

QUINZAINÉ  
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT  
CANNES 2011

"An unsettlingly quiet, even lyrical film about  
a world made and unmade by violence."  
- A. O. Scott, *The New York Times*

# EL VELADOR

## THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

A FILM BY NATALIA ALMADA



EL VELADOR is a co-production of Altamura Films and American Documentary | POV in association with Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), Associate Producers by Tita Productions and Les Films D'ici. Additional funding provided by the Jan Vrijman Fund, The Sundance Institute Documentary Fund, Charles Schultz, NYSCA and Chicken, Egg Pictures, and Région Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur.

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## EL VELADOR / THE NIGHTWATCHMAN

An Icarus Films Release  
Directed by Natalia Almada

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## **NATIONAL TOUR**

June 14-20, 2012 U.S. Theatrical Premiere  
The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, NY  
<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/films/1267>

July 6-8, 2012  
Northwest Film Center, Portland, OR

July 6-12, 2012  
Northwest Film Forum, Seattle, WA

July 13, 2012  
UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, CA

July 15, 2012  
Pacific Film Archives, Berkeley, CA

August 4 and 6, 2012  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX

September 25-26, 2012  
Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH

September 27-28, 2012  
The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN

September 27, 2012  
National Television Broadcast Premiere on POV  
<http://www.pbs.org/pov/elvelador/>

## **SELECTED FESTIVALS**

Cannes Film Festival: Directors' Fortnight

New Directors/New Films

Los Angeles Film Festival

Silverdocs

Melbourne Film Festival

Munich International Film Festival

FIDMarseille

Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival

Festival Internacional de Cine de Lima

Vancouver International Film Festival

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

Night after night, Martin watches over the extravagant mausoleums of Mexico's most notorious drug lords like a guardian angel. Set in a massive, labyrinthine cemetery in the hours between dusk and dawn, *El Velador (The Night Watchman)* is a peaceful meditation on violence. Natalia Almada's haunting documentary reminds us that even today, during the turmoil of Mexico's bloodiest conflict since the revolution, ordinary life persists.

## LONG SYNOPSIS

Martin, the night watchman, arrives at the cemetery in his rumbling blue Chevrolet with the setting sun. The cemetery's canine mascots, El Negro and La Negra, chase his truck down the road and greet him with wagging tails. As the daytime workers leave, the sound of construction fades away and Martin is left alone, looking out over the skyline of mausoleums where Mexico's most notorious drug lords lie at rest.

As night descends, silhouetting crosses and steel construction scaffolding against the purple and pink sky, luxurious cars creep down the dirt roads. Mercedes, a sexy young widow, arrives in a pristine white Audi with her little girl. A portrait of her husband, a policeman holding a machine gun, watches over them as they sweep and mop the shiny marble floors of his tomb.

"Culiacán has become a war zone," reports a coconut vendor's radio as it lists the day's murders. The ominous buzz of cicadas fills the air. Through Martin's vigilant eyes, we see time pass in a place where, for so many, time has stopped.

Natalia Almada's beautiful portrait of daily life in the cemetery captures the intersection between those who live there and those who rest there: the innocent beside the guilty. Construction workers perfect the gaudy details of crypts. Children play hopscotch on tombs. Families light candles for those they've lost. For many, mourning and the caretaking of the mausoleums has become a kind of daily work that echoes the tasks of those whose livelihoods are made from their service to the dead.

The perversely gaudy mausoleums over which Martin keeps watch are monuments to the violence that is devastating contemporary Mexico. They also speak volumes about that country's class inequities. Workers hang lavish chandeliers they could never afford in the houses of the dead.

An code of silence makes conversation dangerous. The word "narco" is forbidden. The teetering scaffolding, the rotting wooden ladder, the photograph of a man who died at 23: life is precarious for everyone with business here.

*El Velador (The Nightwatchman)* lingers at the threshold of violence. By refusing to show the graphic images that most of the press feverishly disseminates and instead contemplating the living and dead casualties, Almada asks us to dwell in the moments after violence has left its mark. Her camera enters into the intimate and ordinary routines of the cemetery world with patience, restraint and tenderness.

*El Velador (The Nightwatchman)* is a film about violence without violence.



