colombia, but found it challenging to maintain a closeness to the country of my birth. Therefore, I constantly look south, towards Colombia, searching for inspiration. I believe one of the reasons for this distance is that the idea of creating

my identity in another country has not yet been completed. The idea of settling in this land and setting roots here has not yet come easily, as I fear I will lose something about myself that has enabled me to create films in Colombia. However, I question this same idea of a home to return to. Would I actually be able to settle in Colombia once again? Or would I be again bound to abandon a place I started setting roots in? I didn't hope to answer these questions when I started making *Kilómetro 126*. However, I wished that by embarking in this process, I could gain awareness for when I need to answer those questions.

Before we started the actual production, Jorge Solorzano (Assistant Camera), Cristian, and I did a scout to the furthest location, the abandoned bridge. We had to find a way to get around the difficulties of transporting crew, cast and the gear to this remote area of the mountain range. So we built a wooden platform, attached wheels as well as the most essential element: a brake system. We knew those would be necessary as we headed down the mountain towards our destination. We installed a double-brake system for our make-shift dolly, as going downhill we would reach a speed of 35 km per hour. If there was an obstacle on the tracks, we could derail, and people might get severely hurt.

We departed at 10 am with little food and water, expecting to arrive by 5:00 pm. Despite this being just a scouting trip, Jorge and I decided to bring an Arri III camera and some 16mm film stock to take images of the moving landscape. Along the way, we hit seven occasions where the tracks had been blocked. Some were easy to deal with, but at several places, landslides had destroyed the entire track, and we were forced to walk. We filmed the empty bridge, and crossed

over to the other side to see if we could capture the bridge in its entirety. It didn't work. But at that moment the sky opened, and we could see the city of Cali in the distance. I knew this location needed to be included in the film so filming from this place would work perfectly. We started our way back to La Cumbre, heading uphill, knowing it would take at least two hours to reach town. Our drink water supply ran out after crossing the first and most challenging landslide. We continued our path until we got to town, and could inspect the damage to our makeshift. On the first leg, we had lost the first of the double brake system when the dolly hit rocks on the tracks. Cristian felt that it wasn't a big issue and that he could fix it before the first shoot day. For me, all the efforts were worth it – the scout helped me understand more about the space I wanted to capture for the actual film. We returned to Cali via car that evening. Seeing the mountain range in the city's west side, I sensed that I was finally ready to film there. I intended to plant a seed in the region, hoping it will grow, so one day I would like to live back there.

On the first day of the actual shoot, we focused entirely on Christian's home – formerly my family's home. A single location would help with the transition to the more difficult days that would follow. In the house we moved some furniture into the rooms and dressed them up as if Cristian and Diana had been living there for a while. During the setup, we also filmed in the exterior where they picked fruit from a tangerine tree. The last time I filmed in La Cumbre was at this exact place, where I filmed my grandfather gathering the remaining fruits of the tree. We then moved inside the house, where I asked Cristian and Diana to lie down on the bed as they would naturally do, and talk about their lives. While the sound recordist Camilo checked levels,

and DOP Gabriela practiced the camera movement, Cristian and Diana opened their world to us. Our presence had already become natural to them.

The inspiration of this scene came from John Greyson's Hybrid Fiction course. For our final assignment, we would implement a technique that would incorporate elements of hybrid cinema. I proposed filming a scene about intimacy. Together with the actor Tito Vallarino, I wrote a short monologue about a young man's relationship with their father. Our idea was to open a space for intimacy, vulnerability, and honesty. We both took elements of our own lives and incorporated them into the scene, addressing a shared common element: father figures, and their shortcomings when raising boys. At its core, it was about masculinity and how the father figure imposes the idea of being a man onto their son.



Image #3. Cristian and Diana in the Bed setup

Karim Ainouz's *Mariner of Mountains* (2020) had been an inspiration to make my film. In the film, Ainouz reflects on visiting his father's birthplace in Algeria for the first time, capturing his interactions and relationships with the land, and interrogates his heritage. With *Kilometro 126*, I wanted to raise similar questions about a place I thought I knew, and capture a similar feeling of re-discovery.

