

Dammed Ecologies, “Hydro-irrealism,” and Aesthetic Slowness in Betzabé García’s *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (2015)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2025.16.2.5504>



Abstract

This article discusses Betzabé García’s *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (*Kings of Nowhere*, 2015), a Mexican documentary that tackles the community-scale experiences of socio-ecological degradation, land clearing and mass displacement produced by the damming of a regional river for neoliberal hydro-development. Although the documentary primarily adheres to the defining realist gestures and formal austerity of observational and “slow cinema” idioms to capture everyday life in a flood-stricken rural landscape, as this article explores, the use of a surreal and spectral visual grammar in certain sequences seems to mediate the radical estrangement that saturates social reality in the zones of sacrifice and submergence wrought by extractive capital. Building on Warwick Research Collective’s world-ecological examination of how “irrealist aesthetics” correspond to the experience of extreme and abrupt restructuring of socio-ecological relations engendered by capitalism’s extractive operations, this article suggests that the unearthly and ghostly atmosphere conveyed through the film’s enigmatic *mise-en-scène* attends to the unfathomable changes to agrarian realities produced by the infrastructures of hydro-extraction, as well as to the brutal dynamics of dispossession and plunder that underpin them. Thus, reading García’s documentary as a work that evinces what Sharae Deckard calls the “aesthetics of hydro-irrealism,” this article argues that the film fosters a critical view of the bewildering yet not immediately perceptible extractive and terror-inflicting mechanisms that structure the region’s socio-ecological rupture, attuning viewers not only to the protracted and concealed violences fostered by hydro-infrastructure development, but also to the oft-invisibilised forms in which local communities respond to the world-destroying schemes of neoliberal extractivism.

Keywords: Environmental documentary, extractive capitalism, hydro-irrealism, slow cinema.

Resumen

El presente artículo ofrece una discusión de *Los reyes de pueblo que no existe* (2015) de Betzabé García, un documental mexicano que aborda las experiencias localizadas de degradación socio-ecológica, desterritorialización y desplazamiento forzado masivo producido por la implementación de un megaproyecto hidráulico. Aunque el filme se adhiere predominantemente a los gestos característicos y austeridad formal del documental observacional y el “cine lento” para registrar la vida diaria en un territorio rural afectado por la construcción de una represa, como se explora en este artículo, el uso de una gramática visual surreal y espectral en ciertas secuencias parece mediar el radical extrañamiento que satura la realidad social de las zonas de sacrificio y afectación creadas por el capital extractivo. Basado en las discusiones del Warwick Research Collective sobre estéticas “irrealistas” y su correspondencia con las experiencias de extrema y abrupta reorganización de las relaciones socio-ecológicas impulsada por las operaciones extractivas del capitalismo, el artículo sugiere que la atmósfera espectral evocada a través de la enigmática puesta en escena del documental apunta a la incomprensible y drástica desintegración de las realidades agrarias producida por las infraestructuras del extractivismo hídrico, así como a las brutales dinámicas de desposesión y saqueo que las apuntalan. Por lo tanto, leyendo el documental como una obra que exhibe rasgos de lo que Sharae Deckard define como “estéticas hidro-irrealistas,” el artículo argumenta que el filme promueve una visión crítica de los desconcertantes, no inmediatamente perceptibles mecanismos de terror y extracción que

estructuran la fragmentación socio-ecológica del territorio, guiando la mirada de los espectadores no sólo hacia las violencias lentas y ocultas del desarrollo hidráulico, sino, además, a las formas usualmente invisibilizadas en las que las comunidades locales responden a la megaproyectos de destrucción del extractivismo neoliberal.

Palabras clave: Documental ambiental, capitalismo extractivo, hidro-irrealismo, cine lento.

At the opening of Betzabé García’s *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (*Kings of Nowhere*, 2015), a Mexican feature-length documentary that captures the localised harms produced by neoliberal hydro-development, the camera attentively follows a young man manoeuvring a small fishing skiff boat through the silvery waters of a river basin. A thick fog blankets the landscape, and an eerie stand of dying and decaying trees can be seen jutting out from the water, enhancing the forlorn condition of the place. The camera stays tightly on him for more than a minute, before gradually shifting the depth of field, rerouting our gaze toward the crosses of tombstones poking out from the water’s murkiness that appear in the outer edge of the frame. From here, the frame opens to a wide shot of a lush mangrove dotted with rural houses now submerged by floodwaters. García’s camera unhurriedly surveys the waterlogged roads of the drowned-out town, passing through long-abandoned buildings swamped by water, rotting walls covered in mildew, and muddy waterways that were once paths, impressing upon the viewer the ruin that befell this rural settlement. But then, as the camera takes us past the half-sunken dwellings and the tropical greenery that promises to overtake them, its lingering gaze alerts us to a somewhat off-kilter sight: a flood-stricken lamppost protruding from the stagnant water that, somehow, appears to be still on.