## CRITICAL PRAISE

"An unsettlingly quiet, even lyrical film about a world made and unmade by violence"  
–*The New York Times*

"Mesmerizing!" –*Time Out*

"An exquisite study of a rapidly expanding cemetery" –*Variety*

"(An) hypnotically detailed feature documentary depiction of life and death"  
–*The Wall Street Journal*

"Two documentaries, *El Velador* and *The Black Power Mixtape*, provide chilling accounts of their subjects that are matched by a refreshing vitality."  
–*The New York Press*

"*El Velador* is deliberate, repetitive, and deceptively peaceful. Watching it feels at first as if you're eavesdropping on someone else's daydream." –*Slant Magazine*

## FILM CREDITS

Director / Producer / Director of Photography:	Natalia Almada
Associate Producers:	Laurence Ansquer, Charlotte Uzu
Editors:	Natalia Almada, Julien Devaux
Sound Designer:	Alejandro de Icaza
Production Assistant:	Ramiro Rodriguez
Running time:	72 minutes / 52 minutes
Format:	DCP, Digibeta, HDCam, DVD
Production Year:	2011
Country:	Mexico / USA

A co-production of Altamura Films and American Documentary | POV in association with Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Additional funding provided by the Jan Vrijman Fund, The Sundance Institute Documentary Fund, Charles Schultz, NYSCA, and Chicken and Egg Pictures.

*El Velador (The Nightwatchman)* was edited in part at the MacDowell Artists Colony. Natalia Almada is a 2010 USA Artist and 2011 Alpert Award recipient.



## FILM BACKGROUND

"There aren't enough living to bury the dead," says the director of the cemetery that is the setting for Natalia Almada's *El Velador* (*The Nightwatchman*). The graveyard is located in Culiacan, capital of the northern state of Sinaloa, deep in the drug heartland of Mexico.

Shortly after taking office, Mexican President Felipe Calderón declared war on the drug cartels and put the military to the task of fighting the drug trade. The subsequent blood bath has affected every sector of society and the daily lives of nearly all Mexico's citizens. In 2009, over 8000 people died in violent incidents related to drug trafficking, nearly twice the civilian death toll in Iraq.

The illegal drug trade is a multi-billion dollar industry without borders. Drugs are produced, trafficked, and consumed across the globe, and responsible for billions of dollars circulating in the global economy. But it is Mexico that has become the central battlefield of this worldwide problem. It is estimated that approximately 35,000 people have been killed since December 2006.

The cemetery is a private enterprise, the most expensive such place in Culiacán. A plot here requires dispensable income that very few have. Since the beginning of the war on drugs, the number of graves in the cemetery has exploded, as has the extravagance of the mausoleums. Ranging in design from minimalist modernism to fanciful imitations based on magazine designs, these opulent narco-tombs can cost upwards of \$100,000. In Mexico's depressed economy, who besides the drug lords can afford such luxuries?

## DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY



Recipient of the 2009 Sundance Documentary Directing Award for her film *El General*, Natalia Almada's most recent film, *El Velador* is a haunting look at violence through the eyes of the night watchman of Mexico's most notorious narco-cemetery. Her previous credits include *All Water Has a Perfect Memory*, an experimental short film that received international recognition; and *Al Otro Lado*, her award-winning debut feature documentary about immigration, drug trafficking and corrido music. Almada's films have screened at The Sundance Film Festival, The Museum of Modern Art, The Guggenheim Museum, and The Whitney Biennial. Her three feature documentaries were all selected for broadcast on POV, the award-winning PBS television series. Almada is a MacDowell Colony Fellow, a 2008 Guggenheim Fellow, a 2010 USA Artist Fellow, a 2011 Alpert Award recipient, and a 2011 TEDx Speaker. Almada graduated with a MFA in

photography from the Rhode Island School of Design, and lives in Mexico City and Brooklyn, New York.

## FILMMAKER STATEMENT

I come from a ranching family and grew up in Sinaloa, which is now Mexico's most productive agricultural state and, coincidentally, the cradle of drug trafficking in Mexico. The constant dinner table stories about run-ins with "narcos" were countless, and all had a quality about them reminiscent of *The Godfather*. But when the cowboy I'd known my whole life told us his son had disappeared, the remains of his seven buddies burned alive, and the ranch caretaker tortured and beaten so badly he couldn't tell the story of what had happened to him without wetting his pants, the violence of the drug trade lost its romantic Hollywood glow for me. Reality no longer felt like a movie. Instead, I felt the need to make a film.

"Why is there so much violence in Mexico?" "What is the solution to the violence?" people ask when I travel outside of Mexico. However, they usually ask as they are getting up from the table, not as they are sitting down to engage in a real conversation about the matter. Violence is the issue that puts Mexico on the cover of *The New York Times*, yet a solution always seems to remain out of reach. Looking at a photo in the paper, we often wonder, "How could someone do *that*?" We feel a sense of relief when it happens over there, far from here. It seems impossible to imagine anyone for whom normal life could continue in the midst of such atrocities.

