

NOCTURNAL TREE

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Abstract

Nocturnal Tree is a 10-minute hybrid-fiction film that delves into a revolutionary fertility treatment developed by Manuel Mendoza Alguero, otherwise known as Mane, who is a local healer based in Los Remedios, Colombia. The film entices the viewer to consider both the truth and validity behind this mythical treatment. Through the eyes of two contrasting individuals, scientist Lily Noches and Mane, the film follows a non-linear narrative that juxtaposes rationality and mysticism, while exploring topics like motherhood, love, and conception. Initially, Lily Noches searches for Mane in Los Remedios as his reputation as a healer grows and takes root in her imagination. Simultaneously, Mane personifies the mysticism present in La Guajira's culture by letting dreams be his compass towards the finding of a fertility treatment that ends up helping more than twenty-five women to get pregnant in the community. By doing so, he becomes the mind behind the transformation and birth of many children in Los Remedios.

The film's structure blends documentary and fiction elements, resulting in a plot that is shaped by both reality and imagination. This interplay between factual and fictional story creates a ghostly narrative that offers a fresh and thought-provoking interpretation of the narrator's imagination.

Dedication

I dedicate *Arbol Nocturno* to the memories of my family: Douglas, Luis, Mari, Mane, Enrique, and Icha, who know and share the same feelings towards the land where we were born and that at some point became a land of ghosts-La Guajira. I aspire to be as resilient as they are, and that at some point in my life I can express love, empathy, and gentleness as they do. This work is based on the love I feel for them, which has guided and accompanied me all my life. And finally, that if life allows us to reach 100 years, may they only be of companionship.

Acknowledgement

The journey of making and thinking about this film has led me through worlds I had not imagined before. It has led me to recognize a path in my life, which has led me to my family. I began to trace my steps and those of my family, encountering stories I had not imagined, some tragic and some magical. I began to rethink cinema as a tool that distorts reality, and I began to build a world based on my memories, reality, and imagination. I brought all this to be consulted with honest professors like Howard Wiseman, Ali Kazimi, Manfred Becker, Moussa Djigo and Patricio Davila and incredible colleagues like Chris Chong, Christina Dovolis, and Felipe Lopez Gomez.

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Introduction

Nocturnal Tree is like a lucid dream, gaseous and fast. It is also a desire, a desire to find *life*. Like personal letters written to my own conscience, *Nocturnal Tree* or *Arbol Nocturno* is a hybrid docu-fiction film that follows scientist Lily Noches's search for a remedy to cure infertility developed by Manuel Mendoza, aka Mane. In this investigation, we don't get to see or meet the central character, Mane; his face, voice, and shape are largely unknown to the audience, who are left to imagine the creator of this miraculous remedy. Mane, who lives in a small town in La Guajira, appears as a ghost surrounding and orienting the film's narrative. The only tool we have left to imagine Mane is a collection of fragmented memories as well as a testimonial from a few inhabitants of Los Remedios.

Central to the narrative is a documentary interview; it starts with Ela Quiles, one of the twenty-five women helped by Mane, who brought two healthy boys into this world after taking Mane's mysterious plant-based concoction. Moreover, Ela shares her memories of meeting Mane and getting the concoction, and offers a fresh take on the mind behind this miraculous tonic of Los Remedios.

This is woven with a fictional first person account through the eyes of the fictional scientist Lily, for whom Mane remains as elusive as a ghost leaving her no option but to imagine his mysterious life images based on what she gleans about his life and craft.

My Background

Since memory is the main source of my inspiration and a consistent component in many of my ideas, why not start with it?

My dad is an artist, more specifically, an abstract painter and sculpturist whose artworks have inspired me since my early childhood. I grew up surrounded by art in my home, as well as conversations about what art is and what art does. I recall having most of the spaces in every room of the house filled with colorful shapes and brush strokes, sculptures of all sizes, and paintings of a wide range of themes. Consequently, as a kid, I was always encouraged to find new ways to artistically express myself and interact with art as in whatever way I could. I remember I would spend countless afternoons playing on Powerpoint creating little stories of intergalactic journeys. I remember one that lasted 5 minutes (imagine hundreds of slides). However, as I grew older, pursuing a career in the arts didn't seem as appealing. I decided to step away from my background and study something far from the artistic world and its ongoing, unanswered questions of what art was and how it impacted people's lives.

Years passed, many careers crossed my mind, as well as several ideas, fever dreams, and possible careers—*Medicine, Pilot, Economy*. Now that I am able to ponder and look back, I am content and confident enough to say I don't regret not following them.