García’s documentary, like other recent Latin American nonfiction films focused on the destructive impacts of large mining, energy, and logistics infrastructures, tackles the community-scale experiences of socio-ecological degradation, land clearings and mass displacement through a protracted and quiet contemplation of extractivism-impaired environments.¹ Shot almost entirely observationally and eschewing the “ecological information dump” (Morton 7) ubiquitous in media discourses of environmental destruction, the film relies on long takes that frame rural villagers (and animals) moving through a half-sunken, thinly populated town and nearby fields, chronicling their dusk-to-dawn routines against a background of environmental threat and decimation, revealed by the end to be linked

¹ There is a significant if scattered body of Latin American documentary films that employ a primarily observational approach to examine the devastating consequences of contemporary extractive infrastructures. Examples include: Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff’s *Surire* (2015), an observational film featuring long, wide-angle shots of mega-mining operations in the Chilean Salars; Eugenio Polgovsky’s *Resurrección* (2016), a documentary that combines observational and poetic elements to address catastrophic watershed pollution in a Mexican industrial corridor; and Josefina Pérez García and Felipe Sigalas’s *Nidal* (2021), a contemplative nonfiction film that uses static composition and uninterrupted shots to focus on the high-rise development projects encroaching upon the fragile coastal ecosystem of Concón.

to the damming and diverting of a regional river. In this sense, the film’s penchant for lingering, uninterrupted visual and sonorous shots of the dam-affected coastal landscape, not only resonates deeply with the socially-committed tradition of Latin American nonfiction cinema and its drive to film “raw reality” (Burton 6), but also with tendencies afoot in contemporary cinemas of observation, as the formal austerity of “slow cinema” works (de Luca and Barradas Jorge) is summoned in the film to bring to focus the processual and cumulative impacts of extractive violence, that, to follow Rob Nixon, often fall short of visual spectacle (2). Yet, while the documentary adheres to the defining realist gestures of observational and slow cinema idioms, the use of surreal and spectral visual grammar García in certain sequences, particularly as the film attempts to register the obscure coercions and socio-ecological disruptions visited on this development-ready site, seems to mediate the radical estrangement that saturates social reality in the zones of sacrifice wrought by extractive capital.

The acute figuration of environmental peril that *Los reyes del pueblo que no existe* (hereafter *Los reyes*) advances, therefore, rather than affixed to a pure realist mode of observational filmmaking, can be more productively interpreted through the prism of “irrealist” aesthetics. By the term “irrealism,” I have specially in mind the way the concept has been elaborated in world-ecological cultural analyses, which have emphasised the pervasiveness of the form in cultural texts produced at moments of intense and abrupt socio-ecological rearrangement. As theorised by Warwick Research Collective (WReC), “the violent reorganisation of social relations” engendered by cyclical crises in peripheralised zones of resource extraction tend to be indexed through magical, uncanny, irrealist aesthetics that blend with realism, as the “relative facticity of realist form” proves inadequate to capture the volatile and disjunctive experience of capitalism’s systematic ravages (72). More concretely, in the neoliberal context of “extreme extraction,” the technical intensification of “high-risk” modes of hydro-extraction and the dynamics of attrition and dispossession it crystallises, as observed by Sharae Deckard, seem to imprint themselves in peripheral cultural forms through the “aesthetics of hydro-irrealism,” as narration marked by the “spectral or absurd” and “macabre and gothic atmospheres of death-in-life” (113) operates to express these hydrological extremes.

In this article, I thus borrow from WReC’s world-ecological conceptual framework to read García’s documentary as a work that evinces the aesthetics of hydro-irrealism. As I suggest, the unearthly atmosphere conveyed through the film’s enigmatic *mise-en-scène* functions to render apprehensible the unfathomable changes to agrarian existence wrought by hydro-infrastructure, as the contraction of life attached to it, from the flooded crops to the displaced and slaughtered rural peoples, is kept out of the field of vision, and suggested only via spectral tropes that point to the violent and abstruse operations of “extreme extraction” in rural Mexico and its deadly socioecological costs. In this manner, I explore, the disruption of the realist tenets of the observational documentary form in *Los reyes* works to foster a disquiet contemplation of the bewildering, lethal yet not immediately perceptible extractive

processes that structure the town’s socio-ecological rupture, foregrounding hydro-infrastructure as an over-looming threat to the survival of rural communities and their land-based lifeways. However, as I proceed to examine, paired with a slow and intimate account of everyday agrarian life, the film’s irrealist hauntological qualities also allow to capture the “submerged perspectives” (Gómez Barris 11) that exist hidden within sacrifice zones, as local forms of ecological care are summoned by García through long and repetitive frames that uplift the largely invisibilised practices that contest the material and symbolic destructive arrangements of extractive capital. By way of conclusion, I suggest the film’s irreal and slow aesthetic approach to the communal effects of river damming functions not only to attune viewers to the concealed injustices fostered by hydro-infrastructural development, but also to the practical doings that, engaging with the preservation and repair of ecological life, spotlight the myriad ways in which local communities respond to the world-destroying schemes of neoliberal extractivism.

Documenting hydro-extraction

Los reyes del pueblo que no existe takes place in San Marcos, one of the six rural villages flooded by the construction of the much-opposed Picachos dam in the northwestern Mexican state of Sinaloa. The cataclysmic inundation in 2009 led to the forced displacement of more than 800 families who were resettled into temporary, shack-like dwellings on the opposite side of the reservoir, effectively cut off from the drowned communal lands.² The ongoing dam project, one of the largest investments in hydro-infrastructure in the country, was touted as essential to guarantee sustainable water supply for agricultural irrigation as well as to secure hydropower generation to boost the country’s energy self-sufficiency. Pursued under the aegis of neoliberal “green” developmentalist narratives, the hydraulic mega-scheme has therefore been presented as a strategic investment to foster sustainable and clean development and heralded as a key tool to chart paths toward the achievement of the long-awaited socio-economic prosperity of the largely agricultural region.