On our second day, we returned to the observation tower which we first visited with Cristian and Diana in the previous year. It had been built in Pavas, municipality near La Cumbre, by a company that harvests trees for paper production. When logging moved to another region north of the valley, the company left. The tower has since become a popular hangout for young couples, offering a panoramic view of the region. When the train stopped running two decades ago, many companies started leaving. What fascinated me about the place was reading the names couples had engraved onto the bridge's pillars. Cristian and Diana were reading them out to each other, and finding themselves in the memory of someone else. Suddenly, our filming got interrupted as the wind started to rise. For safety reasons, we suspended the shoot and left the tower. As a result, we failed to record the final moments of Cristian and Diana's conversation. Thankfully, it turned out to be the only planned segment we missed in our shoot. Throughout the five days of production, we encountered difficulties we needed to overcome, but we never had to cancel an entire scene.

Our third day became the most challenging as it was physically very demanding. Describing his second film, *Mimosas* (2015) Oliver Laxe points out that every film not only

captures what is in front of the image, but also the intention and efforts behind it. The experience of our scout day along the tracks gave me a sense of the conditions we would face on this third day. Therefore, we decided to have the two makeshift dollies to get us to the location along the railway tracks: one carrying equipment, the second transporting the crew. Cristian operated the crew dolly, while I manned the equipment dolly. The trip took a dramatic turn – on our way down the mountain, we lost our entire braking system, as we were approaching another landslide. Luckily, we were still able to come to a stop just on time to prevent colliding with the crew dolly. After an hour of fixing our makeshift dolly, we reached the bridge that overlooked the valley, and realized there was no visibility of the landscape we had hoped for that would give us a view of the city of Cali on the horizon. That was disappointing as it was supposed to be the background for a shot of Diana walking off into the distance, with Cristian watching her. However, I was reminded of Phil Hoffman's approach that allows unexpected circumstances and mistakes to be part of the creative work. We decided to be open to whatever the weather and the camera frame would offer us, instead of imposing our ideas onto the reality we encountered. The mountain simply wanted us to focus on something other than the city of Cali. There would be something else it would give us, and we just needed to be patient. While the two lovers sat side by side to view the mountain, Diana showed Cristian a snail shell she had picked up on her way to the bridge. Cristian wondered how something that originated in the sea had reached the mountain. They didn't have an answer, but the two just accepted that the shell was there. For me, this moment captured the essence of the film. Gabriela took the only close-up shot of the entire film of Cristian holding the shell up against the sky. We knew that this image would serve us well in the edit.

On our final day with our two protagonists, we filmed at a waterfall. Its natural beauty describes this region as a paradise for our two lovers. Before we started production, I intended to use this moment closer to the end of the film, however, editor Lucas Casolo thought it would be better to introduce it in the opening, showcasing the beauty of the region and setting up a conflict between the two lovers. As Diana swims in the pond, we see Cristian looks pensive and motionless. Observing the dilemma in the face of one of our protagonists would signal the emerging conflict of one of them leaving, and the other one staying.

Looking back at the footage now, I notice a pattern in my work – the interest in capturing fleeting moments from everyday life that carry beauty. I noticed this thread in the films by Abbas Kiarostami, such as *Close Up* (1990) or *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). In *Close Up*, the audience encounters the main characters as he waits outside his home. He kicks a can on the ground, and Kiarostami quickly cuts to a closer shot of the can as it slowly rolls downhill. A piece of garbage on the streets of Tehran suddenly has significance. At the end of that scene, the man is running away from his home, encounters that same can and kicks it off his path. With that in mind, I similarly wanted to add a moment of life's mundanity to *Kilometro 126*: Cristian slowly peeling a tangerine. After taking a bite, he spits it out, and says it is too sour for him. These sort of ordinary moments for me are crucial as they build personality and character to the people on screen.

