

RÉQUIEM NN

UN FILM DE JUAN MANUEL ECHAVARRÍA



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A film by **JUAN MANUEL ECHAVARRÍA**

(Colombia / Canada, 2013, 67 min. HD)

A Fundación Puntos de Encuentro / Lulo Films Release



SYNOPSIS

RÉQUIEM NN is a film about a ritual of resistance of the people of Puerto Berrío, Colombia — people who have lived continuous cycles of violence for many decades.

The recovery of bodies from the Magdalena River, their burial, the favors local townspeople ask of the souls of the NN (No Names), and the baptism of these unknown corpses is a collective ritual that has taken place for over 30 years.

The town of Puerto Berrío sits on a bend in Colombia's Magdalena River. For over 30 years, local townspeople have fished out the remains of victims of violence drifting downstream.

Ordinarily, these unidentified corpses, known as NNs (No Names), would be destined for a mass grave. However, for decades, local townspeople have adopted these bodies and given them names; they decorate their tombs and bring them water, gifts and flowers. In exchange, it is believed that the living are awarded protection and special favors. Some people who adopt the lost souls even baptize them with names from their own family, thereby finding comfort for losses of their own.

Through this collective ritual, the people of Puerto Berrío say to the perpetrators of violence: *In our community we don't allow your victims to disappear; we may not know who they were, but they will become a part of us.*

With *Réquiem NN*, artist Juan Manuel Echavarría, whose work addresses the ways in which we respond to violence, takes his camera into a community that restores the value and dignity of life while confronting bitter cruelty and loss.

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DIRECTOR'S NOTES

With my photographic work in Puerto Berrío (2006–to date) I focused on documenting the tombs of the NNs. But then, I realized I needed to shift my attention to the townspeople to continue to piece together the story of Puerto Berrío and the adoption of the NNs.

As I got to know the people better, I was inspired to make this film about their lives. In November 2010, I was chosen to show my photographs of the NN graves at the inauguration of the town's cultural center. That exhibition allowed the community to realize the dimension of their ritual. It also opened doors for me in the town. In a society torn apart by a long history of violence, such as Puerto Berrío, people have a great need to tell their stories and be heard. Some of these are the protagonists of this film.

The shooting was accomplished over five visits to Puerto Berrío with a small professional crew. Most essential to the success of our work was that we were all thoroughly captivated by the stories we began to hear. Beginning to end, the film took two years to complete.

This film is dedicated to the people of Puerto Berrío who participated in its making:

LUIS CARLOS GAVIRIA, a fisherman, who has navigated the waters of the Magdalena River for many years. He has lost two brothers to violence in Puerto Berrío.

HUGO RAMÓN ANTONIO MORALES, the gravedigger and keeper of the cemetery.

BLANCA NURY BUSTAMANTE, mother of seven children, takes in laundry at home and cleans houses. Her daughter Lizeth and her son Jhon Jairo have disappeared.

HERNÁN MONTOYA, the Soul Keeper, conducts a procession every evening during the month of November to pray for the Souls in Purgatory, especially the NNs.

JAIR HUMBERTO URREGO, a salesman, adopted an NN and baptized her Gloria.

MARÍA DILIA MENA DE FAJARDO adopted a female NN and baptized her María de los Angeles, asking her to be her daughter's guardian angel.

MARTHA CORREA, a devout follower of the Souls, has an altar at home, with candles and saints, as well as photographs of friends and relatives who have died violently. She has also adopted NNs.

JESÚS ENRIQUE VALENCIA transported the dead on his tricycle in the '80s and '90s witnessing the peak years of violence in Puerto Berrío.

THE SETTING



When the paramilitaries came into the Middle Magdalena region to fight the guerrilla groups at the end of the 1970s, the mid-sized town of Puerto Berrio stood at the center of the conflict. Enduring uninterrupted cycles of violence, the town became the place where local citizens recovered unknown bodies coming downriver.

Every year during the month of November, when the Catholic Church commemorates the Souls of the Dead, the cemetery doors open at midnight and a man in a black cape – the Animero, or Soul Keeper – invites the faithful to follow in procession, carrying candles in prayer for the souls of the departed to obtain eternal rest – known in the Latin liturgy as *Requiem Aeternam*. As the Soul Keeper has said: "There are more graves with NNs in the cemetery of Puerto Berrio than there are regular tombs of townspeople."

The practice of adoption of NNs is anchored in a long-held belief that those souls who are in purgatory have the power to intervene in favor of the living. Recognizing the desire of the NNs to find a place of rest, and providing a sense of respect in the face of violent death, the ritual stands as an expression of humanity.

Réquiem NN focuses on the daily lives of some of the adopters and the stories behind some of those tombs marked NN.

CREDITS

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Lulo Films and Fundación Puntos de Encuentro

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Dedicated to the Persons in Puerto Berrío who made this film possible:

Blanca Nury Bustamante, Mother of two disappeared children

Jair Humberto Urrego, Adopter

María Dilia Mena de Fajardo, Adopter

Martha Correa, Adopter

Hugo Ramón Antonio Morales, Gravedigger

Hernán Montoya, Soul Keeper

Luis Carlos Gaviria, Fisherman

Jesús Enrique Valencia, Deliveryman

Carlos Vega, Chief Fireman

Juan Carlos Rivera, Forensic Physician

DIRECTOR'S BIO



Photo: Ricardo Armas

JUAN MANUEL ECHAVARRÍA was born in Medellín in 1947. He wrote two books, "La Gran Catarata" (1981) and "Moros en la Costa" (1991), before turning to photography in 1996 when he began to investigate the violence in Colombia through art.

His photographs have been exhibited in different museums in Colombia and in towns like Mampuján (Bolívar) and Puerto Berrío (Antioquia). Internationally he has shown his work in many different places such as the Biennale of Sydney, Australia (2012); the Venice Biennale, Italy (2005); the Mois de la Photo, Montreal, Canada (2011); Kumu Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia (2011); Museum of North Dakota, Grand Forks, USA (2005); among others.

"La Bandeja de Bolívar: 1999" was his first video; then "Guerra y Pa" (2001) and "Bocas de Ceniza" in 2003. His videos have been featured in the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, USA (2009), the Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris (2006); MoMA, New York, USA (2005) and many more.

From 2006 to 2012 he worked on "Novenario en espera", showing the transformation through time of the NN tombs of Puerto Berrío. *Réquiem NN* (2013) is his first film.

The Fundación Puntos de Encuentro (2006) initiated by Juan Manuel Echavarría, has the purpose of preserving the memory of the Colombian war through art with projects like "THE WAR WE HAVE NOT SEEN. A Historical Memory Project" (2007-2009), "Los Tapices de Mampuján" (2008-2009), and the documentary *Réquiem NN* (2013).