However, like any other intensive technology of extraction, the infrastructures of riparian water management and hydropower, as Deckard warns, are certainly not sustainable, producing ruptures and impacts on the social metabolism of nature and deepening the asymmetries of consumption since water is essentially diverted to flow uphill “towards capitalist agribusiness, state-favoured development projects and urban centres” (11). Yet, marketed as a pathway for development and regional growth, the communities sacrificed for such technological and economic progress are often not only subjected to a physical displacement but also to what Nixon sees as an “imaginative expulsion” of populations from national memory that often comes prior to assaults of a region’s environmental resources (151). Therefore, deemed

² See Cañedo Cázarez, Sibely and Mendoza-Guerrero, Juan Manuel. “Desplazamiento forzado y empoderamiento femenino: el caso de la presa Picachos en el sur de Sinaloa, Mexico.” *Ágora USB*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2017, pp. 370-386.

superfluous to the idea of “sustainable” economic growth, the people of San Marcos were promptly evacuated from public awareness, and, with the creation of a new San Marcos, were made to witness the rhetorical and visual emptying out of the place they used to inhabit, figured now as a place without community, history or even use value. From the vantage point of those that continue to dwell in a submerged town that should no longer exist, García’s documentary explores the unseen, ill-fated peripheral sites of neoliberal extraction.

The film focuses on seemingly small moments of everyday life in the near empty otherworldly town of San Marcos. García’s subtle camera work immerses itself in the ghostly rural landscape now only inhabited by three remaining families, out of the more than three hundred that have lived in these lands for generations. Following the opening scene, the camera tracks the village’s slow rustling to life in the bright morning light, against the aural backdrop of the mangrove jungle. In these early scenes—the only moment in which García and the crew members’ voices are heard—the silent and still frames that capture the sheer size of the destruction wrought by the hydraulic project are suddenly disrupted by a voice that appears off-screen. As the camera abruptly pans to the out-of-focus figure standing in the muddy road, the cameraman asks permission to film him. Now in focus, the old man responds by inviting García to film his still standing home and the chickens that continue to roam the land instead. Not coincidentally, much of the praise that the film has garnered rests precisely on its formal conceits, foregrounding not only García’s unobtrusive observation and verité style of filmmaking but also the surreal and “García Marquesque” echoes she brings into the frames. Devoid of people, the visually entrancing shots of animals roaming freely through the dilapidated buildings, donkeys licking up the dough from the still open *tortillería* and a couple dancing *tambora/banda sinaloense* in the middle of the ruins of their abandoned dwelling, convey the sense of being present in a dreamscape. Yet, as Adriana Pérez Limón notes, while “the cinematography courts a ghostly, magical, silent landscape” (95), *Los reyes* also captures the violence and menace that engulfs the region.

Although García eschews on-screen text to let the context slowly emerge through the film’s long and still frames, a context-lending postscript reveals the violence that cuts through this location, which like the rising waters, brutally threatens to submerge it. Atilano Román Tirado, we are told, the forefront of the movement seeking justice for the hundreds of rural families displaced by the megaproject and denouncing the Sinaloan government’s pro-dam efforts to circumvent communal land rights, was shot dead during a live radio broadcast a year prior to the documentary’s release. This last revelation, as Michael Pattison observes in his review, gives retrospective weight to earlier scenes, contextualising the ruin and danger that always lingers in the outskirts of San Marcos, as unspecified figures that shoot and assault them are referenced in the townspeople’s conversations without further comment or clarification. Even when a black SUV (a vehicle notably associated with the narco-paramilitary groups that plague the violence-ridden state of Sinaloa) is seen driving through the deserted town streets or the sounds of distant

gunshots makes the townspeople anxiously look over their shoulders, their fear is scarcely voiced and only momentarily glimpsed through their restless glances; "fireworks, they are only fireworks" one comments with a nervous chuckle. Like the shape-shifting forces of the flood, the difficulty of tracking, visualising or exposing the violence that rains down on the townspeople of San Marcos is thus approached in *Los reyes* by enhancing the sense of a suspended and surreal state of living, an existence that seems hard to visualise through the realist impulse of nonfiction.

In WReC's ecocritical-oriented approaches to cultural production from the Americas, irrealism is presented as a recurring feature in peripheral cultural aesthetics. As Michael Niblett argues, for instance, irrealism can be read as mediating the disjuncture and rifts attendant upon the violent environment-making in the capitalist world-ecology (9). In using the term "world-ecology," Niblett follows Jason Moore's critique of how, since the long sixteenth century, capitalism has created "external natures as objects to be mapped, quantified and regulated" (Moore 13) to fuel its accumulation regimes, which emphasises the systemic character of the production of nature under capitalism. As Niblett argues, with the "restructuring of ecological relations that took place with the transition to the neoliberal regime of accumulation" (82), "irrealist" modalities appear in peripheral cultural discourses to express certain facets of the catastrophic turbulence brought about by the expansionary project of global capital which would otherwise defy representation. Borrowing the term from Michael Löwy, for whom "irrealism" designates modes of representation in which realism is either absent, distorted or disrupted in some way through the incorporation of elements of the marvellous or dreamlike, Niblett suggests that irrealist forms such as surrealism and magic realism might be especially well suited to express "the feelings of strangeness and rupture engendered by the rapid reorganisations of human and extra human natures" (269). The irruption of irrealist elements into a text, even if otherwise broadly realist, not only signals the "disruption caused to local socio-ecologies" (Campbell and Niblett 10) whose ecological resources are leached away but also, through the juxtaposition of different narrative modalities, foregrounds the temporal dislocations and violent imposition of different modes of life by the forces of extractive capitalism.