When I am shooting, I often think of it in terms of Baudelaire's phrase from Barthes' *Camera Lucida*: it is an example of "The emphatic truth of gesture in the great circumstances of life." If film has any relationship to truth (which I'm not convinced it does) it must lie in its ability to gesture.

By filming at the cemetery, I hoped to understand the violence that is pointlessly destroying Mexico and rescue a sense of humanity from the heart of that violence. Or, as Serge Daney so beautifully wrote, "to touch with the gaze that distance between myself and where the other exists."

When I went first to the cemetery, I was reminded of the paupers' graveyard a few miles north of the border in Arizona where I shot part of my first film, *Al Otro Lado*. That cemetery was full of unidentified illegal immigrants who had died crossing the desert. Their American dream ended in a desolate empty lot of dirt, under a brick inscribed with their new American names, Jane and John Doe. The rows of bricks were a site of anonymity and oblivion. The surreal skyline of mausoleums in *El Velador (The Night Watchman)* is its antithesis, a grand expression of remembrance. They index Mexicans' refusal to be invisible, anonymous and forgotten in death.

When I began filming, four massive mausoleums were under construction and a new hole had been excavated for 300 more graves. By the time I finished, that hole had been filled with young bodies and a tractor was digging a new one. The cemetery's exponential growth illustrates our continuing failure to end the violence that has already claimed over 35,000 lives.

In December 2009, after the assassination of Beltran Leyva, "El Jefe de Jefes," a decapitated head was left on his tomb. Rather than a threat, it turned out to be an offering; hence, the red gerbera daisy placed behind the left ear of the bloodied head. The detail stood out brilliantly against the white marble in the photograph that inevitably circulated in the "nota roja" and on the web.

What are we to make of these images: Are they shameful? Are they like trophies of war? Are they like lynching photographs of slaves in Southern United States? Or the photographs of the religious hung along the train tracks in Mexico's Cristiada war?

In her essay about the Abu Ghraib photographs, *Regarding the Torture of Others*, Susan Sontag writes, "The horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken." Perhaps the person who left the head on the tomb was not the one to take the photograph. When he placed the gerbera behind the victim's left ear, did he do it for the benefit of a future photographer? Did he take pleasure in posing the head just so? The media took the bait, and millions stared with fascination and terror at the grotesqueness of it all. And then we walked away.

After a year of filming at the cemetery, I arrived one morning at 7:00 a.m. as usual, to catch the sun rising behind the mausoleums and the arrival of the construction workers. Shortly after setting up my tripod in front of the first burial in the new hole, I was informed that I had to leave. It was very clear to me that this was to be taken seriously. I have always been able to talk my way out of sticky situations, but this time there was nothing to say, because there was no one but the messenger to say it to. That early July morning I felt an invisible, omnipresent power exerted over me. The media had shown again and again what El Narco was capable of doing. *This time*, the threat implied, *it could happen to me*. It was a perfect combination of invisibility and visibility designed to render me powerless.

To viewers of *El Velador (The Night Watchman)*, I hope to convey the desperate fear, impotence and numbness that I felt in that moment. Without resorting to morbid sensationalism or showing the graphic images that have become all too common, I propose that we take an unflinching look at violence.





## INTERVIEW WITH NATALIA ALMADA

In the spring of 2011, on the occasion of Natalia Almada's receiving an Alpert Award, she was interviewed by filmmaker Lourdes Portillo (Alpert Award winner 1999). [www.alpertawards.org](http://www.alpertawards.org)

Lourdes Portillo: *In documentary tradition there is the notion that documentary must adhere to an impartial point of view. Objectivity is a perspective that is very much promoted and valued in journalism and it implies the truth is being told.*

Natalia Almada: I find the discourse about objectivity and truth in documentary filmmaking to be very stifling and oddly antiquated. If we think about the same issues in photography we seem to understand that "the frame" is subjective and that no longer seems to be a point of debate. Yet, in documentary filmmaking there is still this stubborn adherence to ideas of objectivity and truth. To me, it is a question of transparency more than objectivity. Rather than pretend to be objective I find it more interesting to make visible my own subjectivity through how I frame, the questions I ask, and in the structure and form of the films. My most recent film, *El Velador*, is set in a cemetery in Culiacan where massive mausoleums are being built in memory of some of the most powerful drug lords. In a place of such violence there is a code of silence. This silence forced me to rely on gestures to tell the story. The night watchman's twiddling thumbs for instance expressing his boredom and his anticipation.

