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Hearing the Nonhuman: Defamiliarizing Sound and Image in *Lo que soñó Sebastián*

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In 2005, the popular US reality television series *Survivor* chose Guatemala's Petén jungle as the location for its eleventh season. *Survivor: Guatemala – The Maya Empire* opens with a shot of Tikal's Temple IV shrouded in mist. Walking toward the camera from among the ruins, host Jeff Probst theatrically explains that they are “hidden deep” in the rainforest, on the site of a “once-powerful” kingdom, mysteriously abandoned long ago. “Today,” Probst continues,

these jungles are home to exotic and dangerous wildlife, jaguars, poisonous snakes, and crocodiles that lurk in every body of water. It is an unforgiving environment, where extreme temperatures, high humidity, and torrential rainstorms bring even the strongest to their knees.

A sequence of fast cuts of crocodiles snapping their jaws, tarantulas skittering, and vultures tearing at scraps sets the mood for the trials to come.

As the opening sequence underscores, *Survivor's* drama hinges upon a hostile, unspoiled setting. This “unforgiving environment” is framed as the competitors' primary foe: an impassive, awe-inspiring landscape. The place itself is interchangeable. Like the locales that preceded it, *Survivor* presents the Petén as a remote space that is opposed to human life, the ideal testing ground for Americans to prove their ability to endure the enmity of undomesticated Nature. The show's “castaway aesthetic,” Jennifer Bowering Delise has noted, demands that viewers imagine its chosen venues to be pristine sanctuaries that embody “an earlier point in the history of

civilization” (43). The Petén is molded to fit this formula. Probst foregrounds the Maya civilization, but situates it as trapped in the past: “disappeared,” or in ruins. All signs of current human inhabitants are erased. The Petén is figured as an anachronistic space where time has stood still and the nonhuman flourishes. In other words, the perfect staging ground for Westerners to play out “a simulacrum of the colonial adventure romance” (Delise 45).

This territory, in the hands of *Survivor*, is carefully crafted into a telegenic wilderness. Its construction fits Leo Mellor’s observation that “to imagine a landscape as a wilderness has often been, throughout history, a way to render it into a tabula rasa for the imagination, thronged with natural forces and ripe with possibilities –but scythed clear of human presence” (111). Likewise, *Survivor* presents the Petén as an immutable, ahistorical landscape.

Yet the region has been experiencing dynamic change. Guatemala’s northernmost department, the Petén borders Mexico and Belize. Although it is Guatemala’s largest province, it is also its least densely populated. Its location, sparse infrastructure, and lean population has made it an ideal staging ground for transnational cartels, who coordinate smuggling operations up through the border to Mexico. Oscar Martínez has reported that although much of the Petén has been cordoned off as protected land –a state action that intended to protect the rainforest, but displaced the Q’eqchi peasantry– narcotraffickers operate there with impunity.

In addition to the influx of narco families, transnational companies have flocked to the region. Responding to global demand for cheap palm oil, transnational companies have bought up extensive swaths of forest and converted them into plantations. Although the Petén contains one of the largest contiguous tracts of tropical forest north of the Amazon, demand for palm oil has driven rapid deforestation. Oswaldo J. Hernández reports that although most Guatemalans continue to think of the Petén as a lush, uninterrupted forest, in reality, over the past fifty years, three-fourths of the department has been transformed into farmland.

A year before *Survivor: Guatemala* was released the renowned Guatemalan author Rodrigo Rey Rosa directed his first feature film, *Lo que soñó Sebastián [What Sebastian Dreamt]* (2004). Based on Rey Rosa’s eponymous novel published in 1994, *Lo que soñó Sebastián* offers a filmic

imaginary of the Petén that dramatically diverges from the mythic emptiness and immutability put forth by *Survivor*. It brings to screen the jungle's seeming impenetrability, but also its saturation with jostling, opaque, competing interests. It dramatizes the many actors negotiating this space, and the complexity of environmentalist ethics. What most interests me for the delimited scope of this article, is how Rey Rosa's film foregrounds Petén's ecology. Through sound and image, *Lo que soñó Sebastián* figures the Petén not as an easily digestible mise-en-scène or idyll of ecological harmony, but as a dynamic, vibrating field of intensities.

