

# CIELO

A Film by Alison McAlpine  
(Canada/Chile, 78')

Press Notes - February 2018



Cielo is a cinematic reverie on the crazy beauty of the night sky, as experienced in the Atacama Desert, Chile, one of the best places on our planet to explore and contemplate its splendour. Director Alison McAlpine's sublime nonfiction film drifts between science and spirituality, the arid land, desert shores and lush galaxies, expanding the limits of our earthling imaginations. Planet Hunters in the Atacama's astronomical observatories and the desert dwellers who work the land and sea share their evocative visions of the stars and planets, their mythic stories and existential queries with remarkable openness and a contagious sense of wonder. A love poem for the night sky, Cielo transports us to a space, quiet and calm, within which we can ponder the infinite and unknown.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

The unforgettable Chilean sky and the remarkable characters we filmed, and their relationship to the sky, is the heart of Cielo. These desert dwellers and scientists who live and work in the Atacama Desert- their stories, their reflections, their humour and humanity and the endless beauty of the sky- were and are my continual inspiration. So few of us look above and pay attention to the stars or planets in our daily lives; what would it be like to live among these extraordinary people in this otherworldly landscape whose gaze is totally directed upward?

Cielo is also an exploration of what a story can be. The unfolding of our narrative is more associative than logical. We reveal with juxtapositions of image and sound- for instance, the intimacy of a human moment vis-à-vis the epic scale of the night sky. Cielo is an invitation to slow down, reflect and rediscover our world, offering, I hope, the audience an evocative space in which to think and imagine for themselves. Or even experience a moment of transcendence, what photographer Robert Frank calls, "the poetry behind the surfaces of things".

## **DIRECTOR'S TECHNICAL NOTES**

### Time-lapses and Cameras

How can you possibly capture the depth and limitless beauty of such a night sky within the limits of a picture frame?

We've seen so many time-lapses before and they are usually very fast, appearing like special effects or fireworks. There is no time to feel or enter the image. I wanted to re-invent time-lapses so that the rhythms and textures felt human, natural.

Shooting the night sky was a continual process of exploration. We photographed most often 5-7 days before or after the new moon or when there was an astronomical event, like a lunar eclipse. We shot short exposures of 4-6 seconds. I was after simplicity, images that felt raw and alive. I did not want dolly shots. Most often we used a tripod, at times we used a simple motion control head which slowly followed the moon or the milky way.

During the night we used a Sony A7s for shooting time-lapses or filming with characters. At times we also used an Atomos Shogun. When filming by day we used a Sony FS7.

### Sound and Music

How do you reveal the silence of the Atacama Desert, the driest desert in this world? Parts of the desert are like Mars, if there is life it's beyond the pick-up of any microphone. Yet this silence is an essential part of star gazing in the Atacama Desert, a profound silence which

inspires contemplation, reflection and for me, extraordinary joy. And what are the sounds of the stars, of the universe?

Sound was extremely important throughout our process: the natural sounds of the desert; the different atmospheres of each locale; the wild and wonderful sounds in the observatories, howls and purrs as these giant beasts came to life at sunset. Vents and domes opening, telescopes sliding, grinding into position, opening upward, turning, photographing, searching, a dance until dawn. We used Schoeps and Neumann microphones, recording in mid-side.

Initially, I imagined the film without music, feeling the soundscape was rich and could carry the film. Yet when we came to our rough cut, we felt music was essential. I heard acoustic music, a grammar of sound distinct from the electronic world of the observatories. I wanted music which has its own narrative form, music that feels like part of our innermost being. "Film as dream, film as music", Ingmar Bergman says, "goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of the soul."

### Organic Effects

As the film was evolving in the editing room, we began looking for imagery that evoked the stars and planets macroscopically. We looked at NASA images which are beautiful but familiar. CGI was unaffordable and not what I imagined anyway. "Tree of Life" became a reference for us. We'd create organic effects for "Cielo"! I watched the Vimeo segment about special effects legend Doug Trumbull's process. I did some research and went about, with complete innocence, gathering a crew to shoot the "creation of the world" in three days! The dream became a possibility thanks to the extraordinary generosity of Frédéric Chamberland, Steadicam operator and owner of a Phantom camera. We storyboarded and planned each set up precisely. We then arrived at Frederic's studio and improvised using studio lighting, glass, paints, ink, dust, milk, all organic materials, shooting in 2000 and 1000 frames/sec to create the organic effects in Cielo.

In postproduction, we enhanced our imagery with a colour treatment, subtly adding visual effects, working towards an aesthetic that felt natural, non-digital, human. At times we added layers of star imagery we shot in Chile.