The observational style conventions in *Los reyes*, from the peaceful and natural soundscape that serves to score the daily activities of the remaining dwellers, to the slow pacing and editing, are at moments "impurely" inflected with marvellous elements. Puncturing the realist overture, these brief moments could be said to respond to "the lived experience of capitalism's bewildering [...] destructive creation" (WReC 51). In interviews, García herself has reflected on the need for such mixture, pointing to how she felt driven to highlight an atmosphere "bordering on magical realism" as she witnessed a still working *tortillería* in the middle of the submerged town (qtd. in Turner). In emphasising the disjointedness of a not readily apparent reality, the decision to approach this setting from a different gaze is almost rendered as a prerequisite. Thus, as she revealingly concedes, "I had to abandon the script I had written" (qtd. in Cutler). From this first impulse, García allows the audience to be

gradually enthralled by the strangeness of the situation and defers the use of the interview form to gather information, featuring only a handful of unhurried interviews as the townspeople go about their daily lives. Instead, García homes in on the observational mode of documentary that, following Bill Nichols’ nomenclature, abjures commentary and illustrative images to “ced[e] control over the events that occur in front of the camera” (38). This emphasis on concrete experience, which allows for the impression of the camera to disappear into the frame, lends itself to what Navarro and Rodríguez see as “a general suspicion of conventional formulas and traditional documentary rhetoric” (7) in Latin American nonfiction cinema of recent decades, a weariness that has come coupled with a desire to adopt “ways of seeing” rooted in the local “life-worlds” in which the stories are set (Andermann 148). Letting the camera slowly wander through the waterlogged landscape and shunning a focus on the scientific accuracy and expertise exemplary of expository forms of the environmental documentary, García’s contemplative perspective thus seeks to immerse viewers in the lived experience of individuals and communities subjected to ecological plunder and emphasize the dense materiality of the altered agrarian environment the film depicts. In this way, García decision to include the man’s invitation to film his house in the opening scenes directly keys into the documentary’s desire to establish a viewpoint aligned with the townspeople’s understanding of what it means to inhabit a post-disaster environ.

Following the man’s cue, the resulting scene hence positions the viewer in the porch of his house, as the man, Jaime, now joined by his wife proceeds to describe the life in the flooded town, half-jokingly contrasting the advantages of their overabundance of water with the living conditions experienced by those coerced into resettlement with the promise of improvement, but who often experience long periods of water shortages. As his wife Yoya says with a chuckle, “Aquí no nos falta el agua, gracias a Dios” [“Here we are not short of water, thank God”].³ The residents’ account is subtly and unhurriedly registered by García, attentive to the complex ways in which they continue to dwell in a space legislated as a submergence zone. In subsequent scenes, her camera joins a former town resident making a slow course through the flooded roads, as he recounts the local stories harboured in each site he comes across, confiding to the camera his grief over the loss of “este ranchito de los recuerdos” [“this town so full of memories”] and his bewilderment over the sudden evacuation of the whole community. Beyond the visible ruins that fill the backdrop of the frame, the man’s account tracks the way in which the imposed “official landscape” of the large-scale water infrastructure has likewise cast into shadow the affective, historically textured registers of the now fractured landscape, a land now written “in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner” (Nixon 17). As he continues to rove silently through the watery nocturnal locale, his shadowy image stands-in for the ghostly habitat, a world fissured, distorted, made barely visible by the official landscape. García’s camera holds the viewer’s gaze on these shadows,

³ All English translations are quoted from the film’s subtitles.

lingering on the local perspectives wiped out by the infrastructures of extractive developmentalism.

The mournful view over the impending decimation of the local ecology in the wake of large development schemes, therefore, concretises the ways in which many peasant, indigenous and afro-descendant communities have come to label these traumatic intrusions and enclosures as “proyectos de muerte” (projects of death). As the coinage implies, the term has been used to cast into doubt the narratives of frictionless transformation that project global growth, trade and development where dispossession, exodus and extinction occur (Govela Gutiérrez and Sevilla Zapata; Ontiveros et. al.), since the exposure to extraction’s waste and burdens converts rural and peripheral spaces into ravaged habitats where a “slow death” threatens to unfold via the gradual wearing down of a commons that “however modestly or precariously, had proffered a diverse diet, a livelihood” (Nixon 152). With the reduction of viable lands in these environments and the exhaustion of resources, the human and nonhuman animal bodies of sacrificed locales are left with, in Nixon’s words, a “diet of dead rivers and poisoned fields” (232), and are made to bear the physical weight of transnational capital’s unfettered pursuit of economic growth. Still, large-scale infrastructural projects such as dams, continue to press up against fragile environments and life forms in an apparently “bloodless, technocratic, [and] deviously neutral” (Nixon 163) manner that undermines the violence involved. Yet, as slow and quiet as the rising tide, the out of sight despair that tinges the atmosphere in San Marcos gradually seeps into the arresting images of the disjointed everyday existence in this dammed environment.

As the camera tilts in Miro’s direction, the viewer’s gaze is routed to the oblique and incremental violence of the flood that impacts the community: “What you have here is a deserted, abandoned town. Rubble, that is all there is [...] year after year, the water will rise, flooding everything, then it will slowly dry out and the town will be slowly buried in mud [...] It is a staggering poverty, no jobs, no opportunities in these towns”.⁴ The dramatic vision of a town buried beneath deep mud and debris foreshadowed by Miro, is therefore juxtaposed with shallow-focus shots of the skeletal ruins overlooking the blurred landscape. Through these images, the film hauntingly underscores dam-building projects, to use Deckard’s description, as “death-scheme[s] that violently remov[e] the basis for future socio-ecological reproduction” (114). With the deadening of local economies and modes of subsistence (“It was full of plums here, and now there is only water”),⁵ the affected communities, usually peripheral and marginal in relation to centres of economic and political power, are transformed from places of “ecological complexity into hydrological zones and submergence zones that, in the violence of their euphemized effects, are second cousins to the so-called sacrifice zones of military strategy” (Nixon

⁴ “Aquí está un pueblo deshabitado, abandonado ya. Escombros, eso es todo lo que tiene [...] año con año pues llega el agua y se llena, se va secando y se va a ir enterrando de tierra [...] es una pobreza, no hay trabajo, no hay empleo en estos pueblos.”