The Train and its Legend

“Confront the idea of development... because autonomy, personality and culture, the productive bases and the vision of the world that have given us the breath of life as human beings and peoples worthy of respect and a better future are at stake.” — Arturo Escobar, 2012



Image #4. Ferrocarril de Antioquia from La Mula de Hierro, by Gustavo Arias Greiff

The railway system in Colombia has been associated with the idea of progress and development. Introduced to Colombia towards the end of the 19th century, it wasn't until in the mid-20th century when Colombia's National Railway took control of numerous railway systems that were privately owned. Those reached across the country's diverse geography, connecting ports such as Buenaventura and Santa Marta on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts with major cities and the country's interior. The Pacific railway system, which connects Buenaventura with Cali, and the coffee growing region, was one of Colombia's most important railway connections. It was essential not only for commerce and infrastructure, but also for transporting workers and their families who arrived at this port from different countries, seeking to settle in Colombia's interior. In the mid-80s, the company overseeing all regional railways went bankrupt because

they could no longer pay the pensions for their retired employees. Colombia was quickly moving towards developing roads as the main means of transportation. Due to the challenging geography of the country, the highway system was more economical, and trains soon became obsolete. By 1999, most of the railway systems in Colombia had become mere tourist attractions, except for the Atlantic Railway that transported coal from the mines to the ports of Santa Marta. The dream of a unified railway system connecting the country had come to an end.

My grandmother told the story about how a German engineer in La Cumbre had helped her mother raise their family in the region by giving her a piece of land to build a house. The man named Hermann was one of the key engineers of that stretch of the Pacific Railway. The support given to my family was essential in helping them settle in this area. However, my family had no resources to pay him back before he moved back to Germany. In honour of their benefactor, my great-grandmother named her first-born son Herman. My great-grandfather was the head of transportation at La Cumbre railway station. In April 1948 a massive outbreak of riots spread across the country with the murder of presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. As a result of the social and political instability, my great-grandfather was fired from his position and forced to move to another region looking for work. When the political climate improved, my great-grandfather returned.

Ramon Chao's book, *Tren de Hielo y Fuego*, (1994) records the journey of his son – a musician, from the Caribbean coast to Bogotá as they looked for places to perform, at a time when Colombia was in the height of civil war. The journal of his son's band describes Colombia

as an ever-changing physical and social landscape. The band staged performances in the main railway stations along their path. With *Kilómetro 126*, we aim to address the challenges of making a livelihood in a rural area, while showing its beauty and uniqueness. The railway tracks in the mountains are not just the remnants of a time passed, as people still use those tracks to travel by foot or on makeshift dollies throughout the region. It was important to me to have the track present in the film, for example in the foreground of the image of the entrance of the house, when we see Cristian, or the bridge that shows a passage of time. It was important to me to capture the sentiment represented that the current use of the tracks as a trail was honouring what it once meant to its people: the idea of uniting the country.

Shortly after we wrapped production, I went to my grandmother's home to record her describing how the tracks came to be. La Cumbre is a town filled with tales, and the arrival of the train is one of them. Johanna Cote told me about the story of two lovers who were able to relocate the tracks so they pass directly by their homes so that one day they could see each other again. The story captures the ability of the human heart to make dreams come true. From early in the planning, I knew this would be the film's goal – to represent these lovers in Cristian and Diana being able to move railway tracks through the strength of their love.

With the help of my producer Adriana Badillo, I wrote several drafts of a Voice Over text during the pre- and production phase, to set the context for the story of Cristian and Diana. Our main goal was not to literally represent them as the couple from the past, but to raise the possibility of the two of them being characters of that folklore. The recording of my

grandmother's voice reading the text passages was challenging as her attention kept getting diverted, and her eyesight was failing her. The edited version of the many takes, created by editor Lucas Casolo, did not match the intimate and natural approach we wanted for the film and overall tone, and we decided to remove the voice-over all together, and with it a structure based on the railway tracks. We didn't want to have the unrealized concept of my grandmother's voice distance the viewer from the film, just as the abandonment of the trains in the country had separated the people of Colombia.