It was only during my last year of high school when I borrowed a photography camera, that somehow my old passion for art was resurrected, as if I had reunited with a dear old friend. I was fascinated by what I could capture. Mesmerized by the technology

that reinvented the arts and ways of understanding reality. In fact, I felt that everything I captured looked beautiful, unique. I started to think about the moving image as well—how films are able to create/transform reality. I was fascinated by how images could evoke a range of emotions; it was as if images transported me to that place and/or feeling just by thinking about it. Moreover, thinking of how many voices could I embrace in a film was extremely appealing to me. That's when I realized my ultimate desire to pursue films.

In 2018, I met my great uncle Mane when he came to visit for the first time. He lived in a small town in the northernmost region of Colombia and we lived in Bogotá, in the "center" of Colombia. When it was late at night we started talking about his stories, and the more Mane talked, the more I was fascinated by the images that bloomed in my head. Two stories in particular inspired my curiosity. First, one day Mane was hunting rabbits on the border of Colombia and Venezuela; the sun was setting and it was becoming more difficult to see and even recognize the figures of the animals. After a long time waiting, Mane heard a noise and saw a rabbit moving quickly. Mane took aim with his gun and shot it, as soon as he did he heard a noise from the other side: it was the Venezuelan army. They accused him of crossing the border illegally, and detained him. According to Mane, the officer and his soldiers were very angry at the beginning, but in the end, they made fun of the situation and let him go... Hearing my uncle that night was an extraordinary event, it cut through my boring life in Bogotá. The second story is about a tree he found in the mountains while hunting. This was the very tree he had seen in a dream. In the dream, a voice had told him to concoct a tea from the leaves that would help infertile women get pregnant. With no prior education, Mane decided to listen to this

voice. He made the concoction, gave it to an infertile woman—soon after she got pregnant. I listened to Mane with growing fascination: I began to wonder how I could bring these images to life to feel the same way I felt when I imagined them. I found myself floating between reality and dreams. It was incredible to feel that creative energy.

That's when I decided to film Mane. In 2018, together with a friend, we made the first film about Mane; an 8 minutes Verite documentary, in which we followed Mane during his daily routine. It was here when I realized that I could mix Mane's reality with a parallel, phantasmagoric reality. The images started to speak by themselves, and a cinematographic language started to become visible. The door that would allow me to dream was opening.

My family comes from La Guajira, a region in the north of Colombia bordering Venezuela. It is one of the largest region of the country where people retain strong belief in dreams. This is also where I spent most of my vacations growing up, and like everyone in La Guajira I grew up believing in dreams and still do.

However, the short documentary *Mane* (2019) still contained a lot of that Latin American realism. This is because of its form, in the use of hand-held camera approach to create the semblance of raw reality—classic cinema verité. By using sacred Latin American music, such as *Los Tres Clavos*, *Indulgencia III* by Brigido Porres, I intended to establish a connection between the symbolism of the crucifixion of Christ with Mane's faith as he turns to the Divine seeking for protection from the harsh reality he finds himself in. In the end, *Mane* (2019) was well received in several film festivals and won some awards as well. Mane was happy with all of that.



Image 1: Still image from *Mane* (2019), Jharol Mendoza.

This form of filmmaking stayed in my head until my next film, *Sunset Without Sun* (2021), which is a search for my father's memories, also set in La Guajira. In this film I started to blend actuality with images suggesting a ghostly/spiritual world. I felt it was the only way that allowed me to experience the ideas and/or memories of my father. Here I drew upon our *Guajiro* belief in dreams. However, the film could not be purely ethereal, as it also had to convey ideas, such as, “what we can’t remember also remains in our memory,” and how my father, in his paintings, brings light and colors to sunsets without sun. Drawing on the observational cinema notion of a fly on the wall, I began to place the camera in a way that the characters being filmed would lose the notion that I was there. The idea was to capture their pure reality; then I added some compositional and photographic work that would make those everyday images look perhaps as if they were part of a dream.



Image 2: Still image from *Sunset Without Sun* (2021), Jharol Mendoza.

Here, I would like to mention how important my discovery of Cinema Novo was.

ⁱThis is why the hunger of Latin America is not simply an alarming symptom; it is the essence of our society. Herein lies the tragic originality of Cinema Novo in relation to World Cinema: our originality is our hunger, and our greatest misery is that this hunger is felt but not intellectually understood.