⁵ “[...] aquí antes era todo lleno de ciruelas [...] ahora es sólo agua.”

162). Rather than coincidental, the close proximity and continuity between submergence zones and sacrificial sites, often located in areas devastated by warfare, suggests a deep connection between the violence of militarisation and the destructive schemes of megadevelopment.

Macarena Gómez-Barris poignantly underscores this occluded nexus in her analysis of large-scale dams as landmarks of “dystopic developmentalism” (6). Grounding her discussion on the effects of hydroelectric construction upon riverine communities in the Americas, Gómez-Barris frames ravaged submergence areas as extractive zones where “military, corporate and state collusion over the destruction of life” literally “damns” social ecologies for extinction (97). As she signals, the extractivist logic of hydroelectric damming, always goes hand in hand with the militarisation of territories slated for extraction, foregrounding the obscure relations between damming and the longer arc of land dispossession and protracted history of military terror across the region. In the concrete case of Mexico, as Dawn Paley has prominently contended, the “combination of terror and policy making” by “drug war capitalism” has served as a “long-term fix for capitalism’s woes” (32), as the increased paramilitarisation and its ability to displace territories through the widespread use of terror-inflicting methods has provided vast benefits for the energy, hydrocarbon and mining sectors, eliminating any potential opposition to extractive projects. In this manner, the synergistic interests among extractive initiatives and the quest to militarise rural areas, operates through what Saskia Sassen sees as the “predatory formations” of contemporary capitalism, that is, “assemblages of powerful actors, markets, technologies and governments” (221), that work to facilitate the expulsion of people from highly valued regions and allow neoliberal development to disguise its rapacious character.

The obscure inner-workings of extractive violence seem then to underline the importance of Nixon’s injunction to shift our analysis from the instantaneous and immediately visible guises of violence to the “threats that never materialise in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene” (14). Therefore, while the insidious presence of paramilitary violence in San Marcos—which is only made evident through the ominous atmosphere created by its *mise-en-scène* (e.g. gunshots blasting afar)—is, for instance, cast as a “subtle undercurrent” that reveals “the political dilemma of a doubly-menaced people: flooded and faced by the constant threat of cartel violence” (Harris 56), what García carefully attends to instead is how the unseen and imperceptible terrorising forces that hover over the town are not decoupled from the menacing force of the dam. Rather, they stem from the same *proyecto de muerte* that works to safeguard the ceaseless plunder upon which capitalism depends.

Hence, rather than realism proper and its “faith on the evidentiary value of data afforded by appearances and testimonial accounts” (Aguilera Skvirsky 125), *Los reyes* gestures toward a critical irrealism that more readily registers the “landscapes where people experience the feeling of living in a territory, not just

‘occupied’/‘usurped,’ but absolutely stranged” (Machado Araoz 62).⁶ Instead of merely building meaning through interviews and testimonies, *Los reyes* appeals to an atmosphere of oddity and menace to apprehend the imperceptible violence and terror brought by the penetration of brutal capitalist modes of accumulation within these lands. Thus, in one of the few scenes in which the characters audibly voice their fears, the cinematography assumes an almost nightmarish quality to chart the lurking threat that roves through the countryside.

The sequence begins with an arresting wide-shot of a storm-threatened night sky with streaks of lightning flashing over the darkened landscape. An ominous crash of thunder punctures the cacophonous nocturnal noises of the tropical forest as the camera jump cuts to the eerie sight of an empty road just as the electricity feeding the streetlight is abruptly extinguished, plunging the town into darkness. In the following shots, as Yoya and Jaime roam through pitch-black rooms with a flashlight as their only light source, silhouetted by its scattered light, the camera lingers on the darkness that engulfs their emptied-out dwelling. García resorts to a static long shot—which effectively showcases the characters’ smallness and vulnerability—while the piercing rumble of thunder and cicadas dominates the soundscape, amplifying the atmosphere of isolation and dread that encircles their dwelling space. With the candles now lit, the camera closes in on the scarcely illuminated couple’s faces, which are obscured by the shadows cast on the blackened room walls, almost as if foretelling something terrible that awaits crouched outside the frame. In a half-whisper, the couple opaquely signal the source of their unease, speaking of unspecified figures that come at night and “atacan de repente” [“attack suddenly”] and which, without anyone noticing, have chopped up one of the townspeople into “pedazitos” [“little pieces”], dumping his body parts in the nearby fields. “People say they come here but we never see them” Jaime says,⁷ expressing his bafflement, before being interrupted by Yoya, who anxiously asks him to stop disclosing more information.

While the quasi-gothic visual arrangement and soundscape already foreshadow the spectre of violence that haunts the townspeople, the elliptical and oblique testimony similarly summons up the threatening and phantasmagoric qualities of the capitalistic forces that operate in the besieged rural environment, as the couple resorts to spectral vocabulary and tonality to figure “a particular order of reality relatively inaccessible to ‘realist’ representation” (WReC 75). Fraught by bewilderment and anguish, the account of these spectral and malevolent intrusions upon these rural communities layers the proximity between these hidden macabre histories and the environmental insecurity that threatens the web of life—which is stressed by the aural backdrop of the raising floodwater heard throughout the testimony—a linkage that is nonetheless presented as outside the visual field.