Rey Rosa's Dark Ecology

Lo que soñó Sebastián is an anomalous film in two senses. First, it is one of very few feature films to be shot on location in the Petén.¹ And second, it is an important precursor to the recent boom in Guatemalan cinema, emerging at a time when the country's film industry was essentially non-existent.² María Lourdes Cortés' comprehensive study of twentieth-century Central American cinema points to several reasons for this paucity, including political instability (dictatorships and revolutions) and natural disasters.³ We might add that equally decisive was the lack of state funding and infrastructure dedicated to national cultural production, and the absence of spaces for circulation.

However, over the past ten years this has been rapidly changing. The last decade has seen an upsurge in Guatemalan filmmaking, due in large part to the diminishing cost of equipment (and its subsequent democratization) and the expansion of international festivals that provide venues for filmmakers to showcase their work and recoup costs. Neoliberal demand for authentically "diverse" world cinema has increased, and the isthmus' perceived exoticism has empowered its

¹ The kitschy Mexican-Guatemalan film *El ogro* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1971) was likely the first feature film to shoot

² There are of course exceptions. The seventies saw an increase in Guatemalan documentaries in response to state violence. However, because of censorship these films were scarcely screened (see Cortés 263). Another important exception is Luis Argueta, a Guatemalan auteur whose film *El silencio de Neto* (1994) was widely praised.

³ Citing the work of Edgar Barillas, Cortés underscores that the lack of scholarship and historicizing of Central American cinema has also resulted in its cultural productions lapsing into forget (see 24).

cinematic production as a commodity.⁴ On a regional level, there has also been a deliberate, hard-fought push to cultivate Central American cinema. In 1998, Guatemala's Casa Comal filmmaking collective launched a film festival, Ícaro, to bring regional films to local audiences. Others followed suit, like IFF Panama, founded in 2012. Additionally, CINERGIA (Fondo de fomento al audiovisual de Centroamérica y Cuba), established in Costa Rica in 2004, has operated to foment the production and distribution of regional film. Not only a key venue for financial support, CINERGIA also provides opportunities for professionalization, including workshops and scholarships that support budding filmmakers. Through the coalescence of these initiatives, a transnational space dedicated to the circulation of Central American filmmaking has been established. And as a result, several Guatemalan filmmakers have risen to prominence: most notably Ana Bojórquez, Jayro Bustamante, and Julio Hernández Córdón.

Within this context, *Lo que soñó Sebastián* represents an important and understudied forerunner to this boom. It premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2004, a feat that reflects the film's quality as well as Rey Rosa's cultural capital as an acclaimed author with a far-reaching network. The film is dedicated to Paul Bowles, the celebrated North American writer and composer. Bowles was a close friend and mentor of Rey Rosa's, and helped launch his literary career. As Alexandra Ortiz Wallner has noted, the film's crew reflects Rey Rosa's commitment to artistic collaboration (see 138). The American conceptual poet Robert Fitterman collaborated on the adapted screenplay and the cinematographer is Guillermo Escalón, a Salvadoran filmmaker known for his documentaries of guerrilla groups filmed during the early eighties. What is more, the avant-garde musician Elliott Sharp composed its score. As I will argue further ahead, this collaboration serves the film well, as evidenced by its experimental aesthetic force.

In spite of the fact that Rey Rosa is best known as an author, he was originally interested in film. He studied cinema for two years at the School of Visual Arts in New York in the early eighties, but dropped out to pursue writing (see Gray 164). Incredibly prolific, Rey Rosa has