(Rocha, Glauber. 1965. *The Aesthetics of Hunger*)

From Rocha, I learned the beautiful phrase: ⁱⁱⁱ*"A camera in hand and an idea in the head"*. This not only means that films should have social ideas, such as inequality, hunger, prejudice, corruption, religion, and land issues, but it also means that the way films are produced can be enough with a simple camera-hand and characters that are native to the place where one is filming. On this I would like to be a little clearer for the reader. As a Latin American filmmaker, I have become aware of the limited resources I have and from them I try to generate my own cinematography that can serve as a social character and reveal invisible aspects of our reality.

It is important to mention that the production of the film itself also determines the type of film. This has been very important for me because in all my works I have decided that apart from directing, I also photograph and edit, emulating the feeling that I am creating the whole film with my hands, as if I were a child.

All that I have lovingly mentioned up until now is the preamble and/or basis of my new film: *Arbol Nocturno*, which is born from exploring La Guajira with my two past short films and is perhaps a mixture of *Mane* (2019) and *Sunset Without Sun* (2021).

Pre-Production: A Pre-Introduction to its Craft

ⁱⁱⁱ Apenas nos pusimos en dos pies
 Comenzamos a migrar por la sabana
 Siguiendo la manada de bisontes
 Más allá del horizonte
 A nuevas tierras, lejanas
 Los niños a la espalda y expectantes
 Los ojos en alerta, todo oídos
 Olfateando aquel desconcertante paisaje nuevo, desconocido
 Somos una especie en viaje
 No tenemos pertenencias sino equipaje
 Vamos con el polen en el viento
 Estamos vivos porque estamos en movimiento
 Nunca estamos quietos, somos trashumantes
 Somos padres, hijos, nietos y bisnietos de inmigrantes
 Es más mío lo que sueño que lo que toco
 Yo no soy de aquí
 Pero tú tampoco

(Drexler, Jorge. "Movimiento." Frontera. 2022.)

The preproduction of a film starts many years before finishing the last lines of a script. It actually begins with something that happened to you or someone you met along the way that marked your memory in tremendous depth, that you couldn't forget such a passage and only found peace of mind when you decided to transform that memory matter into physical birth.

To me, that's happened only a couple of times. Honestly speaking, creating a film involves much more than just writing an idea somewhere on a paper and structuring the plots and characters. It is also much more than the sleepless nights, the fears and storms coming on the horizon, filling me with questions and doubts of my current path. It involves, above all, connection. Connection to my origins, past, childhood, family, and memory—to mention a few. And this connection, if lost along the way, might

compromise the entire piece afterwards. The connection to my luminous subconscious—where the surrealistic dreams reside and where I find all my stages of life, faces, and aspirations—is not only a connection to a part of myself but to the everlasting celestial fire that keeps on burning.

And in many instances of my creative process, I find myself brought back to La Guajira; I see myself close to my uncle Mane, who tells me his dreams, dreams that predict the a future where he escapes unprecedented death, or stories of war and violence near the border of Venezuela and the surrounding Serranía del Perijá mountains. I listen to him teaching me what his ancestors taught him—how to heal, what to plant, how to listen to the Earth and understand the signals that come in dreams and properly interpret them. But above all, Mane teaches me about his life—the life of a *Guajiro*.

^{iv}In Colombia, the word "Guajiro" can refer either to the indigenous Wayuu people, or to people of any ethnicity who live in the La Guajira region. In parts of the Caribbean, the word began to mean rural or rustic, and over time lost its association with Arawak or Indian people.

In other words, as Mane comes from a region named La Guajira, he entitles himself as Guajiro. Mane personifies the strength, resilience, and resistance of his family through his practices like hunting and natural healing. Moreover, it's important to emphasize that Mane stands in a conflicted moment of life. On one hand, he embodies the old times in the coast of Colombia, bringing Guajiro inheritance and life experiences together. On the other hand, he now faces the consequences of modernity that are slowly but constantly erasing the legacy of people like him. Colonization, land exploitation, and corruption from internal government bodies—all those factors press against what La Guajira entails. As a matter of fact, next to Los Remedios, the town where Mane lives, is

the biggest open-pit coal mine in Latin America, *Cerrejón*. Thus, the whole territory where Mane hunts is moving. As time goes by Mane has to travel further to find the animals he hunts.

One day I was recording Mane while he was hunting. Out of nowhere, we started to hear a giant engine noise. We stopped to figure out where it was coming from. Mane told me that it must be from the mine. We climbed to a high point and looked down on a gigantic hole in the earth. We were at the edge of a massive open pit mine from which giant trucks transporting coal.

