

San Diego Latino Film Festival—Part 1

Films on social life, past and present, in Mexico, the US and Peru

By Kevin Martinez and Toby Reese
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After 10 days of screenings, the 24th annual San Diego Latino Film Festival came to a close March 26. Films from Mexico, Cuba, Spain, Venezuela, Colombia, Canada, Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, Peru, Honduras, Brazil, the US and other countries were shown.

Perhaps more than ever before, international bonds—and borders—find their way into the various films. The connections are occasionally explicitly drawn, and in other cases, the realities of our present world force their way into the art but do not find their fullest expression.

Many of the works are limited in their ability to explain what is behind the sorrows or inspirations of their subjects. With many artists, there is a timidity, an evasiveness or simply the inability to grasp the nature of the contradictions in which people find themselves.

What has happened in the world since the festival a year ago? In many countries the political establishment has shifted to the right. Donald Trump has unleashed a reign of terror in immigrant communities, kidnapping and robbing children of their parents in broad daylight. The goal is to get working class communities accustomed to the sight of heavily armed police taking everyone away as they please. What is being tested on immigrants and refugees today is a taste of what the entire working class will face tomorrow.

Opposition to Trump and his administration is no doubt alive and sincere in the artistic milieu. However, the artists and intellectuals must come to realize that opposition to Trump means opposition to the social system that produced him—capitalism. It should not be forgotten that the Obama administration deported more immigrants than any other administration in American history, and expanded all of George W. Bush's wars in the Middle East, and launched new wars in Libya and Syria, killing hundreds of thousands of people.

The present conditions in Latin America, especially the extreme divide between rich and poor, point to the central responsibility of US imperialism in wreaking havoc in the region over the last century. The plight of its political and economic victims, the refugees and undocumented, is the result, first and foremost, of American capitalism. Did any of that find reflection at the festival? Were names named, so to speak? Yes and no.

To the extent that artists are able to lift the veil on this reality, they do so in a limited fashion. Questions of race, gender and sexual identity still predominate.

Art at its most meaningful has the ability to connect human beings in a profound manner. At a time of unprecedented crisis, with the ruling classes of the great powers, above all the US, threatening humanity with the disaster of war and dictatorship, there is an objective need for art that affects millions and millions, that speaks the truths they urgently need.

We are confident that the same impulse that gives rise to walls and war is producing a movement toward the abolition of all walls and borders, in

other words, world revolution.

Farewell Ferris Wheel

The US documentary, *Farewell Ferris Wheel*, from directors Miguel Martinez and Jamie Sisley, is a humane and nuanced look at the dying carnival industry and its efforts to stay in business by employing migrant workers using the H-2B guest-worker visa program.

The film evidently took six years to make and follows a group of Mexican seasonal workers as they travel from southern Mexico to Texas, Louisiana, Maryland and Virginia. Given the depressed economies on both sides of the border, the seasonal workers are an ideal choice for the carnival employers.

The camerawork on the film is intelligent and intimate in regard to its subjects. We get a sense of the rhythm of the workers' lives and the complexity of the political and economic issues simply through the editing of the sights and sounds. *Farewell Ferris Wheel* is in part a typical "talking heads"-style documentary, in which numerous experts address the camera. It also, however, includes more spontaneous portions, where the unfolding reality forms the drama.

The Mexican workers toil hard and complain little, since there is no one to complain to. They are given work for the summer season, assembling and tearing down giant carnival rides, and then provided transportation back to Mexico. The conditions they are forced to live under are poor, they sleep in dilapidated trailers and have to do without electricity and water for days at a time. The workers reason that as bad as things are, it beats unemployment back home.

One of the surprising things about the documentary is not only the fact that it humanizes the workers, which is almost a given, but also the bosses as well.

One of the carnival bosses, Jim, travels to Washington, DC to lobby congressmen and women on behalf of small business. He tells the camera that further regulations and increases in wages would bankrupt him, and given the nature of global capital, he is probably right. He and the assembled small business owners are so much small fry compared to the real rulers in Washington—the financial oligarchy.

As one of the immigrant rights advocates tells the filmmakers quite correctly, there is no one to lobby on behalf of undocumented immigrants. Beautifully shot and edited, *Farewell Ferris Wheel* proves to be a commendable film and essential viewing for anyone who still thinks immigrants are "stealing" jobs and destroying the country.

La Casa Rosada (The Pink House)

Peru has been involved in an ongoing civil war since 1980, costing the lives of some 70,000 people. The main belligerents have been the Peruvian state, backed by US imperialism and the Shining Path, a Maoist

offshoot of the Peruvian Communist Party. Little remains of the guerrilla group, which advocated “armed struggle” and terrorism against the state. The government replied with wholesale massacres of innocent civilians and the suspension of democratic rights.

The appearance of the film, *La Casa Rosada*, is welcome. It is inspired by true events and despite a modest budget, effectively dramatizes a horrific period in Latin American history.

The film opens in 1982 in the town of Ayacucho. Martial law has been declared and government troops are able to stop and search anyone suspected of being a “communist terrorist.” As Adrian (Jose Luis Adrianzen), a professor, leaves his job at the university, we see soldiers march by singing about how they are off to kill communists for fun. Various Shining Path slogans with hammers and sickles adorn the colonial-style architecture.