This formal interplay between visibility and invisibility is correspondingly underscored in a later scene, as we see Jaime, standing in a parched open field while

⁶ “[...] paisajes donde se vivencia y experimenta la sensación de vivir en un territorio, más que ‘ocupado’/‘usurpado’, absolutamente extrañado.”

⁷ “Dicen que vienen para acá, pero nadie los ve.”

feeding his horse, suddenly point to a nearby location and start recounting his recent sighting of a young man being killed in that exact spot, before frightfully restraining himself from talking further, refencing his anxiety over attracting some unseen evil. In this moment, García’s camera remains at medium distance, prompting us to observe Jaime’s shallow-focused natural surroundings, yet never venturing enough to reveal the site of which he speaks—which appears to be located around the edges of the frame—leaving it outside our field of vision. In its absence, however, the off-screen space takes on a centrifugal role, persistently pulling at the edge of the frame and alerting the viewer to what is left unseen.

This aesthetic path detaches the film from the straightforward methods of envisaging violence and disaster, which is most starkly underscored by the conspicuous absence of the Picachos Dam from the filmic register. In withholding it from view—and only explicitly acknowledging it in the final credits—the dam is dislodged from the celebratory and teleological narratives of progress and modernity and the spectacular visibility bestowed upon it. Instead, the film tracks the violent tides of ruination that followed in its wake, and figures it, to borrow Gómez-Barris’s description of the overbuilt condominiums in the Chilean coastline, as a “monstrosity looming over a delicate local ecology” (36). Hence, if as Nixon argues, “the production of ghosted communities who haunt the visible nation has been essential for maintaining the dominant narratives of national development” (151), García’s documentary operates in an inverted scheme of visibility. Employing subtle visual and aural cues that sometimes evoke the disquiet rumbles of a gothic film, the documentary’s language gestures instead toward the insidious workings of late capitalism (displacement, ecological depletion, paramilitary terror) that act as a haunting force in the zones of extraction and resource control. Thus, if we follow David McNally’s argument that the elusive power of capital that grows and multiplies remains “unseen and un-comprehended,” the estrangement-effects used in the film to materialise capitalism’s life-threatening capacities can be said to work toward charting out the horrifying dislocations that, as he contends, are “at the heart of a commodified existence” (7).

The spectral surrealism attributed to García’s feature therefore carries a disruptively political charge for it promotes a critical realism that mirrors the bewildering and jarring world of capitalist modernity better to expose it, operating to make “the everyday appear as it truly is: bizarre, shocking, monstrous” (McNally 7). Yet, beyond juxtaposing the mundane and uncanny to bring dam building into the domain of violence, García’s film uses the affordances of defamiliarised aesthetics to foster a critical spectatorial disposition towards the oft-observed efforts that work to destabilise extractive capitalism’s logics and totalising spread.

Submerged viewpoints

In a significant moment in the film, viewers are stirred through the brownish waters via Miro’s small boat, silently heading to dry land. Where the vegetation

thickens and the sound of the mangrove mountains heightens, the boat’s movement slowly ceases. Turning toward the verdant landscape, the still boat-bound camera tracks Miro as he jumps into the muddy waters carrying a sack over his shoulder. A wide-scale shot frames Miro as he moves deep into the green mass of rainforest, making a whistling sound that blends with the amplified hum of birds and cicadas. The camera abruptly cuts to show a white cow surrounded by dense green foliage. Miro lays out the hay and the *tortillas* he brought for her, gently caressing her as he explains to the camera how the cow was left stranded on this tract of land by the rising waters, as well as the frequent visits he makes to feed her with her much-loved *tortillas*. Key to the filmic register in *Los reyes*, the sequence poignantly underscores and mirrors the story of abandonment and insulation that characterises the catastrophic projects of modernity across peripheral sites of resource extraction. However, as the camera requires us to focus our attention on the quotidian and intimate interactions between humans and similarly vulnerable animals living within the mangrove forest, we can perceive anew the overlooked networks of living relations that run parallel to the alienating conditions that extractive capitalism produces.

One of the direct consequences of this sustained focus on the more-than-human living in *Los reyes* (indicated by lengthy shots of both built and natural environments devoid of human presence) is an elongated and attuned awareness to the intricate unfolding of the natural world, a slowed down form of perception where “the frenetic timescape of extraction is not the sole temporality” (Gómez-Barris 17). Aligned with the aesthetics of slow cinema and its durational quest to capture realities “at odds with or, at the margins off, dominant economic systems” (de Luca and Barradas Jorge 14), *Los reyes*, leveraging stasis, stillness and distended time, presents slowness as a “sensory perceptual prism” that aims to bring into view the rural rhythms and folds of life assaulted by the “accelerated tempo of late capitalism” (15). By focusing on unattended temporalities, this slow model of perception offers the potential to short-circuit the “capitalised sensorium of extractivism,” which, as Nicholas Mirzoeff suggests, is rooted in neoliberalism’s fear of unproductive wilderness, relentlessly transforming lands, people, and ecosystems into commodities. Thus, while state and extractivist corporations operate on the purely materialist cost-benefit logic on which the practice of expropriation is based, *Los reyes*’ lingering investments into the affective and communal toll of the river’s blockage and subsequent submergence not only seeks to attune us to the violent atmosphere but also to the layered land-based rhythms of life that exist in these terrains.