With a 69,000-hectare concession in its pocket, the U.S. energy company partnered in 1983 with the state-owned mining company Carbocol to extract the mineral wealth of La Guajira. They named the company Cerrejón, after a nearby mountain considered sacred by the Wayúu Indians, who make up 44% of La Guajira's population.(...) "Some 80% of human rights and international humanitarian law violations in the last 10 years have been carried out in mining and energy regions in Colombia," the report maintains. (...) "When Cerrejón first started, there were no international standards, no norms for business with respect to human rights", says Carlos Franco, director of the firm's social standards' division. "Our basic position was always to obey the law... At a time when there were 3,000 kidnappings per year, to respect the law was no small thing."

(Bach, Oliver)

Mane is also in the midst of an ongoing struggle against mining companies from countries such as Canada, to exploit lands located on the Colombian coast, putting at risk the survival of its very people:

The mining industry is strategic and has a long tradition in Canada,⁶ to the extent that the country has been dubbed “a mining power.”⁷ In 2012, 57 percent of the world’s mining companies were listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX), and 70 percent of the shares issued by the mining sector worldwide were traded on the TSX.⁸ There were approximately 1,619 mining companies listed on the TSX and TSX Venture in November 2013.⁹ Nearly half of all mining companies whose shares are traded on the TSX were engaged in operations outside Canada in 2012.¹⁰ Of the 4,322 projects carried out by those companies outside Canada, 1,526 were in Latin America.

(“The impact of Canadian Mining in Latin America and Canada’s Responsibility”,
Due Process of Law Foundation, 2014)

This damning report goes on to describe the numerous ways the mining industry is affecting the lives of locals.

Various large-scale mining projects have disturbed the social organization of communities and their way of life in a number of ways. Such disturbance may be: 1) planned and managed directly by the company to ensure the effectiveness of the project. In this regard, it is important to note that companies usually indicate in environmental impact studies whether the project involves forced displacement;³⁵ 2) caused by environmental disturbances that directly affect the livestock and agricultural livelihoods of communities, such as decreased water for irrigation, deaths of animals, and contamination of ground, water, and air; and 3) caused by corporate pressure to replace artisanal mining. (...) Displacement resulting from the replacement of artisanal mining by large-scale mining. Complaints to this effect have been made regarding mining projects in Colombia.

(“The impact of Canadian Mining in Latin America and Canada’s Responsibility”,
Due Process of Law Foundation, 2014)

Consequently, when I found myself immersed in my creative process and my connections within it, I not only saw Mane and his legacy and stories, but the risks and violations he and the rest of La Guajira’s communities are facing at this very moment. Knowing that and having the power of changing at least something—even the smallest of actions that are happening in the land right now—empowered me to write and orchestrate

Arbol Nocturno. I want to perpetuate, somehow, Mane's presence and explore his universe in a way it feels like he is resisting, and even opposing being forgotten.

Pre-Production: The Process

I called Papito (Mane's brother) in 2020 to ask about Mane, who at that time, didn't believe in the necessity of having a cellphone. Papito went from a quick "he's the same as always" to recounting his famous funny stories in La Guajira, then he casually mentioned "the big news" regarding Mane's latest accomplishments. "He made more than twenty-five women pregnant in the village." At first, I assumed that he is now the father of twenty-five different children. But Papito continued Mane had discovered a new concoction made from a parasite plant that, when given to couple, man and woman (at the same time), the concoction works as a booster that makes the woman pregnant not more than two months later. After his initial success, Mane has become a phenomenon in the community, and couples wanting to expand their family or that have been facing fertility issues have been travelling from different cities to meet with him. That's when the bulb of a lamp went on. Here, I saw how a community resists and creates life while a mining company treats them with destruction. I also saw Mane as somebody looking for perpetuity, as his job is to bring life. That could be the beginning of my inherent connection with Mane and his legacy; the start of something bigger. I would make a short film about his healing practices and from there, maybe find a way to approach not only the concoction but also a dream-rich territory that is resisting erasure.

I ask my father what he thinks about including this larger issue into a film. He's usually straightforward and as an artist, he understands the poetics and symbolisms within my craft. My father gets excited. It's a wonderful opportunity and there's a lot to be explored, but in his words "your biggest challenge is time, how long would you take to make a film of it?" Time. I wonder why time—what does that exactly mean? Suddenly, I

am taken back to 2019 when I went to record Mane in La Guajira, following him around the town like a fly on the wall, watching him hunting and interacting with people, living his life. He was mid-60s then, but now Mane is getting older. I would have to run against time and get it done before Mane was too old to go on his mountain expeditions to find the parasite plant and make his miraculous concoction that has been making dreams come true in the middle of a small village in La Guajira. In the end, the most important part before starting this film was to know what Mane actually thought about this. His response was clear: “Nephew, I like it, when are you coming?”