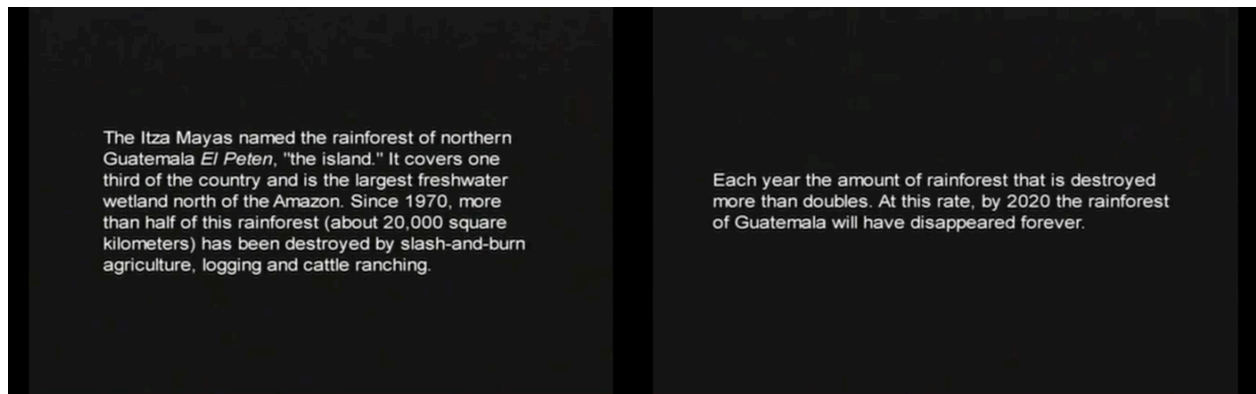
⁴ This echoes market trends in literature. See Arias (25).

published over a dozen novels and short story collections. His work is often periodized as part of Central American postwar narrative, which is defined as literature written from the 1990s on, in the wake of the region's civil wars. Although the violence was presumably over and "peace" had arrived, the postwar era was not what most had hoped. The revolutions had come and gone without bringing the promised changes, and the passage from dictatorship to democracy under neoliberalism brought with it continued inequity, corruption, and violence. Arturo Arias' metaphor for the contemporary moment is apt: the "intoxication with revolutionary utopias" gave way to a "heavy hangover" (22). In contrast with revolutionary optimism, postwar narratives are saturated with disenchantment. Beatriz Cortez has compellingly argued that this predominant tone of detached pessimism can be understood as an "aesthetic of cynicism."

Although in comparison to his contemporaries, Rey Rosa's literature is generally more universal and cosmopolitan (see Ortiz Wallner 137), his work still fits within the postwar paradigm. Many of his novels center on subjects in crisis, who are trying to reinvent themselves in societies that lack clear moral boundaries. This is also the case in *Lo que soñó Sebastián*. Both the novel and the adapted film follow the same plot, which is structured around a classic premise: a man is inspired to withdraw from society into an idealized landscape, to shed the cumbersome trappings of civilization and become more in touch with nature. Sebastián Sosa decides to move to the Petén jungle in order to write. He aspires to create a refuge, so he constructs a house without nails, inspired by his surroundings. He wants his property to be a sanctuary for wildlife too, so he bans hunting. This is what sets the conflict in motion. A caiman and a man are shot dead on his property, and the perpetrators flee the scene. Sebastián suspects the Cajal family, locals who have long made their living by hunting. This pits Sebastián against Roberto Cajal, with both men endeavoring to see the other put behind bars. Sebastián's attempts to bring justice by navigating the flawed law enforcement system lead him to murky moral terrain. The rest of the plot opens up a complex mosaic of the region's competing interests: corrupt authorities, poachers, foreign archeologists, and tourists. The novel enacts Rey Rosa's flare for generic play and disruption, incorporating elements of the fantastic and noir. Ortiz Wallner elaborates that it is

written in a style that “could be called an oneiric realism with echoes of an ambiguous criollista (local Hispanic) gaze” (138).

In an interview, Rey Rosa explained that he felt that he urgently needed to film this project “de cualquier manera” because its setting, the Petén jungle, was fast disappearing and would soon be gone (Martinetto 358).⁵ In the title sequence, the film positions itself as a response to this deforestation. This text is directed at foreign viewers who may not be familiar with the crisis, as it is only included in English in the version of the film for international distribution. This explicit framing of the film as environmentally conscious confirms Adrian Taylor Kane’s assertion that the novel is rooted in the philosophy of deep ecology, which questions the human instrumentalization of nonhuman nature.