*In your film El General, you are looking at your great grandfather (a historical and contested character in Mexican history) with a very intimate eye. What was your approach and how did you make sense of this dilemma.*

*El General* was particularly delicate because there was a collision of the private and public in making a film about a man who was both my great-grandfather and a historical/political figure. I often felt frustrated by the expectation to be "clear" or "historically accurate" because I was working within the documentary tradition. Yet, I was much more interested in exploring the process of remembering which is a very personal and subjective process. I found inspiration in my grandmother's recordings in which the moments when you could feel the vulnerability of memory were the most moving and beautiful. I wanted to rescue that quality of her recordings in the film. I was also interested in looking at how class and power give certain people the privilege to participate in history while erasing and silencing others. If we look at history this way, then it too becomes a very subjective accounting of the past.

*Illustrate for me the stages in your work that have developed your style of documentary, what would you chose to call [them]?*

A part of me wishes that we could discard these categories of documentary and fiction because in them lie numerous hidden values that I don't agree with. For example, fiction is always more cinematic than documentary. Why? Says who? For me, something to hold onto about the term "documentary" it is not its adherence to truth and objectivity, nor its educational value or its potential to instigate change, but rather the process. For me the documentary process is a kind of improvisation with reality, which I find exhilarating. This happens as I look through the lens, and as the structure of the film takes shape. I wouldn't say it is an accident, but it is my response to a situation or a given circumstance. This 'improvisation' is what keeps me curious.

My work is an exploration largely about form, not only about content. One can make a film just about anything, what matters is how one makes the film, just as in

photography it not what you photograph that really matters but how you frame. Content is really just a pretext. Unfortunately it is a pretext that often gets in the way of really seeing what we are looking at. As Susan Sontag wrote in her 1961 essay *Against Interpretation*, "our task is to cut back on content so that we can see the thing at all."

*In reference to a statement that you made 'I am interested in documentaries that do not hide their subjectivity' does that mean that objectivity could not be a possible means of expression in your work?*

I am not interested in objectivity. I would replace the idea of objectivity, that in journalism and documentary, I think, is meant to secure a certain fairness, with respect and responsibility. Particularly when shooting other people, the integrity lies in being respectful and responsible, not in erasing oneself, which is what is implied in objectivity. I remember in particular when shooting *El General* I thought of my camera as a kind of two way mirror in which I was seeing outward but I was also being looked at. The encounters I had with people were as much about them as they were about me; about my place in this society and culture, about how I am perceived and treated. I like to think of filming as a triangular relationship between the subject, camera and photographer and not just as the photographer taking the picture of the subject. There is a scene in *El General* that is shot in the women's car of the metro in Mexico City. I love it not only because of the women's expressions and the neon light and movement of the subway car, but also because I know that only a woman could have shot it. There is no objectivity.

*A very well regarded documentarian and author of The Battle of Chile, Patricio Guzmán, once commented that we Latin Americans are now creating a "family album" of our lives/cultures through our documentaries. Would you agree with this comment? Or is there also another movement that has inspired your approach.*

I do think we are creating a 'family album' of sorts but I'm not sure if this is unique to Latin America. Perhaps it has come to us later than to other countries and perhaps what has changed is that we are making our own portraits of ourselves more and more. The third world or developing world is used to being the subject matter of the developed world's gaze and fascination. We are used to being 'looked at' in this way and described in foreign languages. As more films are made by Latin Americans, we begin to take back the right to look at ourselves and in this regard, yes, we are creating a family album. I think that there is however a danger or a trap that we must be wary of: the expectation that the films we make are definitive—definitive of who we are and of our country and culture. I went to a fantastic lecture by Gayatri Spivak in April 2009. In my notes there is a line that says, 'the greatest gift is doubt,' and then (underlined many times), "the right to doubt" followed by "not everything about you is evidence." I was very moved by Spivak's idea that ambiguity, doubt, uncertainty, mystery—these ideas which exist in a grey zone—are in fact privileges which we are often denied. And yet to me, it is precisely this grey area that matters.

*You mentioned that your relationship to film grew out of your desire to fabricate memories, would you explain that? Were the memories inaccessible to you at a certain time? And film has enabled you to remember and therefore create anew?*

The first film I made was about my sister who died when I was a baby. Everyone in my family had some concrete memory of her, but I didn't. So not only did I have this family with the wound of her loss, but I felt excluded from their collective suffering because I could not remember her - and therefore I could not mourn her, or miss her, as they did. So I created my own invented memory through film.