I started to get my visual references in order. For me it is especially important how a film is going to feel and look. Sometimes I think it's even more important than the plot itself, or maybe these two should blend together like two different energies exploding silently and transparently.

It is worth mentioning one other aspect that inspired me while developing *Nocturnal Tree*: Cinema Novo, the Brazilian film movement from the 1960's that was the force behind the creation of important masterpieces such as *Entranced Earth* (1967) by Glauber Rocha. A camera in hand and an idea in mind; the motto of the new Brazilian wave that inspired filmmakers to jump to novel ideas without worrying about the limitations or challenges of making a film.

In countries such as Colombia, film production equipment is expensive and scarce. Moreover, the lack of government funding and financial support for filmmakers in the region also affects the size of film crews. Consequently, in order to create a short film and make the story come to life, I had to make tough decisions based on budget which directly impact the look of my films. Hence, I tend to wear many hats when

filming in Colombia. For *Nocturnal Tree* this wasn't any different as I was not only producer and director, but also the cinematographer. This can be quite difficult as the entire load of the film is carried by one person alone. On the other hand, being the cinematographer of my own films, I get an intimate opportunity to explore hidden aspects of the communities I know, and translate those same aspects into symbolic visuals that appear in the film. Similar to the Brazilian Cinema Novo filmmakers who had not only a limited budget but also a voracious hunger of making new films to revolutionize the status quo of a country, I found myself during many stages of *Nocturnal Tree* looking at them to find inspiration, guidance, and hope. If they were able to act against such financial, political, and economic limitations, I could go ahead and make my short film too.

Another important thing worth mentioning is that the term hunger goes beyond one's momentary physical need and sensation. According to the Brazilian new wave filmmakers, hunger is directly associated to the artistic process of any and every "third world country" such as Brazil or Colombia, whose creative power is fated to be forever misunderstood by richer places like Europe, which find the misery within Cinema Novo's topics and creative limitations *exotic*. It's worth mentioning the following passage citing Glauber Rocha's words for the sake of the train of thought:

^vThis is why the hunger of Latin America is not simply an alarming symptom; it is the essence of our society. Herein lies the tragic originality of Cinema Novo in relation to World Cinema: our originality is our hunger, and our greatest misery is that this hunger is felt but not intellectually understood.

(Rocha, Glauber. 1965. The Aesthetics of Hunger)

Moreover, Glauber Rocha emphasizes this vision along the lines of his Manifesto, *The Aesthetics of Hunger*, as follows:

^{vi}From *Aruanda* to *Vidas Secas*, Cinema Novo narrated, described, poetized, discoursed, analyzed, aroused the themes of hunger: characters eating earth, characters eating roots, characters stealing for food, characters killing for food, characters running away in search of food, ugly characters, dirty, ravaged, inhabiting ugly houses, dark and dirty; such was the gallery of famished people that identified Cinema Novo with a miserabilism condemned by the Government, by a critique that serves anti-nationalist interests, by the producers and by the public—the latter being incapable of facing the images of poverty. The miserabilism of Cinema Novo opposes an ameliorating tendency represented by the critic of Guanabara, Carlos Lacerda; films of rich people, in beautiful houses, driving luxury cars; joyful films, comical, fast, contentless, of strict industrial objectives. These are films against hunger, as if, in the glasshouses and luxury condominiums, filmmakers could hide the moral misery of a characterless and fragile bourgeoisie, or as if material and scenographic techniques could hide the hunger that is rooted in our uncivilization.

(Rocha, Glauber. 1965. *The Aesthetics of Hunger*)

Therefore, Cinema Novo not only exposes stories of hunger, but also allows filmmakers to reinvent their aesthetics within limited resources to still convey powerful narratives. That's why this very film movement spoke so much to me when I first started developing *Nocturnal Tree*. Cinema Novo, above all, offered me a possible way towards accomplishing the film. The style of the short film mirrors *Entranced Earth* (1967), which uses natural light, untouched exterior scenarios, camera composition, and locals as characters—key ingredients that inspired me to find the right visuals that could portray La Guajira.