Like in the above-mentioned sequence, the complex relationship between animals, people and environments that forms the basis of the film’s visual address functions to register, to borrow Gómez Barris’s terminology, a “submerged viewpoint” within the murky waters that gives primacy to the “less perceivable worlds, life forms, and the organisation of relations within them” (xv). Furthermore, the prolonged view of the marooned cow and the caretaking practices Miro performs

to keep her alive, more than an allegory of the town’s slow decimation, enacts what Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese identify as “practices of radical care,” that is, “vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds” (2). In this way, the intricate collaborations within and across species that García visualises point toward the land-based relations that resist the commodity logic of extractivism. Yet, as Gómez-Barris contends, “to be able to see beyond the capitalist divide, renewed perception does not simply represent a structure of visibility;” rather, it needs to foreground “an enlivened sense of the relationships that inhabit [...] the microspaces of interaction and encounter” (2) that exist alongside the developmental paradigm. Thus, by orienting our senses toward the sonic landscape and the spatial surroundings, the film’s aural cues not only capture the menace emanating from the surrounding foothills but also register the “audacity to produce, apply, and effect care despite dark histories and futures” (Hobart and Kneese 3), practices that are based on the felt interdependence between the townspeople as well as with other forms of life.

A trenchant example of this is manifested mid-way through the film, as Miro’s aging mother expresses how she copes with living in this perilous and desolate locale. Although the threat of being attacked in the middle of the night keeps her awake, she tenderly intimates how she and her son have devised a form of communicating—a howling sound—to combat the isolation, anxiety and fear and to care for each other. Although Pérez Limón reads these caring actions as “ordinary affects” performed within the family unit (101), the film, I argue, poignantly charts radical care practices that extend beyond these confines, signalled by the intimate encounters between humans and animals registered in almost every frame and the everyday activities that townspeople continuously perform to preserve communal lands and their local agricultural and food systems. For instance, we see two of the townspeople (Paula and Pani) maintaining the *tortillería*, cranking out fresh tortillas daily for the surrounding hinterlands—despite having once been ambushed and shot while driving their truck—as well as their continuous efforts to restore the now-ruined town’s square. These repeating frames visualise the forms of communal rebuilding and collaborative resistance devised in the face of ongoing dispossession. If, as Deckard suggests, the infrastructures of water resource management and hydropower that rupture peripheral ecologies are made visible by courting hydro-irrealist aesthetics, in *Los reyes*, this optic also proves useful to visualise the precarious infrastructures crafted to sustain communal forms of living in the face of these *proyectos de muerte*.

As Gladys Tzul Tzul argues, the process of rebuilding communal life vis-à-vis the continual forms of dispossession, aggression, and capture fundamentally requires the “reconstruction of landbased communal systems” as well as of collective memory (404). Since, in Tzul Tzul’s view, when a common good is stripped from a community the social relations created through the management of the good extracted also become undone, forms of communal work that manifest in “microscopic” ways through rebuilding pathways, tending to plots of land and sources of water, and the

organisation of communal celebrations help to re-establish the order of communal life (406). In a similar vein, reading the notion of the infrastructural through the prism of Indigenous thought, Anne Spice suggests that the category of “critical infrastructure” mobilised by governments “to transform oil and gas infrastructures from industry projects into crucial matters of national interest” (41) has been contested by communities resisting extractive constructions to point instead to the collectively constructed systems that build and sustain communal life. Appropriating the term “critical infrastructures,” as she further argues, land defenders not only “expos[e] the lie that these projects are creative/productive” but also index infrastructures as interconnected systems of relations that “require caretaking” and “create the grounds” for a commonly-administered life (ibid.). Tzul Tzul’s gloss on community building and Spice’s alternative approach to infrastructure thus capture something useful about these forms of communal care and recovery that García’s camera attentively registers. Through repetitive framing, these small daily acts performed by the townspeople acquire a critical and heightened importance that, as one critic has evocatively suggested, plays almost like the *“Myth of Sisyphus”* filtered through Gabriel García Márquez” (Spector 9). While most of these forms of tending for the land might be characterised by a strict adherence to realism that has become the trademark of slow films, the oft-noted “absurd” and “magical realist” musical montages within the film prove particularly generative for seeing beyond the violent ruptures of social ways of life.

Immediately after the stranded cow sequence, the camera cuts to a wide shot of the half-sunken houses, framed by bare shapes of trees and the intermittent sound of the lapping water. A percussive sound begins to slowly engulf the ambient soundscape. As the soundscape begins to change to softly register this distant sound of the percussion, the image jump cuts to a medium-distance frame of dead a stump that sits in the middle of the ruins of the former *plaza* covered by forest vegetation. With percussion sounds now dominating the aural environment, the frame cuts to an open shot of the now distant *plaza* that reveals the source of the peculiar sound: a young boy appears walking amongst the ruins playing what appears to be a makeshift drum. This same motif repeats itself at different instances throughout the film. We see a second boy sitting in the ruins of a rundown brick wall as he plays the tuba surrounded by water and overgrown foliage; in another moment a boy appears on the upstairs window of a flooded building playing an instrument made from scrap materials. These “ethereal” moments, as one critic notes, add to the “stroke of magic realism” and other-worldliness that tinges the film (Turner). Whilst, following Deckard’s reading of García Márquez’s “hydro-irrealist” tropes, “hauntological qualities” appear in his fiction to “gesture to absolute exhaustion” and a “hydrological rupture in the social metabolism of nature that promulgates an irreversible collapse of the entire ecology” (155), the spectral qualities courted in these surreal sequences appear to figure instead what Anna Tsing calls, “the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present” (Tsing 1). As Tsing argues, “forgetting, in itself, remakes landscapes, as we privilege some assemblages over others” (6). Yet, as she