Image #5. Archive Cali Carretera al Mar

Post-Production: Determining the Time



Image #6. Cristian holding a shell

One of the main struggles during the post-production phase was to set a time frame for the film. When does it take place? How do we portray a sense of time passing, and how do we visualize the concept of time? We knew these questions would determine the film's atmosphere and tone. Having a collection of transient moments with Cristian and Diana around the train tracks turned out to liberate the creative process. Jeremy García, the sound designer and composer for the film, observed in the material that there were signs which were signifiers of the cyclical time we wanted to portray, like the image of the snail shell, and the winding tracks in the mountain. Once we built the sequences with our protagonists during postproduction, we would also need to create a timeframe to incorporate the archival stills. Those images would reflect the past and the images we captured would become a continuum of the past. In a conversation at the Cineteca di Bologna I attended in 2022, costume designer Deborah Landis³ talked about their

conviction that we can't look into the past without looking into the present. What seemed obvious at first became our main organizing principle to create the film's structure.

During the post-production, we considered many ideas and concepts for the film's structure. But once we started capturing the real world in the present tense, our goal became to represent the humanity and beauty of the lives of the people in the frame. *Kilómetro 126* opens with archival footage of a raw mountain under construction and the people who worked on it. Throughout the film, we see the same mountain again, but this time in the present tense. As the story of our two lovers unfolds, their conversations about a shared future bring up different visions of each one's life between them. The past imposes itself onto the present. In the end, we return to where we first met the lovers, at a waterfall where many have been before. While Archival images show where people once lived, our lovers live in the present, and others will carry on in the future. This dedication to authenticity and sincerity in our portrayal of the characters and their lives was a driving force throughout the project. In the film's first cut, we attempted to narrate the last day of Cristian and Diana together. In the finale, Diana leaves their paradise. The main takeaway from the editing process of *Kilómetro 126* was to eventually replace the specificity of Colombia and La Cumbre with the universality of the story we were telling. My thesis supervisor Manfred Becker pointed out that departing from the film's original idea was a natural process, towards the human experience of losing the one you love. Capturing the character's humanity would supersede any other idea that is carried in the film. I was bound to tell a story that seemed only familiar to me, but thanks to the openness of Cristian and Diana, we reached a feeling that transcended the story to speak about what it means to be alive.

After locking the film's structure, we added Johanna's archive to introduce the scenario that our lovers were the last people left in town. The archival stills illustrate the region's development and decline. We structure the archival into four moments:

1. In the introduction, we see the mountain and the people who worked on it. We chose those three images as we wanted to show the mountain and the work that was required to arrive at this place. It is also essential to clarify that the film will be about a place and its people, past and present. The editor, Lucas, felt that it would have been stronger to start off with the two lovers in the pond; however, the focus would shift. Playing the archival stills upfront helped us set up the past for the film. The archive allowed the spectator to associate thoughts to contextualize the past and present, rather than us imposing a specific point.
2. In the second placement of the archival images, we see two photos of a house near the train tracks and an image of a town raising a flag and founding what would become their home. We wanted to play with the idea that dreams and desires existed in the past as just they are expressed in the present – many people had their own homes in town.
3. The third archival sequence shows the settlement in the area. While we hear Cristian and Diana read names carved into the watchtower, we see the photographs of people that could have easily been them. However, a few seconds later, it is clear that those names are not from the people we see in the images, but others who also passed by the area. It felt like the archival stills were asserting themselves into the present.

4. The images of the mountain in black and white still images and our original footage indicate that there is no difference between the past and the present. What once existed will be kept alive if remembered. I wanted the archival in *Kilómetro 126* to never allow time to be in the past but find its way to the present. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1959), Scotty travels with Madeline back to a small colonial town outside of San Francisco where a fateful accident happened. Both are aware of where they are going, as they once went there for the last time, Scotty tells Madeleine, "I have to do one final thing, and I'll be free of the past'. Scotty needs to liberate himself from a trauma.

Kilómetro 126 is a film that captures a place and its people - an archive of what it could have been, and a future that never existed. This film is a way to regain a memory of a place I once knew. Creating this film was driven by allowing the space and time to guide me as its director. As a result, the film has become an archive of what it took for me to shorten the distance between this town, its people, and my family. *Pampalinda* was a film that retained a memory of my grandparents, *La Cumbre* was a film about a past dream of my family, and finally, *Kilómetro 126* has become a film about my attempt to regain a memory of a place I once knew.

