

Alamar

Mexico 2009

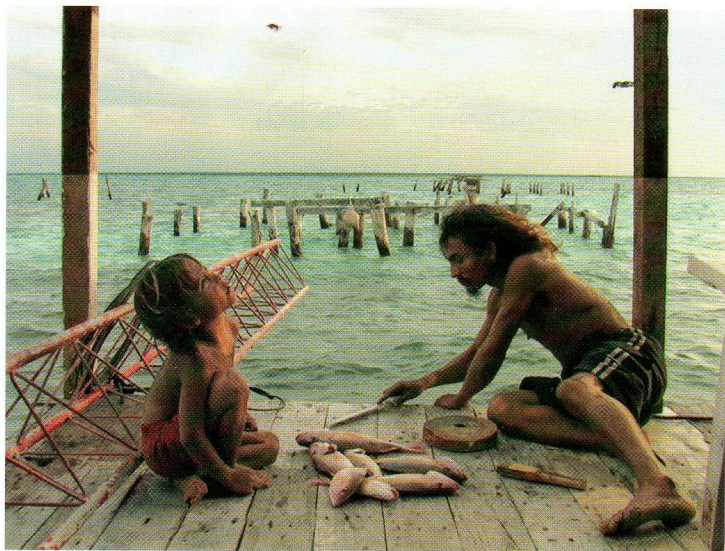
Director: Pedro González-Rubio

With Jorge Machado,
Roberta Palombini

Alamar would seem to be a prime example of slow cinema with a vengeance. This first fiction feature from Pedro González-Rubio (who takes an impressively hyphenated credit as director-screenwriter-cinematographer-editor) tells the minimalist tale of a boy and his fisherman father sharing a shack perilously poised above the Banco Chinchorro, the largest coral reef in Mexico. And made by Mantarraya, the successful production company helmed by Carlos Reygadas (*Japón, Battle in Heaven*), *Alamar* might be expected to boast the provocations of the maestro in tandem with his excruciatingly long takes. Against all the odds, *Alamar* is an absorbing and engaging hymn to the most selfless of loves: that of a devoted parent for a child who must, inevitably, leave him.

Innocent of incident, *Alamar* is a docu-fiction hybrid in which nothing happens many times. And the viewer would do well to remember one choice piece of advice offered in the film itself: "You need patience to be a fisherman." Arriving in the shack, little Natan almost slips into the sea, but comes to no harm. Later he barely heeds his father's wise advice to steer clear of the crocodiles lurking near his feet. Father and son befriend a beautiful white egret only for it, simply and disappointingly, to disappear into the limitless ocean. Slowly and patiently Jorge trains the five-year-old in the pleasures and perils of this enduring Eden: the fish whose "big teeth" could bite off a little finger, the snorkel that requires the child to "blow really hard" to expel sea water. By the end, in an ecstatic underwater sequence, Natan is expertly navigating the depths.

Negotiating risk (for the child as for the viewer), *Alamar* also offers a new and challenging take on ecology. Although the setting is a natural park, the rich marine life is hardly protected from these traditional fishermen. Not content to marvel like tourists and filmgoers at the site's otherworldly beauty, Jorge and his 'father' Matraca impale lobsters and dispatch barracuda they have landed with a blow to the head. And the primitive living conditions contain some less picturesque wildlife: at one point González-Rubio's camera slowly tracks a cockroach that will



Life aquatic: Natan Machado Palombino, Jorge Machado

later be served up to the egret. In spite of the apparent synergy between the little family and the ocean that encompasses it, then, nature proves finally indifferent to man. The white bird will fly off, unresponsive to the boy's calls, teaching him a necessary, if unwanted, lesson about loss.

Indeed, as if in awareness of the oldest moral of the pastoral genre – *Et in Arcadia ego* – death is shown to stalk this paradise. Father and son play with a crab on the beach before the latter pronounces it "dead already". The perfect jade sea is studded with bare poles, reminders of long-lost houses once as full of life as the one Jorge and Natan have painted buttercup yellow and whose floor is littered with scales from laboriously cleaned fish. Entrails are thrown to the crocodiles waiting patiently below or to frigate birds circling anxiously above.

But *Alamar* is vibrant and positive too, much more so than many of the dourly inexpressive low-budget features we have come to expect from Latin America. Rarely has cinematography proved more luminous (see *Alamar* on a big screen if you can). Apricot sunsets give way to the whitest of sea foam and bleached-blond coral sand. And frame composition is immaculate. The egret, named Blanquita by the boy, is first introduced craning her unfeasibly long neck against a tropical atoll in the far distance. More often González-Rubio offers extreme close-ups of hands and feet: the former folded placidly in a bus, the latter inching their way perilously down a rough tree trunk or up an unexpected metal pylon. And surely there has been no more supportive

family than these three generations of males schooling each other (schooling themselves) in survival skills.

Finally *Alamar* is fiction: the family is not quite what it seems, and the charismatic Jorge, invariably stripped to his shorts, is no noble savage. He is, like his bilingual son, competent in Italian (a pre-credit sequence shows him in Rome); and the knowledge he transmits to Natan takes the form of Latin bird names as well as Mayan botanical terms. But whether fact or fiction, *Alamar* is a revelation: a film as fragile (and as beautiful) as a house built over the sea. ♦♦ Paul Julian Smith

CREDITS

Director

Pedro González-Rubio

Producers

Jaime Romandía

Pedro González-Rubio

Screenplay

Pedro González-Rubio

Director of Photography

Pedro González-Rubio

Editor

Pedro González-Rubio

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Production Companies

Xcalakarma,

Mantarraya

Producciones

With the support of

Reserva de la Biósfera

Banco Chinchorro,

Instituto Italiano de

Playa del Carmen,

Razonatura A.C.,

CONANP, Langosteros

del Caribe, Cooperativa

Banco Chinchorro,

Cooperative Andrés

Quintana Roo

Line Producers

Manuel Carranza

Kim Ley

Production Co-ordinator

Fiorella Moretti

Post-production Supervisors

Øyvind Stauren

Joakim Ziegler

Underwater Photographers

David Torres

Alexis Zabé

Soundtrack

"Unidad" – Fausto

Palma; "Dualidad" –

Daniel Slotnik, Marco

Castro, Juan Andrés

Vergara, Agustín Bernal;

"Trinidad" – Diego

Benlliure, Uriel

Esquenazi;

"Caminando" – Janja

Sound Recordist

Manuel Carranza

CAST

Jorge Machado

Jorge

Roberta Palombini

Roberta

Natan Machado

Palombino

Natan

Nestor Marín

'Matraca'

Matraca

Garza Silvestre

Blanquita

Dolby Digital

In Colour

[1.85:1]

Subtitles

Distributor

New Wave Films

SYNOPSIS Mexico, the present. Roberta, who is Italian, wakes up her five-year-old son Natan. She is separated from the child's Mexican father, Jorge. The latter arrives to take the boy away. After a bus and boat journey, Jorge and Natan come to a house on stilts in the sea and are greeted by grandfather Matraca. Jorge and Natan paint their wooden house. The father and grandfather go spear fishing and sell the resulting lobsters on a bigger boat. They later go line fishing and spend time cleaning their catch. A white egret visits the house and is named 'Blanquita' ('Whitey') by the boy. When they go to clean the boat on a neighbouring island, Blanquita flies off. She returns only to leave once more and this time it is for good. Natan launches a message in a bottle that tells in pictures the story of his stay.

He is upset because he must soon leave his father, but is last seen playing with his mother in a park in Rome.