However, when taking the characters into consideration, the hybridism in my technique comes back to play an important role. *Nocturnal Tree* and its characters, for example, are a complex mix of many other film movements and their aesthetics. Mane, as a whole, is a humble and elusive character to the eyes of the audience that represents La

Guajira and attempts to fight back against different levels of exploitation such as the hunger of Lily, a researcher who wants his concoction for her own. Moreover, by letting the characters pursue their trajectories freely, the film once again emphasizes its connection to the Brazilian new-wave style, as the freedom given to characters so they can conduct their own narrative is also another instrumental element present in the Cinema Novo. However, Mane is not entirely affected by the challenges and obstacles that appear in the narrative. He is completely immersed in the life of a hunter, healer, and Guajiro. Consequently, even though Cinema Novo plays a huge influence in my technique, the characters are shaped by forms from other film movements and artists that could better show me a clearer way of translating Mane to “fit” *Nocturnal Tree*. That’s when Cinema Verite comes into play, which could also be defined as observational cinema.

Once I conceived the idea of photographing Mane's normal day-to-day life. along the lines of Cinema Verité, I followed Mane in his walks, hunts, and conversations. The shooting schedule was organized around Mane's normal activities. This would give me candid and real footage of Mane that I could modify in the editing room in pursuit of the story. And just as in Cinema Verite, the best moments would come from the most unexpected places.

The Image: Present Perfect

As I began to imagine how this film would look and how I would photograph it, I came to the idea of the term “Perfect Present,” which refers to a past that is still unfolding, something like a ghostly latent image that is here and there. First, I began by collecting images of films that could serve not only as inspiration stylistically but also a guide in the way they were filmed. Films like *Mi Piel Luminosa* (2019) by Nicolas Pereda, *Post Tenebras Lux* (2016) by Carlos Reygadas, *Notturmo* (2020) by Gianfranco Rosi, and *Noche Herida* (2015) by Nicolás Rincón Gille share a certain reality that leaves enough space to the imagination, as if there were an image of the past that is still very much alive in the present. That certain idea of existing in the past and the present led me to the idea of developing a surrealism in the image of this project that could support my way of seeing the world, a liminal world between dreams and reality.

For this I had to equip myself with tools that would allow me to create the images of this film. In La Guajira, the sun is very intense, but between 7am and 10am as well in the afternoon between 3pm and 5:30pm the shadows are less intense allowing me to find restful images without strong contrast in the landscape or characters of the film. Additionally, I added a Pro Mist filter to the lens that lowers that contrast and adds a slight with more ghostly glow to the highlights. My goal is to shoot a reality that looks dreamy.



Image 3: Still image from *Nocturnal Tree* (2023), Jharol Mendoza.

One of my greatest challenges was to be able to capture everyday life without feeling that I was interfering in it. In other words, I wanted to capture the spontaneity of Mane's nature and his environment. When I studied the way Gianfranco Rosi and Nicolas Rincón Gille photographed their films, I realized that they spent time to make the characters in their films feel comfortable with their presence and camera, to such an extent that you didn't feel like they were there. Gianfranco Rosi and Nicolas Rincón Gille coexisted with their characters in such a way that they became part of the environment of the place. This meant that the camera and the filmmaker were no longer intruders.

Having worked with Mane and the inhabitants of Los Remedios previously, I felt confident that I would be warmly welcomed back. However, I decided to go for a few weeks in June 2021, where I filmed Mane several times and further developed the research for *Nocturnal Tree*. At the beginning of every documentary I do, there is always

a kind of resistance to the camera from the people being filmed. I consider it a method of protection, which I have come to realize only goes away over time.

“I am living permanently in my dream, from which I make brief forays into reality.”

(Bergman, Ingmar. “Images: My Life in Film”, 1987.)

Production: Facing the Land

“It’s enough for me to be sure that you and I exist at this moment.”

(García Márquez, Gabriel. 100 Years of Solitude, 1967.)

In January 2021, I secured the camera, and had a script of sorts to cover the key points in the film. I wanted to risk and try something new—a hybridism in fiction and documentary that would use surrealistic elements along with both realistic and made-up characters in their true context/environment of La Guajira. By mixing my documentary experience with unknown fiction territory, I risked not only the story but also my graduation plans—if the film didn’t turn out well, I would have to rethink my international student plans while in Canada. However, this unique blend sounded too tempting to make it simpler; too interesting to be put aside by moments of anxiety. The hybridism, in its utopian plan, would seamlessly interweave surrealistic elements with authentic characters, both real and fictitious, within the vibrant tapestry of La Guajira's universe—it would, at its best, portray what Mane embodied.