continues, “ghosts remind us. Ghosts point to our forgetting, showing us how living landscapes are imbued with earlier tracks and traces” (6). The haunting quality of this troupe of children’s solitary wanderings amidst the ruins disrupting the oppressive silence with traditional village brass-band music (*tambora/banda sinaloense*) resurrects memories of the local lifeways submerged with the arrival of the dam and pushes against the amnesiac removal of what was once there. This is further reinforced by the film’s end credits as an old recording of a town’s celebration shows the now displaced children, women and men—some of whom, as the end credits denounce, have died while protesting their unjust relocation—joyfully dancing to the sound of *tambora*.

In the face of looming degradations, the children’s apparitions not only manifest as living traces, memories of the lost and missing, but also as forms of communal meaning that still reside within sacrifice zones. As the extreme climate of insecurity and growing threat of submergence is strongly manifested in the film’s final sequences, as a storm tears through the already waterlogged settlement, García directs the attention to the sounds of the makeshift instruments played by the troupe of boys, drowning out the portentous sound of torrential downpours and gathering thunder. While the sequence moves between static shots of decaying buildings as they fill up with diluvial water, the last frame reveals the now complete junk-band playing in the middle of the derelict *plaza*. As we see them standing within the imperilled wooden structures erected by Paula and Pani and the verdant foliage that has grown out of the ruins, the sequence charts a visual trajectory from depletion and ecological disaster to the deep-seated communal life forms that resist neoliberal erasure. In the following sequences—which echo the film’s introductory frames—Paula and Pani are framed tending to the *plaza* in the storm’s wake, clearing out the debris and laying out bricks to secure the wooden structure, which underpins the laborious nature of their rebuilding task. Miro, again framed roving through the flooded mangrove, narrates the overwhelming anxiety over the devastating fate of the town exacerbated by the severe weather conditions: “I got hit in every direction. I’m trapped here.”⁸ Yet, amid the chaos, he descends from his boat and immerses himself within the vegetal environment, as his whistles (similar to the ones he uses to communicate and care for his mother) reverberate through the verdant mountains, calling for the cow and other stranded animals left in the storm’s aftermath.

However, while these future-oriented endeavours performed by the townspeople signals the primacy the film gives to the sources of communal resistance in the face of environmental loss and protracted violence, García’s concluding vision does not preclude her from showing the ongoing infrastructural collapse of the town, nor does it disavow the calamities to come. In the film’s last scene, to offer one last example, the remaining families sit on Jaime and Yoya’s porch now surrounded by the darkened landscape, teasingly suggesting the advantages of the storm, such as the clear skies and the lovely moon, which, as they say, money cannot buy. “No,” Yoya

⁸ “Todo se me juntó y aquí estoy amarrado.”

responds, “When will it ever? Only nature can give you that,” framing nature away from the instrumentalised logic that undergirds extractivism. As they continue to discuss the upsides of their situation and their plans to repair the *plaza* the next morning, Jaime teasingly proposes that they should proclaim themselves “los reyes de San Marcos” [“the kings of San Marcos”]—fleshing out the meaning behind the film’s title. While this scene could be easily read through a tone of triumphalism against the apocalyptic and expulsive forces of extraction, this moment is soon upended by the sound of gunshots coming from the adjacent mountains. Although the townspeople follow up their conversation and continue to reminisce about the past before a second round of shots is heard, García’s camera pans to capture the fear in their faces as they look deep into the darkness. Opening the shot to frame the isolated dwelling perilously standing against the treacherous night, the lingering image serves as a prelude to the film’s closing titles, which call attention to the brutal consequences of confronting the interests of the state-corporate alliances that seek to uproot them. And yet, by continuing to rest its focus on the still-standing structures and the community-driven efforts to reclaim and maintain these lands, the ending also upends the apocalyptic forecasts angled almost entirely toward catastrophe and ecological depletion.

While *Los reyes* draws attention to the violent despoiling and brutal reshaping of peripheral environments that powers hydro-development, it likewise renders tangible alternative ways of perceiving nature that defy its endless commodification and enclosure. In deploying a contemplative documentary approach that forces us to look attentively at the current struggles over environmental futures, the film responds formally to the extractive calculus that devaluates rural territories and land-based lifeways, carefully registering the alternative forms of socioecological organisation that are currently mobilised to restore, cultivate and affirm life in the face of the behemoth schemes of death and dispossession that continue to proliferate across the Americas. *Los reyes*’s orientation to these neglected ecological entanglements thus highlights the potential of defamiliarised and durational cinematic forms to interrupt the accelerated and growth-driven extractive imaginings that shape our present, as the elongated nature of García’s filmic gaze operates to elicit a critical attunement to different registers of existence that exceed capitalism’s profit-driven confines. Ultimately, the disruption of the fixed social realities and temporal orderings of extraction in *Los reyes* endeavours to bring to focus the accretive and occluded socioecological harms inextricably bound up with capitalism’s rapacious appropriation of environments, offering a window into the overlooked resistances arising from the world-destroying projects of neoliberal developmentalism and urging us to see beyond the extractive-oriented future that capitalist modernity prompts us to envision.

Submission received 19 May 2024

Revised version accepted 22 December 2024

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