In the end this "invented memory" inevitably reflects the reality of being part of a bi-cultural, bi-lingual family. It also reflects the "lack of communication" that sometimes exists between cultures, particularly in the face of loss when pain is expressed perhaps more through gestures and traditions of mourning than through language. The film reflects the fragmented and incomplete nature of memory. In Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, the narrator's says, "I do not know how those who do not film remember." Sometimes I think that those of us who have poor memories turn to photography and film as a way to make memory concrete and tangible.

*What has been your inspiration to work outside of the documentary tradition? What has freed you from that immutable approach to documentary? Have art and living on the margins of many worlds been an inspiration?*

I think, in part, simply not having gone to film school where you learn how films are supposed to be made has been liberating because I set my own rules that fit my own experience. I've never felt that I lived in a world that was black and white or where everything had an answer, so how could I make films like that? Perhaps this perspective comes from living between two cultures and having to reconcile (or not) the inherent differences. It forces you to accept contradictions rather than trying to resolve them. But this is an uncomfortable space. The mainstream documentary tradition aims to provide clarity, not confusion. Conclusions are the ultimate goal. For me, I find the web of contradictions, mysteries and secrets to be a much richer terrain. Again, if we are to consider any kind of "truth" or "honesty" in documentary, isn't this to be found precisely in depicting the chaos and confusion in which we actually exist rather than trying to make digestible, orderly, definitive statements?

*As the world becomes more accepting of multi-lingual and multi-racial people do you think that it also hungers for films that speak a different visual and verbal language... the language of film?*

I think the world has been forced to accept more multi-lingual and multi-racial people but I think the media still has a very long way to go. It is not a question of whether films can be in Spanish or English or both or whether people will become more agreeable to reading subtitles. It is about deep structures and different ways of seeing. Once we have a greater diversity of form then we will have something that looks like diversity. When I was making *El General* I looked a lot at *Santiago*, a beautiful film by João Moreira Salles. Other films I love include Chantal Akerman's *News From Home*, Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*, Albert and David Maysles' *Grey Gardens*, and one of my favorites, Fellini's *La Strada*. Culture and identity influence the ways we see, the ways we tell stories and the kinds of formal decisions we make. In some societies linear, single character narratives are most highly valued, while stories that focus on collective experience may predominate elsewhere. Telling a story with a happy ending or making a film with a clear conclusion is based on a set of cultural values that are not necessarily universal, or even most interesting.

*What direction is your work taking, with its visual poetry, intimacy and unapologetic cultural richness?*

I think I'm happy that I don't really know the answer to this question... but I do hope that I can continue to push a boundary within myself. I don't want to become comfortable making films or find a formula 'that works' and get trapped in a certain kind of style or restricted to certain subjects. Sometimes I feel like I am on the cusp of something - it is like having a word on the tip of your tongue or a kind of vertigo. I think it is usually between films when I am not fully engrossed in the production of one, but am somehow open to whatever may come next. It is a frightening and yet very rich moment in the creative process. I suppose it's not unlike what a painter told me,

'mixing the paint is what takes the most courage.' I just hope that I will be like Louise Bourgeois or Agnès Varda and still be making things in my eighties... and have a life of work to look back on.

*Natalia, you give me a sense of the documentarian as an artist, explorer and adventurer; documentary has given women the opportunity to be all that. Do you feel the power to be not only creating but being on the edge of events? Still, for me, I feel there is always a sacrifice to be made, is that so for you?*

I think it is precisely someone like you who paved the road for a filmmaker like me, as a woman and as a Latina. I didn't have to question whether or not I had the right to be an artist, explorer and adventurer because I have role models who showed me that it was possible. I feel that it is my responsibility to continue on this path and not take it for granted; this goes back to the earlier question about being transparent and subjective. I refuse to erase who I am in a vale of objectivity that, usually, is just another way of reinforcing the dominant perspective as truth. It is without doubt empowering to make films. But I've never thought of myself as being on the edge of events. Rather, I think that documentary gives us the excuse to look, and forces us to pay attention to the details that often get lost in the noise of life. We look through the lens when we shoot and then we look again and again at the footage as we try to shape it into something. In the looking I think we find or give meaning and value to what we see. To me this is the most interesting when 'what we see' is not necessarily what society encourages us to look at. Then the looking can be a political act that can be subversive or revolutionary.

In what way do you mean that there is a sacrifice to be made?

*There are many sacrifices. The first one that comes to mind is that while searching for the truth, as documentary does, we sacrifice an illusion, or it even might be a lie. When we dispel illusions in search of truth, not everyone will feel good about it, and sometimes we have to deal with the consequences. Just as you have said, 'what we see is not necessarily what society wants us to see.' I could not agree more. So that gaze that we engage in is dangerous, and we sacrifice complacency and illusion.*

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