Figures 1 & 2. Title sequence sets the ethical stakes. *Lo que soñó Sebastián*.

The film points to several culprits behind the destruction of the rainforest, but it is more interested in a nuanced approach to complicity. Even though the protagonist is an environmentalist and animal rights activist, he too is ultimately figured as complicit in the generalized state of ethical decay. In this sense, *Lo que soñó Sebastián* is not only interested in deep ecology, but is perhaps more aptly situated within what Timothy Morton terms “dark

⁵ Rey Rosa has recently completed production on a forthcoming film based on his short novella *Cárcel de árboles*, which is also shot and set in the Petén. In the interview with Vittoria Martinetto, he goes on to say that although he has thought about adapting his novel *Los sordos* into a movie, there is no such urgency, since the environment in which it takes place, the Guatemalan highlands, is already totally degraded (see 358).

ecology.” Morton argues that ecological art should not perpetuate a romanticized celebration of Nature, but rather be prepared to confront both its beauty and its ugliness. He writes:

Dark ecology puts hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking. The form of dark ecology is that of noir film. The noir narrator begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to discover that she or he is implicated in it. (16-17).

This revelation of our complicity leads us to realize that “there is no metaposition from which we can make ecological pronouncements” (17).

In this vein, *Lo que soñó Sebastián* diverges from other Latin American ecocinema in that it embraces noir and wades through the dark, shadowy layers of environmental thought. It is not didactic; it doesn’t aim to teach best practice environmentalist ethics. It also lays bare the protagonist/environmentalist’s privilege. In contrast with the families that have lived in the Petén as hunters for generations, Sebastián has mobility and is able to adapt to the neoliberal economy. This nuanced approach troubles the notion that there is one “correct” way of being in relation to the nonhuman animal: whether as observer, protector, or hunter.

For the remainder of this piece, I would like to set Rey Rosa’s well-crafted drama aside. Instead, I am going to turn to the question of how the film invents a cinematic imaginary of the Guatemalan jungle, one that is not just defined by the human. As I will explore, *Lo que soñó Sebastián* builds ambience, a sense of world that is not mimetic, but experimentally constructed as a sonic and visual artifact that can be felt as well as perceived. Instead of depicting the Petén as a static environment waiting to be animated or given meaning by human movement, it has something physical about it, even though it only exists on screen. It is this innovative framing of the nonhuman, I argue, that makes *Lo que soñó Sebastián* a particularly stimulating contribution to ecological cinema.

Sound and Space

When thinking about how cinema crafts a sense of place, scholarship often tends to emphasize cinematography above other elements of the filmic experience: detailing the ways in which lighting, lens, and aspect ratio together shape the audience's experience of a space. Equally important, yet often overlooked, is the role of sound. *Lo que soñó Sebastián* uses sound to flesh out a texture of place, plunging the audience into Rey Rosa's fictional universe.

The celebrated avant-garde musician Elliott Sharp composed *Lo que soñó Sebastián*'s original score. Sharp is a versatile performer who has worked with genres ranging from blues to jazz, but is primarily known for his central presence in New York City's experimental music scene since the 1980s. His innovative compositions often manipulate groove and timbre through computer processing: blurring the lines between what is rhythmic and algorithmic, organic and processed. Sharp's score reflects this ludic approach to sound. It includes ambient instrumentals, such as "On the River" and "She Leaves," performed on string instruments. Other numbers like "Nightmare" and "Ranae" are electroacoustic, blending string instruments with synthesizers and processed sounds of animals (like birds and insects) or elements (like fire and water). For the purposes of my argument, it is this inclusion of processed organic sound that is most provocative.

