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El mar la mar

Joshua Bonnetta, J.P. Sniadecki

Producer Joshua Bonnetta, J.P. Sniadecki. **Production companies** Joshua Bonnetta (New York, USA), J.P. Sniadecki (Chicago, USA). **Directed by** Joshua Bonnetta, J.P. Sniadecki. **Director of photography** Joshua Bonnetta, J.P. Sniadecki. **Editor** Joshua Bonnetta, J.P. Sniadecki. **Sound design** Joshua Bonnetta, J.P. Sniadecki. **Sound** Joshua Bonnetta, J.P. Sniadecki. **Production design** Joshua Bonnetta, J.P. Sniadecki.

Colour. 94 min. English, Spanish.

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The sun beats down mercilessly on all those who cross the Sonoran Desert between Mexico and the United States. Aside from the few people who live here, it's the poorest of undocumented immigrants that make the crossing, who have no choice but to take this extremely dangerous route, followed by border guards both official and self-appointed. The horizon seems endlessly far away and deadly dangers lurk everywhere. It's best to move under the cover of darkness; during the day, being exposed to the heat and sun is enough to make animals and humans perish. Their traces and remains accumulate, fade, decompose and become inscribed into the topography of the landscape, making the absent ever-present as life and death, beauty and dread, hostile light and nights aglitter with stars and promise all continue to exist alongside one another.

El mar la mar masterfully weaves together sublime 16-mm shots of nature and weather phenomena, animals, people and the tracks they leave behind with a polyphonic soundtrack, creating a cinematographic exploration of the desert habitat, a multi-faceted panorama of a highly politicised stretch of land, a film poem that conjures up the ocean.

Hanna Keller

The ebb and flow of the desert

A landscape is always a landscape of time.

Jean-Luc Nancy

In the desert, night is like day – the sky is a roof of light, an illuminated room.

Testimony #3

It is only fitting that a film about the desert should be called 'The Sea'. *El mar la mar*, a stunning, sustained meditation on the time and light of landscape, arrives on the Sonoran shores [Sonora is a federal state in Mexico, -Ed.] to capture the ebb and flow of the desert's vast wilderness – and to discover frequencies of light amidst the fatal forces of an unforgiving and inhospitable land.

Within the fragile folds and contours of a dark, hostile terrain, death lurking in every corner, the camera continually uncovers life, finding moments of the desert's vitality – the clamorous buzzing of insects, the seething whisper of the wind, the sun's brutal and relentless glow. It is not the oscillation between these seemingly opposite forces – life and death, day and night, sky and earth – but their perpetual convergence and co-emergence that *El mar la mar* meticulously follows and invites us to contemplate.

This invitation to look at, but also to look with the landscape – to witness what it sees, to listen closely, to encounter what it keeps and holds – takes the form of a suspension. A pause on the surface of the world. A window that frames what lives on, or in the film's symbolic lexicon that reveals what survives, an echo across 'a landscape still unknown... where only muted voices can be heard'. Like the film's string of sonic reverberations, its arsenal of landscape images suspend us as well: fiery tides illuminated by the radiance of golden embers still burning at nightfall are met with the shimmer of possibility ushered in by the dawn.

El mar la mar is both a cinematic excavation of, and a poetic elegy to, what remains embedded in the subterranean hollows hidden deep beneath – but ultimately rising to – the surface of our visible horizon.

Divided across three sections – 'I. Rio', 'II. Costas', 'III. Tormenta' – the film pairs dramatic long takes that arrest us in the unwavering sublimity of landscape with the incessant ghostly rumblings suggestive of a haunted topography. *El mar la mar* discerningly traverses the edges of perception, moving seamlessly from testimonies of border crossings to the faded but still detectable material traces left behind by those who did not survive. These signs paradoxically mark the presence of absence and remind us repeatedly, though not exhaustively, of the film's investment in shedding light on the things that the land bears and remembers. A beautiful and timely reminder also of how film, at its best, is always invested in new modes of seeing what remains in the dark.

Between things that perish and fade away and the afterlife of those that survive, between the blinding light of the scorching sun and the luminous clarity of the desert sky at night, *El mar la mar* always returns its gaze to the landscape as a source of knowledge and testimony, as a place of revelation, beyond language, where the invisible can be seized and illuminated, even if only for an instant.

Things wither and grow weak over time; things die and disappear, finally settling into the ground. *El mar la mar* is a film that breathes life into such 'dissipated forms', once overshadowed by scale, distance, darkness, and embraces the storm that unfailingly brings an 'affirmation of light'.

Patty Keller, Sahuarita, Arizona, 6 January 2017



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Joshua Bonnetta, born 1979 in Canada, is an artist based in New York who works with 16mm analogue film and sound in various modes of theatrical exhibition, performances and installation. Bonnetta is an associate professor for Film and Video Art and Sound Art at Ithaca College in New York State.



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J.P. Sniadecki was born in 1979 in Marne, Michigan, USA. He studied Philosophy and Film at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan, and Chinese Language and Culture at East China Normal University in Shanghai. He then attended Harvard University, where he earned an MA in East Asian Studies and a PhD in Social Anthropology with Media, which he completed in 2012. J.P. Sniadecki

is an artist, filmmaker, and anthropologist working in both China and the United States. He co-organises Cinema on the Edge, a screening series showcasing independent Chinese film. He currently teaches filmmaking in the Documentary Media MFA programme at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, USA.

Films

Joshua Bonnetta: 2002: *Cathode Aurora* (Video installation, 6 min.). 2004: *Patchwork* (Film installation), *First Snow* (2 min.), *November Light* (2 min.). 2007: *By Grace* (3 min.). 2009: *Parting* (Film and video installation). 2010: *Long Shadows* (12 min.). 2012: *American Colour* (25 min., Video installation, Forum Expanded 2012), *Remanence I – (Lost, Lost, Lost, Lost)* (2 min., Forum Expanded 2013). 2013: *Strange Lines and Distances* (Video installation, Forum Expanded 2013). 2016: *Lantern* (Installation). 2017: *Land of Thin Air* (Video installation), *Low Islands* (Film installation, 65 min.), *Lago* (Sound installation, 44 min., Forum Expanded 2017), *El mar la mar*.

J.P. Sniadecki: 2007: *Songhua* (29 min.). 2008: *Demolition/Chai – Qian* (62 min.). 2010: *The Yellow Bank/Huangpu* (27 min.), *Foreign Parts* (80 min.). 2012: *People's Park/Renmin Gongyuan* (78 min.). 2013: *Yumen* (65 min., Berlinale Forum Expanded 2013). 2014: *The Iron Ministry/Tie Dao* (82 min.). 2017: *El mar la mar*.