In a dream-like anxious state, I suddenly started to envision the scenes coming to life; moments where reality would merge with imagination, blurring the boundaries between truth and fiction. I could see Mane resistance to giving the concoction away to Lily Noches. She would beg him to have the plant for personal gain, while Mane embodying *Guajiro* resilience and resistance, would remain hiding in the land from her capitalist ambitions that intended to destroy the memory and cultural legacy of its people. The town immersed in a ghostly light, visuals that the audience could think that it was just a dream; an illusion. Images such as the kids, the result of Mane’s concoction,

playing in the river in an eternal childhood. I could see it all taking shape in front of me; the surrealist touch would infuse the narrative with a captivating essence, drawing the audience into this world where dreams and reality intertwine. Consequently, I had to find a story that could back me up and offer poetic support.

That's when suddenly, one day, my partner, Mariana Michaelis, hands me this thin book entitled ^{vii}*Pedro Paramo*, a Mexican magical realist novel that tells the story of Juan Preciado, a man who decides to meet his father after promising his dying mother he would fulfill her last wish. The character embarks on a journey that reveals to be his own encounter to death after meeting spectral characters of his own life and memory. The opening is worth reading:

I came to Comala because I was told that my father, a man called Pedro Paramo, was living there. It was what my mother had told me, and I promised I would go and see him after she died. I assured her I would do that. She was near death, and I would managed to remove my hands from her lifeless hands. Before she died she also told me: "When you go, don't ask him for anything. Demand that he give you what is ours. What he should have given me and never did... Make him pay dearly, my son, for the way he has neglected us."

(Rulfo, Juan. 2014. *Pedro Paramo*. 5)

Pedro Páramo arrives in a place with which he has many connections due to his mother, who is a native of the place. However, as time goes by, he realizes that some of the people he has known do not exist anymore and what is left are just talking ghosts. That hybridization between reality and fiction was what I was interested in capturing stylistically in my film.



Image 4: Scouting *Nocturnal Tree*.

In 2023, after having conversations with my supervisor Ali Kazimi, I decided to return to Los Remedios, La Guajira, to reshoot my uncle Mane. Since I had already done some previous work on locations and characters in 2021, this shoot flowed more smoothly. For example, I already knew how the light worked in the place and where and at what time it was filtering into nature, in the leaves of the trees, and in the sparkles of the rivers. Further, Mane felt calmer with the camera around and the inhabitants of Los Remedios shared an affinity with me, so much so that sometimes I spent afternoons listening to their stories and jokes. For me this is all part of living in a dream, and it's one of the best parts of making my films, enjoying the scenery and enjoying the people around.



Image 5: Scouting *Nocturnal Tree*.



Image 6: Scouting *Nocturnal Tree*.

To achieve the right light for our film, we woke up before the sunrise, at 5am, to get everything ready to shoot sharp at 7am until around 10am. Then we would come back and go out again at 2:30 pm to shoot from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm. It was a challenge, especially for some crew members who were not used to waking up that early.

Before travelling to Los Remedios, I was in Valledupar, which is about a two-hour drive from Los Remedios. In Valledupar, I did a little casting looking for the character of Lily Noches. I focused on finding a character who would embody intrigue and seriousness at the same time. Something that would allow the audience to believe this surreal world and at the same time doubt it. That's when I found the idealistic Yamileth Vanegas, who being a mother, understands how the desire to be a mother can be more powerful than oneself.



Image 7: Still image *Nocturnal Tree* (2023), Jharol Mendoza.

When I was with the crew in Los Remedios, we decided to stay at my family's house where Mane lives today. The shooting lasted 5 days, and we had no problems whatsoever. For the whole team it was an immense pleasure to be there, despite the early

waking up, because not only did we feel comfortable with the work we were doing, but the mere fact of being there seems to have somehow made us more human and more open to each other.

Post-Production: Reflecting on a Dream

After finishing shooting in Los Remedios, I returned to Canada to edit the material with Mariana Michaelis. It is worth mentioning that I am a firm believer in re-writing a film in the editing room. In fact, my previous works have been purely written and finished in the editing room. In the first cuts I found that the story I had initially written worked in a way that was no longer interesting to me. Then, together with Mariana Michaelis and thanks to Ali Kazimi's comments, a new structure for the film was forged. I found at this point the idea of directing the film to something that could be called "Letters to Mane." This would reinforce the idea of the search for Mane's secret while Mane appears as a more mystical or ethereal figure, thus giving us scope for the imagination of what Mane is like.

For the character searching for Mane, I decided to use the voice of Mariana Michaelis because her voice projects an innocence that helps make this search more intriguing. Sometimes listening to her we think that she is also lost in the world she finds herself in.

While editing *Nocturnal Tree*, I was also colour correcting the shots, so I could get a clearer idea of the image and feeling I was looking for. I also consider sound very important in my films, so I decided that the music in *Nocturnal Tree* would be like a boat for the narration. I imagine a ship sailing through the clouds and inside is the narration. Sometimes inside that ship we see clouds with shapes, sometimes those clouds touch us, the clouds are gaseous but palpable, that would be the music.