## **PEOPLE/LOCATIONS**

Roberto Garcia, storyteller, man who flies, Catarpe

Stéphane Udry, planet hunter, La Silla and Paranal Observatory

Mercedes Lopez and Néstor Espinoza, planet hunters, Las Campanas Observatory

Casiano Ardiles and Lilian Rojas, algae collectors, Los Pozos, Huasco

Raúl Adriazola , miner, Inca de Oro

Jorge Rojas, algae collector, young man cooking, Los Pozos, Huasco

Mario Salas Schered, photographer of UFOS, Requeña, Huasco

Cipriano Castillo and Gabriel Castillo, cowboys, Andean mountains Elqui Valley

Francisco Pepe, planet hunter who sings, La Silla Observatory

## **CREATIVE TEAM**

**Alison McAlpine (Writer/Director/Producer, Second Sight Pictures)** - Alison's roots are in poetry, which she began writing as a teenager, publishing in her early twenties. At a writing workshop in Banff the novelist Alistair MacLeod described her work as film poetry. Soon she discovered theatre in Ireland, writing highly visual poetic monologues which were performed in Dublin. In Canada, Alison formed a theatre company and wrote and directed plays that were presented at festivals in Canada, Ireland and France. She was encouraged towards cinema and received a commission to write a TV Opera based on a play she had written. The mid-length film *SECOND SIGHT* (2009), "a nonfiction ghost story," was screened at more than 35 international film festivals. She had two BBC Commissions, versions of "Second Sight". "Ghostman of Skye" was "Pick of the Day" or "Critics Choice" in every UK newspaper. *CIELO* is Alison's first feature film. [www.alisonmcalpine.com](http://www.alisonmcalpine.com)

### **Carmen Garcia (Executive Producer, Argus Films)**

Carmen Garcia produces documentary films exploring and questioning social, political and cultural issues from a humanistic perspective. Her company, Argus Films, has a large experience of filming on all continents and counts with a team of seasoned filmmakers and collaborators who have won many awards for their work.

### **Paola Castillo (Co-Producer, Errante Producciones)**

Director and Producer of acclaimed Chilean documentaries and international documentaries such as *Beyond My Grandfather Allende* (Documentary first prize, Cannes). Executive Director of CHILEDOC, which helps distribute Chilean documentaries. Paola has also been an invited

to serve on juries and conferences at many festivals such as IDFA, DOKLeipzig, It's All True etc.

**Benjamin Echazarreta (Director of Photography)** - Born in Paris and based in Santiago, Benjamin's work as a Director of Photography includes A FANTASTIC WOMAN (2017), REY (2017), SEX LIFE OF PLANTS (2015), GLORIA (2013), EL CIRCUITO DE ROMAN (2011), MOZART'S SISTER (2010), NAVIDAD (2009), HINTERLAND (2007, Tiger Award), 1,2,3 WHITEOUT (2007) and L'EVANGILE DU COCHON CREOLE (2004).

**Andrea Chignoli (Editor)** - Based in Santiago, Andrea has worked as a film editor since 1995. Her filmography includes THE DESERT BRIDE (2017), THE BLIND CHRIST (2016), NO (2012, Academy Award nominee, Best Foreign Language Film), VIOLETA WENT TO HEAVEN (2012, Sundance World Competition Jury Award), CIRCUMSTANCE (2011, Sundance Audience Award, U.S. Competition), POST MORTEM (2010), THE GOOD LIFE (2009, Goya Award, Best Foreign Film) and TONY MANERO (2008).

**Phillippe Lauzier (Music Composer)** - Philippe Lauzier is a Montreal based musician dedicated to the art of improvisation. He has toured Europe, North America and Australia with groups like Saint Laurens, Quartetski, Toiture and Not the Music, as well as playing concerts with the musicians Alexandre St-Onge, Cléo Palacio-Quintin, Isaiah Ceccarelli, Martin Tétreault, Kim Myhr, Franz Hautzinger, Xavier Charles, Jim Denley, Tatsuya Nakatani among others. Phillippe also creates sound installations and music for films, contemporary dance and theatre.

**Miguel Hormazábal (Sound Design/Supervision)** - Miguel's numerous credits include THE DESERT BRIDE (2017), NERUDA (2017, Fenix Award Nomination, Best Sound), EL CLUB (2015, Fenix Award Nomination, Best Sound), NO (Academy Award nominee, 2013) (2014), Violeta se fué a los Cielos (2013); POST MORTEM (2010) , MACHUCA (2004, Ariel Award Nominee).