Feature films often forgo ambient sound in favor of music, in order to organize narrative tempo or structure the viewer's affective response. A film score can be used to index themes, communicate emotion, or guide the audience's interpretation of the narrative (see Green 82). Sharp's score does this, but also gives the spectator a feel for the Petén's acoustic ecology. By drawing upon sounds innate to the jungle, and manipulating them to exaggerate or soften them, Sharp crafts a soundscape: an assemblage of sounds that accompanies a particular landscape. A "soundscape" denotes both sound and scenery; the term is a noun that refers to a view of a space as a whole, but also a verb that references "how sound is "scaped" to be distinguishable" (Dairianathan). A soundscape shifts our understanding of what a landscape is: not just a text to be seen, but also a space whose meaning depends upon the coalescence of the senses.

Sharp's score curates the acoustic texture of the jungle in a way that buttresses narrative leitmotifs of anxiety and lawlessness. "Shore Night," for instance, immerses the listener in a claustrophobic cacophony of droning insects, calling birds, and trees rustling in the wind. Mimicking and amplifying the jungle's acoustics, these sounds are layered and sped up. They swirl together, a chorus that is periodically interrupted by one component or another suddenly emerging as identifiable to the human ear. The electronic manipulation of these seemingly organic noises produces a feeling of defamiliarization, intensifying the film's narrative suspense. "Shore Night," we might argue, can be interpreted as fitting Dominic Pettman's definition of *vox mundi*. Pettman proposes that *vox mundi* is not the romanticized "coherent, organic... voice of Gaia" but rather "the sum total of cacophonous, heterogenous, incommensurate, and unsynthesizable sounds of the postnatural world" (8). By incorporating a clamoring chorus of atonal noises –sounds that are disagreeable to the listener's ear– Sharp distances his score from melodic convention and the "normal" listening experience. These unexpected sounds elicit a bodily response, prompting the spectator to viscerally recoil or sit up.

To illustrate how Sharp's experimental score contributes to the cinematic sense of place, I will indulge a somewhat extended close reading of the film's opening sequence. Opening sequences set the tone for what follows, and *Lo que soñó Sebastián*'s prefatory experimentation with sound and point of view places the film within posthuman terrain. These technical choices, I argue, stake its interest in resisting cinematic conventions that reflexively reinforce narratives of human exceptionalism. By foregrounding nonhuman voice and perspective, the ensuing human drama is established as firmly situated in, and intertwined with, an expansive ecology that engulfs and surpasses the human.

The first half of the film's opening credits is shown in silence, superimposed on a black screen. Then, coinciding with the text introducing Rey Rosa, this silence is abruptly broken by a sharp whine. The whine is not immediately identifiable; its source is concealed. We wonder whether it is a "natural," biophonic sound or an "artificial" one generated by an electronic instrument. This uncertainty reflects a property particular to sound: the interpretative gap that

opens up between when we are affected by a frequency, and when we are able to translate it into a recognizable regime of signification. This lag reflects Ana María Ochoa's observation that "acoustic knowledge is located at the nexus of what we are able to make sense of and what is beyond sense making but still affects us" (34). As the whine slows and lowers in pitch, it becomes more legible: the buzzing of mosquitoes in flight, electronically sped up. It is a marriage of the "natural" and the "artificial," a vocalization that is both nonhuman and cybernetic—a sound that collapses the very binaries of natural/artificial, human/nonhuman. The effect is anxiety provoking. Anxiety provoking because we do not totally recognize the sound, yet we recognize it enough. We recognize the sensation of hearing mosquitoes before we see them: when they are near our ears, circling our heads, looking for a place to bite.

This disorienting auditory introduction to the setting has several effects. The first is that it presents the Petén as a space that is overwhelming and antagonistic to humans. This foregrounding of the environs' combative loudness sets up a preemptive challenge to the protagonist's idyllic view of the jungle as a harmonious refuge. The second is that it makes the spectator question her own competence, and distrust her ability to decipher the space on screen. Third, it destabilizes the presumption that auditory perception is universally consistent. The altered speed of the buzzing suggests that the sound we hear is not in fact apprehended by humans, but perhaps by mosquitoes themselves.