Ethical Issues

When I'm shooting my films I try not to be an intruder. I am aware of situations that could harm the lives of the people who are in front of the camera. In the case of Mane, I tried to be as careful as possible with the story we tell about him. The collaboration we did together in this film was based on the love, support, and trust we have as a family. I asked myself many times what I was doing that could lead to a negative impact on the participants in the film and how I could avoid it. Overall I did not want to be a voyeuristic tourist and make an exploitative film.

Conclusion

I still believe that the way I was raised by my Guajira family has a lot to do with the way I see cinema today. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if I had been raised by a family from downtown Bogotá. Would I make the same kind of films I make? Would I dream the same? I thank cinema for being that bridge between reality and the imaginary and allowing me to express that world I carry inside me. It is also important to say that the way we produce our films also defines the form that they have in the end, and that perhaps in a certain way they find a unique particularity based on their creation.

Nocturnal Tree is an experiment of imagination based on reality. Perhaps we could call it a dream, if you will. Filmmaking can perhaps be equated with having a dream. I consider films sources of knowledge as dreams as well, since from both of them you can gather pieces of a better understanding of this so-called life. That is the idea of *Nocturnal Tree*.

While analyzing the recorded images of *Nocturnal Tree* I was fascinated to think how an image could convey so many things. Sometimes it even felt like a game, but a game of ideas and feelings. I made peace with the idea of thinking that maybe I am a seeker of images, beyond plots. To conclude, making *Nocturnal Tree* has helped me to look in the mirror as a filmmaker, to understand how I should conceptualize and approach my films. And above all, to be true to my essence as an artist and find and register the images I want to share. I understood that sometimes it is not necessary to dwell on the subject so much, and that what may be the simplest way is the best way to go. It is certainly a call to stand firm in my convictions and in the images I want to see. I

realized the images I am looking for are like an extension of what I am able to dream and at the same time they become dreams too.

Notes

ⁱ “The Aesthetics of Hunger” is Rocha's iconic manifesto for a Third World Cinema, defining a negative mode of production to industrial cinema (and, consequently, a refusal of Western colonizing forms) but also an epistemology of the oppressed. “The Aesthetics of Hunger”, HUEBUNKERS, accessed in 2023

ⁱⁱ “Brazil: Five Centuries of Change”, Brown University.

ⁱⁱⁱ We had just begun walking upright
 We began to migrate through the savannah Following the herd of bison
 Beyond the horizon, to new, distant lands The children on the back.
 Expectant
 Eyes peeled, all ears
 Sniffing out that puzzling new landscape, unknown We are a species in transit
 We don't have belongings, we have baggage We go with the pollen in the wind
 We're alive because we are in movement We're never still, we are nomadic
 We are parents, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of immigrants
 What I dream is more of mine than what I touch
 I'm not from here, but neither are you.

(Genius, “English Translation of Movimiento Lyrics”)

^{iv} “Laura Redish, *The Arawakan meaning of Guajiro*.”

^v First presented at Latin American Cinema conference, Genoa, Italy, 1965. First published in Portuguese as “A estética de fome,” in *Revista civilização brasileira* 3 (1965). First published in English as “The Aesthetics of Violence,” in *Afterimage* 1 (UK) (1970). Published in English as “The Aesthetics of Hunger,” in Michael Chanan, ed., *Twenty-Five Years of the New Latin American Cinema* (London: BFI, 1983), 13–14. Trans. Burnes Hollyman and Randal Johnson. Rocha, Glauber, “THE AESTHETICS OF HUNGER (Brazil, 1965)” In *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology* edited by Scott MacKenzie, 2014.

^{vi} Glauber Rocha—director of such films as *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (Black God, White Devil, Brazil, 1964)—articulates in “The Aesthetics of Hunger,” his statement of principles for Brazil's cinema novo. Here he speaks to underdevelopment, hunger, and violence as the engines behind a politically engaged cinema. Influenced by Frantz Fanon, Rocha argues that the colonizers will recognize the colonized only through acts of violence, both in the realm of the real and in the realm of representation. Rocha, Glauber, “THE AESTHETICS OF HUNGER (Brazil, 1965)” In *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology* edited by Scott MacKenzie, 2014.

^{vii} One of the greatest classics of Mexican magical realism in modern literature, Pedro Paramo tells the story of a haunted village visited by the character whose name is as of the book. First published March 19, 1955 by Juan Rulfo.

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