A Place in Latin America

*“Everyone returns to the land where they were born.
To the incomparable spell of its sun
Everyone returns to the corner where they came from
Where perhaps more than one love blossomed.
Under the lonely tree of the past.
How many times do we start dreaming, everyone comes back
Down memory lane
But the time of love does not return again.*

– Ruben Blades, *Todos Vuelven* (1984)⁴

With *Kilómetro 126*, I hope to contribute to Colombian cinema by creating films about transient, intimate, and human stories of love that can also occur in these spaces. Colombian cinema has undergone significant changes in the last 25 years. The new Cinematographic Law 814, introduced in 2003, has helped our film industry to grow by supporting the production and distribution of new films. Before this law, Colombian cinema produced less than ten films per year. Most of these films focused on issues such as poverty, crime, the ongoing civil war, and the drug culture that was gradually becoming a part of our society. However, with the introduction of the new law, a new period of exploration in cinema began. Our national cinematographic identity was no longer limited to these same topics. Films such as *The Color of the Mountains* (2010) and *Embrace of the Serpent* (2015) tackled themes beyond war and drugs. This new law allowed for the possibility that if any national or international film were shown in Colombia, a percentage of the ticket sales would be allocated to the national fund for the production and distribution of new films. This law has allowed small filmmakers like myself to make films that speak to us and our experiences. Previously, making an independent film in Colombia was nearly impossible because

of the difficulty of securing financing. However, opportunities for small filmmakers are increasing with the growing film industry in Latin America. Films such as *Solecito* by Oscar Ruiz Navia, *Delivery* by Martin Mejia Rugeles, and *Anhell69* by Theo Montoya are clear examples of our growth and diverse cinematography. With *Kilómetro 126*, I hope to contribute to national cinematography by creating films about intimate and human stories of love that can also occur in these spaces. After completing any project, I questioned its significance for me. Making films about Colombian life while living in Canada has made me question its authorship – Is it a Canadian film made by a Colombian? Or is it a Colombian film made by a Canadian? These questions have been, and I will always be with me. Throughout my filmmaking practice, I have always looked for familiar places to document and keep a memory of it. I have understood that these past years, I have found a place for memory and remembering in filmmaking. *Kilometro 126* became a project of an active process of recollection, where its goal was not only to recall and archive but to reinitiate it.

I want to conclude this paper by sharing the lyrics of Ruben Blades' song "*Todos Vuelven*" (Everyone Comes Back, 1984). These lyrics have been with me since I was young and have resonated with me, particularly as someone who has left home multiple times outside of Colombia. They express the desire to return to a place that is held dear, a place that is distant but longed for. May *Kilometro 126* capture this same sense of longing and the process of reconnecting with a place that once was. Through making this film, I explored a space that belonged to my family during a time that was not ours. The goal was to reconnect and begin a dialogue with this place, and I am happy to say that I have achieved this. In making films, I have

been inspired by Werner Herzog's statement during the making of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) in which he has Indigenous people drag the vessel over a mountain and says, "I was there" (Herzog, 2009). For me, it is not about recognition but the experience of fulfilling a dream and looking back on it with pride. *Kilometro 126* is about a time and place that has passed, not just for the region but for me. It is about accepting the fact that there is a next step in those abandoned hills. At the end of the film, as Caicedo notes in his book *El Cuento de mi Vida* (2008), he states that La Cumbre's purpose was mainly as a transitory space to open and shorten the distance between oneself and the space where we are found. The film showcases the inevitable truth that, ultimately, we all come back to find ourselves.



Image #7. Cristian & Diana on the Motorcycle

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1. Laxe, Oliver. “International Film Seminar” Tabakalera, San Sebastian, Spain, October, 2019, 16

2. Kiarostami, Abbas. “In Conversation with...”, Toronto International Film Festival, Toronto, Canada, July 5th, 2016, 20

3. Landis, Deborah, “Vestire Hollywood.” Lecture, Cineteca di Bologna, Bologna, Italy, July 2nd 2022, 31

4. Blades, Ruben. Todos Vuelven. Elektra Entertainment Group, 1984, Accessed May, 12th, 2024, 35

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