Creative Works

The Sound & the Image

An Interview with Filmmaker Natalia Almada

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Introduction

Figure 1. Filmmaker Natalia Almada. Courtesy of Indiana University Cinema.

Viewing a documentary by filmmaker Natalia Almada often feels like sifting through a stranger's family photo album while overhearing a whispered conversation about the subjects in the images. Her films are deeply intimate, treating topics such as the loss of a sibling; a young man's choice between drug trafficking and illegal immigration; the familial and national legacy of a dictator; and daily life during a violent civil conflict. Each of these topics is intensely familiar to the filmmaker. *All Water Has a Perfect Memory* (2001) is comprised of home videos and interviews with her own family and deals with the process of mourning and remembrance after her two-year-old sister's accidental drowning. *Al Otro Lado* (2005) follows a *corrido* composer who, no longer able to earn money as a fisherman due to economic crisis, must decide between trafficking illegal drugs in his hometown in Sinaloa (the Mexican state where Almada is also from) or crossing to the US to work as an illegal immigrant. *El General* (2009) tells the story of President Plutarco Elías Calles, Almada's great-grandfather, through the memories of her grandmother and Mexicans who lived during Calles's reign. Finally, *El Velador* (2011) considers the ways in which life persists despite daily violence as Mexico endures a bloody drug war.

After seeing Almada's work, it is no surprise to learn that her background is in photography—she received a Masters in Fine Arts in photography from the Rhode Island School of Design. Each image in her films appears deliberately selected and meticulously framed. For instance, in *El Velador*, featuring Martín—a

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night watchman of the Culiacán Cemetery in Sinaloa, who guards the tombs and crypts of some of Mexico's most notorious narcotics dealers—Almada's camera often rests on a single image for minutes at a time. Her lens captures a group of workers leveling concrete that will serve as the foundation to a cemetery monument as the anguished wail of a grieving mother, whose son is being buried off camera, pierces the silence of their workday. Her camera sits still as a *lona*[1] gently flaps in the wind, and a widow mops the marble floor of one of the elaborate mausoleums that entombs the body of a dead victim of Mexico's drug trade.

Almada's choice of the Sinaloa cemetery was a careful and deliberate one. Since 2006, when the war on drugs was declared by the Calderón administration, tens of thousands of people have died violent, drug-trade-related deaths in Mexico, and that trend has not abated since the 2012 election of the PRI's Enrique Peña Nieto. Almada's film shows the seemingly innocuous hustle and bustle of the booming cemetery industry in order to obliquely point to the pernicious drug trade that fuels this macabre arm of the economy. In this way, the film is subtle, and, as one *New York Times* reviewer put it, *El Velador* "is an unsettlingly quiet, even lyrical film about a world made and unmade by violence" (Scott).

One of the most striking elements of Almada's films is their capacity to undermine the viewer's expectation of finding an iconography related to a particular topic, such as immigration or drug trafficking. In *El Velador*, for instance, in lieu of highlighting graphic violence, Almada focalizes individuals going about their lives alongside Mexico's daily turmoil. In one scene, the camera rests on the dark interior of the cemetery's guardhouse, framing two dusty buckets as Martín, walking in and out of the frame, prepares for an evening of work. In the background, a newscast sounds from the TV, and the reporter states that there have been 1,100 deaths related to organized crime in the current month, totaling 21,915 violent deaths since the start of Calderón's presidency. The film refuses to participate in the reproduction of violent spectacles, and instead subtly discloses the way in which this violence has become woven into the fabric of everyday life through ambient sound.

Almada is one of the most respected documentary filmmakers today. Her films have screened at the Sundance Film Festival, the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Biennial, and dOCUMENTA(13), among other prestigious venues. She was the recipient of the 2009 Sundance Documentary Directing Award for *El General*, and *El Velador* premiered at the 2011 New Directors/New Films and the Cannes Directors' Fortnight. Almada has been selected as a 2008 Guggenheim Fellow, 2011 MacDowell Colony Fellow, 2010 USA Artist Fellow, and a TEDx speaker. She was a 2011 recipient of the Alpert Award

1. A large plastic banner hung in memoriam with photos and details about the deceased's life.

in Film/Video. Each of her full-length films (*Al Otro Lado*, *El General*, *El Velador*) has been broadcast on the award-winning documentary series POV. Her current project, the feature film *Todo lo demás*, is currently in post-production.

In October 2014, Natalia Almada visited the IU Cinema to deliver a Jorgensen Guest Filmmaker Lecture and screen two of her films, *El Velador* and *Al Otro Lado*. Associate Director of the IU Cinema, Brittany D. Friesner, sat down with Almada to conduct this exclusive interview.

Figure 2. Martín, the titular night watchman of Almada's 2011 *El Velador*, guards the Culiacán Cemetery where some of Mexico's most infamous drug lords are buried in elaborate mausoleums. Despite the January 2016 arrest of Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, the Sinaloa Cartel's leader, the drug-related violence and deaths in Sinaloa have continued without reprieve. Courtesy of Altamura Films.

Interview

Editor's Note: The following interview has been condensed. The full interview with Natalia Almada and additional content can be viewed by visiting: **http://chiricu.indiana.edu**

Natalia Almada: I feel like, as a filmmaker, what I really love is being able to look at something from a lot of different ways and think about it in different ways... represent something visually and sonically. I feel like, as a viewer of film, there's something very immersive, especially about the cinema experience, you know, as opposed to watching it at home or on your computer. But there's something about the collectivity, the way the dark room envelopes you. And how you kind of fall into a film, that's incredibly powerful.