Most importantly, the prefatory onslaught of difficult-to-interpret sounds configures the jungle as more than a mere backdrop for the unfolding human drama. The physical properties of sound—the transfer of energy through vibration—breaks down the distance between what is on screen and the viewer. Through sound, the spectator internalizes the cinematic space in her body; they become enmeshed. These sonic intensities give the spectator knowledge of this place; bodily knowledge that exceeds the visual or discursive information afforded by plot, text, or image, but that like Ochoa suggests, affects us yet doesn't quite make sense. The processed biophony indexes that this landscape cannot be considered "Nature" in the sense of something that is "found rather than made" (Outka 45). The processed whine is postnatural: it reveals that nature is

something that is constantly produced and modified, whose supposed “essence” is in fact arbitrary and reliant on supplementarity. This doesn’t make the sound that we hear any less “real,” but rather more multidimensional. It gives the spectator a virtual means of experiencing the landscape in ways that exceed the confines of human perception, thus stretching our delimited scalar and temporal modes of experiencing the world.

The opening credit’s electro-biophonic soundtrack is paired with camerawork that further enacts a nonhuman point of view. During the same introductory sequence, images of the jungle’s flora flash by in fast motion. These shots of the rainforest are not filmed from a single, stable perspective, but with a shaky handheld camera. While the shaky cam is often used to give films an ad hoc documentary feel, in this case, the sped-up shakiness provides the spectator with a dynamic, yet unstable view of the jungle. Like Sharp’s experimental soundtrack, this technique by director of photography Guillermo Escalón also puts the spectator on guard. The jolting images that flash by of lush greenery are not intended to be filler ambient shots. Rather, this stylization suggests that the jungle cannot be captured as a stable, digestible image. It isn’t until the first scene of the film that we understand why the shaky cam is deployed in this way.



Figure 3. The Petén’s foliage zips by, blurry and out of focus. Extreme close-up shots deprive the viewer of a transcendent, birds-eye view of the landscape, and develop a sense of claustrophobia and limitation. Lo que soñó Sebastián.

After the opening credits, the first shot is a close-up of a mosquito, perched on a mosquito net. We watch as it jumps off and takes flight. Assuming the mosquito's point of view, the handheld camera simulates the insect's trajectory, bumping gently into the netting as it tries to find its way to the human beneath. This scene clarifies that the disorienting, frenetic sequence prior was also filmed from the mosquito's subjective view. We retroactively realize that our introduction to the jungle –through sound and imagery– was through an insect's frame of reference. The mosquito's current object of attention is our narrator, Sebastián, who lies sprawled under the net. Finding its way through the netting, the handheld camera floats over the protagonist, scanning his body from high, oblique angles. Eschewing traditional motion photography's reliance on stable mounting as well as cinema's favored focus on the face when introducing protagonists, this sequence presents the narrator as he might be perceived by an insect: a series of fragmented body parts.



Figures 4 & 5. Sebastián (Andoni Gracia) is introduced as an object of the mosquito/camera's desire. The nonhuman point of view decenters the face, and instead presents the subject as an assemblage of different pieces of the body. Lo que soñó Sebastián.

Upending the conventional correlation of the first person perspectival camera with an anthropomorphic gaze, *Lo que soñó Sebastián* begins by privileging the nonhuman point of view. Although we hear Sebastián begin to narrate through a voiceover, the camerawork contradicts his protagonism, introducing him not as a subject, but as a vulnerable object of our more-than-human gaze. He is codified as an object of desire, or perhaps more precisely, as a vulnerable object of our appetite: prey, flesh, a piece of meat. The voyeuristic “killer cam” shooting style,

commonplace to the horror genre, is used to develop the sense that he is under siege by an unseen threatening force.

Rey Rosa often works within the genre of the thriller –most notably, in his recent novels *Los sordos* (2012) and *Fábula asiática* (2016)– and has argued that all novels ought to be thrillers in that they should thrill their readers (Maristain). We could read the techniques that I have outlined above –the disquieting music, and use of shaky or killer cams– as cinematic strategies that merely intend to infuse suspense into the film. And of course they do fulfill this function, propelling the narrative forward and injecting viewers with nervous excitement. But, as I have argued above, these techniques should also be read as part of a broader cinematic strategy: one that intends to foreground the nonhuman in innovative ways, and give agency to the environment, not just to human stories.