## CREDITS

Writer, Director, Producer	Alison McAlpine (Second Sight Pictures)
Executive Producer	Carmen Garcia (Argus Films)
Co-Producer	Paola Castillo (Errante Producciones)
Producer, Marketing and Distribution	Sean Farnel
Editing	Andrea Chignoli
Director of Photography	Benjamin Echazarreta

Music Composer	Philippe Lauzier
Sound Supervision/Design	Miguel Hormazábal
Timelapses	Alison McAlpine Benjamin Echazarreta Cristian Valenzuela Diego Delanoe
Sound Recording	Andres Carrasco Rodrigo Salvatierra Carlo Sanchez Farías Claudio Vargas
Organic Visual Effects	Phantom® cameras by <a href="http://frederic.ca">frederic.ca</a> Philippe Toupin - Supervision VFX Mathieu Laverdière – Director Photography Alexander Storm- Asst
Drone Photography	Ariel Marinkovic, Martín Cruz, X-Cam.cl
Narration	Alison McAlpine
Narration Recording and Coaching	Catherine Van Der Donckt
Timelapses Consultant	Babak A. Tafreshi
Musicians	Philippe Lauzier Pierre-Yves MARTEL
Post-Production Sound Re-recording Mixer, Editor of Direct Sound Sound Editing Foley Post-Production Image Colourist On-line Editor and VFX	Filmo Studios Mauricio López Ivo Moraga Sole Vargas, Ivo Moraga Post-Moderne Charles Boileau Étienne Beaupré
Credits (Cont'd...)	

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This film could never have been completed without the support, generosity and enormous creative contributions of my collaborators.

Please see full Credits: [cielo-thefilm.com](http://cielo-thefilm.com)

## **PRESS**

“Cielo: A beautiful film!! Photography, sound, structure, subject matter - enough to lift the spirits out of any earthly trough. A moving film in all senses of that word.” - Walter Murch

“Seen on a big screen, these images — photographed by cinematographer Benjamin Echazarreta — have a transporting power that comes close to approximating what it must be like to actually stand in Atacama, gazing up in awe.” - Hollywood Reporter

“Les étoiles, les nébuleuses, la Voie lactée, c’est qui semble avoir ensorcelé la cinéaste qui veut nous communiquer de manière sensible la poésie, la stupéfiante beauté du ciel par des images prises par des caméras Sony Time-Lapse. Le résultat ressemble à une symphonie où la lune et les étoiles voguent sur une mer bleue qui se situe au-delà des montagnes et des plaines.” - 24 Images

“No planetarium could hope to replicate the awe-inspiring spectacle that is Alison McAlpine’s Cielo, a documentary screening at the 2017 New York Film Festival.” - Culture Trip

“Fantastic. CIELO is like SAMSARA meets PARTICLE FEVER... It is very much my jam.” - Jordan Hoffman

Among the 142 films featured at the latest Montréal International Documentary Festival, one of the most memorable was Cielo, the first feature film by Canadian director Alison McAlpine. Set in the Chilean Atacama Desert, Cielo is an exploration of the night sky’s hold over the people who live in the driest desert in the world. - McGill Tribune

New York Film Festival 2017, “Cielo”, Among the Highlights- Talking Movies, BBC World News

“The documentary film Cielo is set in the Atacama Desert of Chile. I put Cielo on my “must-see list” after seeing extracts from the film at the press conference for Montreal’s RIDM film festival. The film is full of absolutely stunning images of the desert, and night skies full of more stars than you could imagine. And the Milky Way! Just stunning! In time-lapse sequences, the heavens seem to be rotating. The occasional shooting star zips by.” - Mostly Movies

“Alison McAlpine nous entraîne dans un voyage poétique, ludique et profond à la fois, à la rencontre des astronomes et des habitants. Dès qu’on lève les yeux vers les étoiles, les questions, existentielles ou concrètes, fusent et la cinéaste les pose sans gêne à ceux qu’elle croise. Une quête spirituelle portée par des images superbes.” - Film Documentaire



“Cielo est composé de contre-plongées phénoménales. Des plans lents, pourtant en accéléré, du ciel étoilé qu’avale le désert au fil des heures, jusqu’à engloutir la lune. L’ensemble des prises de vue sont empreintes de la subjectivité d’Allison, qui n’apparaît jamais à l’écran, bien que toujours présente derrière la caméra. Sa voix off incarne une voix intérieure qui réunit les personnages en un infini dialogue avec le ciel.” - L’heuristique

“El documental de Alison McAlpine navega entre la ciencia y la espiritualidad, entre tierras áridas, costas desérticas y la visión de galaxias que atraen nuestro imaginario de terrestres como la luz atrae a las mariposas nocturnas... Cielo nos permite viajar tanto al desierto de Atacama como al espacio infinito.”- Radio Canada International

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