Brittany D. Friesner: Do you have a film experience that changed your life?

NA: You know, I always think about when I was shooting *Al Otro Lado*, which is my first feature documentary. I was shooting about thirty miles north of the border, and I was following Chris Simcox, who was the head of the Civil Homeland Defense Group. I was starting to think "I'm wasting my time... this is really crazy.

Why am I doing this?" It felt pointless in a way. And then I was looking through the camera and walking, following his finger, and all of a sudden I saw these eyes looking back at me from a ditch in the ground. And it was a moment that really changed me, because I understood how powerful the camera is, how much I had to be very responsible and ethical with my use of it. And it was a moment of conflict, because I didn't really know if I did the right thing or if I should continue filming and be the filmmaker. My camera was definitely intimidating and humiliating these people who were already being humiliated. It was making their reality worse, yet it also seemed to provide the opportunity to give them a voice, which seemed important. So it really brought up for me, in a moment when I was filming, the real power, the conflict, the kind of understanding of what having a camera really means, and the privilege and responsibility that that entails. So I always think of that as the moment that really marked me as a filmmaker.

BDF: What are some of your artistic influences?

NA: It's always different depending on what I'm working on, so, for example, working on *El Velador*, I thought about improvised jazz and how there's this kind of tension and release when you listen to the music that can make the chaos that you can feel listening to improvised music sometimes frustrating almost. But then if a melody or something recognizable comes in you feel this kind of release because something made sense or was understandable. So it moves in a way that works with your emotions, and I'm not a musician, so this may be my way of experiencing the music, but that's what I thought about making *El Velador*, and I think with each film there's kind of a medium or a certain artist, writer, or someone who is particularly important to me at that time. But I find being around different kinds of artists to be really important, and not to just be a filmmaker, but [also] to be in dialogue with writers and musicians and artists. A place like the MacDowell Art Colony, for example, is an incredible place for that. You're with people of all disciplines, and they inform you and inspire you and you can kind of compare art practices. I think that's super important.

BDF: Why do you make films?

NA: I don't know why I make films. I mean, I love doing it. I love when I'm in the making of the film. I love when I'm shooting. I love editing. For me, that's when I really feel okay in the world. And the kind of noise and anxiety of life subsides in those moments, and I stop questioning. It just is, and it's fine.

BDF: Do you make your films for a particular audience?

NA: I hate the question of audience, and I think it's often because it comes up when you make work that's not of the mainstream. I understand that's not why you're asking me now, but that's often why I get asked, like "who's this film for?" It's usually a question from somebody who feels that the film isn't for them, either because it's in Spanish and it's subtitled, or it's about Mexico and they're not from Mexico, so why

should they care. And I think that one of the most enriching things about my experience has been showing films to completely different audiences, all over the world. Showing them at home, showing them abroad, to young people, older people, [people from] different education levels, class levels, showing on public television and in museums and in festivals. All of those audiences bring something different, and in their responses I learn something about how the way in which I have seen and portrayed something is perceived by different kinds of people. And that's the dialogue that really interests me. Much more so than saying "oh, my films are to convince these people about this issue or to touch these people." And I think that when I look at art, it wasn't made for me, and that's the art I love and so, I think that's the idea.

BDF: At what age did you know that you wanted to become a filmmaker?

NA: I don't think I ever decided that I wanted to be a filmmaker. I studied photography and had an incredible teacher who really inspired me. I made a short film. I think I also work as a photographer, meaning that, my way of thinking really comes out of my background in photography in terms of framing—like, what the frame means, what the image means, how we read an image. So I think it sort of happened more than anything, and I often attribute it to a kind of response to being bicultural and bilingual where language becomes unreliable in a way, and you're always thinking in two languages and two cultures, and they contradict each other or they don't make sense together, or you feel like "I express myself in English, and therefore there's something I wish I could say in Spanish, but I can't." So language becomes this kind of fragile, unreliable method of communication, which makes the image much more concrete. And then you say, here's my image, and it is what it is, and people can interpret and read it differently, but the image is there. So I think that is how I started to get interested in images.

BDF: What advice would you give to a young filmmaker?

NA: If you don't love it, don't do it. And that's both the craft of filmmaking and what you make films about.

BDF: How important is a good university cinema program for the students?

NA: I think it's really important to have a good cinema program. What I [mean] by that is like a theater, like this that has good sound and good image quality and good programming and people who are writing about cinema. I think that's really important. I didn't study film, and I don't really believe that school is the place to learn craft. Especially now, the technology is changing so quickly. We might be teaching students a lot of archaic methods, but I think it's important to learn how to look at images, to learn how to talk about images, to learn how to critique work, to learn how to listen to critique, to learn how to articulate your thoughts about an image. And I'm using "image" kind of shorthand for a film, a photograph, understanding what image does with sound and story. I think it's incredibly important in that way. I think the mistake is, a little bit, when it becomes too much about the

industry or craft, so the drive of the program is "I'm going to teach you how to edit on Final Cut Pro", and next year Apple decided to eliminate Final Cut Pro and it no longer exists. So then you've graduated a whole class of students who've paid all this money thinking they were going to come out with a marketable skill, and they don't have that skill. If those students had been taught conceptually how to edit and given somehow the confidence that they can figure things out, then it wouldn't matter that the technology changed, because they could adapt. You know I always think of some of the great editors, like Walter Murch, who is someone who began editing on a flatbed and is still editing today on films with huge effects and on an Avid and completely digital and this whole new world. And you think, that person is an editor, he's not someone who knows a system, and so I think that's what we want to teach, is really how to think, much more so than the craft.

Bibliography for Introduction

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