Becoming Insect

The initial perspectival shots align the audience with insects. By upending our expectation that the subjective camera normally adopts a human point of view, the film begins by prompting viewers to recognize the anthropocentrism of most cinematic narratives. Although the camera subsequently switches to a more traditional and coherent human point of view, there continue to be periodic disruptions in which it unexpectedly reverts to those of nonhuman animals. For instance, on occasion it abruptly switches to inhabit a diegetic monkey or parrot's POV, interludes that remind viewers that there are other ways of seeing the unfolding drama, and other narratives to be told. This technique establishes that the subject position itself is variable, not just across different (human) characters, but across species.

As a final note on *Lo que soñó Sebastián's* opening sequence, it is particularly striking that the mosquito is the creature whose perspective is foregrounded. When thinking about how to disrupt the humanist binary that partitions humans from animals, scholars have been inclined to prioritize positive forms of interspecies intermingling. This focus on favorable interactions or

productive forms of making kin, however, ignores relationships with less pleasant animals. As a result, animal studies has tended to sidestep creatures that are widely perceived to be disgusting, obnoxious, or invasive: like insects, snakes, and other aggressors. Pushing back against this inclination, Franklin Ginn, Uli Beisel, and Maan Barua argue that it is important to also think about multispecies entanglement “when the creatures are awkward [or] when togetherness is difficult” (114).

The abrasive strangeness of our encounters with pests pushes us to think beyond idealized notions of interspecies solidarity, and instead consider forms of commingling that include miscommunication, conflict, and friction (see Ginn, Beisel, and Barua 116). The relationship between humans and insects is difficult to romanticize. Our biological entanglement highlights human vulnerability; the mosquito’s appetite for human flesh troubles the idea that relationships across species are statically hierarchical, with nonhumans as victims and humans as perpetrators.

Our dislike for mosquitoes also indexes the difficulty of practicing a truly nonanthropocentric ethics: one that aims to protect life throughout the ecosystem, without taxonomic bias. Conservation efforts inevitably articulate some animals as worthy of protection (the “charismatic megafauna” that appeal to broad publics), while others are determined to be expendable nuisances.⁶ Ursula Heise calls this “the logic of species preferences” (36): the notion that an ethics of care vis-a-vis the nonhuman world is largely determined by what humans empathize with or value. Within this context, *Lo que soñó Sebastián*’s foregrounding of the mosquito establishes a preemptive critique of Sebastián’s stance against poaching. Although as an environmentalist he works to protect the wildlife on his property by outlawing poaching, he simultaneously endeavors to engineer his house so that it is biosecure –free of insect life. His efforts to manage mosquitoes points out a conundrum that environmentalists find themselves in, that even when they desire to be “in nature,” this experience of “nature” depends upon the exclusion or eradication of “natural” life. Thus Sebastián’s conflictive cohabitation with

⁶ Heise notes that according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, as of 2008, all of the known mammal and bird species had been evaluated for endangerment status, in contrast with only 1,250 of a total of 950,000 insect species (see 22).

mosquitoes dramatizes how even environmentalism paradoxically coexists with efforts to control the environment, contain life, and engineer human security against that which we deem disruptive.⁷

The question of human and nonhuman togetherness is central to the film, a question that is not treated with sunny optimism, but framed as an awkward, uncomfortable coexistence. The cinematic foregrounding of the mosquito's frame of reference initiates the audience sonically and affectively to this space, allying us with the insect while also introducing the protagonist as just another animal inhabiting the Petén. This enacts a dual movement: it recognizes the importance of environmentalism and animal rights in this era of ecological crisis, but also signals the impossibility of assuming a just environmentalist stance –the desired fiction of a neutral position from which to speak. Instead, the first few minutes of *Lo que soñó Sebastián* suggest that ecological thought must follow the difficult mandate “to figure out how to love the inhuman: not just the nonhuman (that’s easier) but the radically strange [and] dangerous” (Morton 92). In other words, to appreciate that pesky intimate stranger, the mosquito.

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⁷ For more on the intersection between security, species, and power, see Ahuja.

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