Adrian has his two children to look after, Juan (Ricardo Bromley Lopez) and Maria (Shantall Lozano Rodriguez). Adrian is detained by government soldiers who accuse him of listening to a clandestine radio broadcast from Shining Path. He is “disappeared” and brutally tortured at a site called “La Casa Rosada,” or the Pink House.

He is urged by his torturers to confess to being a member of Shining Path, or at least to snitch on those who are. Adrian’s children are forced to go into hiding with an aunt.

The scenes where Adrian is tortured by the police and military are well done without being excessive. We see the thugs who form the backbone of fascism. Even if a prisoner does confess, as one peasant artisan does, it does not spare him or her from execution.

As a suspense film, *La Casa Rosada* is on point, but the social picture is somewhat lacking. We never find out what motivates Adrian, other than love for his family. Why was he attracted to Shining Path? The film does not say.

Other scenes feel a bit hackneyed, such as when Adrian and his family are saved by family connections at crucial moments. The religious component of the film, including Adrian’s vision of his deceased wife in heaven, does not help either.

To its credit, *La Casa Rosada* does not draw an equals sign between Shining Path and the Armed Forces of Peru, but there is no explanation either as to what each side really represented. In the case of Shining Path, it should be stated emphatically that this was not a Marxist party and had nothing to do with the fight for socialism.

Shining Path was a petty bourgeois nationalist movement that utilized individual terrorism. The group was disdainful of a mass mobilization of the workers and peasants. The result was a bloodbath for the Peruvian working class, as the film attests to.

At the end of the public screening in San Diego, director Palito Ortega Matute explained that the authorities in Peru did not want *La Casa Rosada* made because it pointed fingers at the police and military. Despite a “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” in 2000, which blamed the military for numerous massacres and disappearances, the same figures remain in place.

Los Jinetes del Tiempo (Time Riders)

From Mexico comes an intriguing documentary from director Jose Ramon Pedroza, about a group of rural actors who want to recreate the meeting between Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa in Mexico City on December 6, 2014, the centenary of the Mexican Revolution.

The actors are not peasants, but their descendants, agricultural workers. The biggest strength of the film is not so much its emphasis on the past, inspiring as that is, but on the problems of the present. Many things in Mexico have changed, but the same exploitative class structure that existed 100 years ago remains.

The actors themselves are cognizant of this contradiction. They assert that NAFTA has replaced the hacienda system of old. We see Dow

Chemical signs dotting the countryside and there are jabs at Carlos Slim, the telecom boss and richest man in Mexico.

As the troupe of actors make their way on horseback across southern Mexico into the capital, they are given an official police escort along the way. Dressed in US-supplied combat fatigues, we also see the Mexican military do its best impersonation of a revolutionary army. They have far more in common with Porfirio Diaz (the last military dictator of Mexico before the 1911 revolution) than with Villa and Zapata.

When the caravan finally makes it to Mexico City, there are thousands of protesters in the street demonstrating against the government of Enrique Peña Nieto, a fitting event to mark the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution. Many young people are in attendance with signs demanding justice for the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa.

At this point, allowing a caravan of actors to recreate Zapata and Villa’s meeting is apparently too much for the city officials and the group is denied access to the Presidential Palace. The Mexican bourgeoisie greets its own revolutionary heritage as if it were an uninvited ghost from beyond. The group is finally allowed to take pictures months later but only in the dead of night, with no fanfare.

These scenes are the most powerful but are not explored adequately. Moreover, to the extent that the creators of the film address the sources of Mexico’s social ills, the latter are blamed almost exclusively on the “gringos” from up north. There is more than a whiff of Mexican nationalism here.

The question remains: why is Mexico still dominated by exploitation and oppression over a hundred years after Zapata and Villa met in Mexico City?

The strength of *Los Jinetes Del Tiempo* is that it blends history into the personal and the dramatic in a way that reminds us that the past is never past. One feels certain that Mexico is ripe for a far greater revolution. (See also, “One hundred years since Zapata and Villa took Mexico City—Part 1” by Eric London)

El Castillo de la Pureza (Castle of Purity)

Taking its title from an essay by Mexican poet Octavio Paz on artist Marcel Duchamp, *The Castle of Purity* (1972) was the feature film debut of Mexican director Arturo Ripstein. A disciple of Spanish surrealist Luis Bunuel, Ripstein (born 1943) has been one of Mexico’s most well-known filmmakers for several decades and is still at work. The festival paid special tribute to him and screened several of his films.

In *The Castle of Purity*, Claudio Brook (*Viridiana*, *The Exterminating Angel*, *Simon of the Desert*) and Rita Macedo star as Gabriel Lima and his wife Beatriz. They live in a dilapidated house presumably in Mexico City. They have a son and two daughters. The patriarch isolates his family from the rest of the world in the hope they will be protected from “the evil nature of human beings.” He tyrannizes his family through strict diet, exercise and study. The family business is making homemade rat poison.

Gabriel goes to the market to sell his poison to vendors who are switching over, however, to a cheaper, industrial brand of pesticide. The rest of the family is cooped up at home and the mother does her best to comfort her children with games.

Whenever his wife or children get out of line, Gabriel beats them mercilessly and locks the offending party in a cage. Gabriel lashes out at Beatriz for not being more supportive and visits prostitutes when he leaves the house. Eventually, the children, along with their mother, try to escape.

Although meant to be a “subversive” look at the institution of the family, *The Castle of Purity* left this reviewer cold and unmoved. There is a serious misanthropy to the whole work, with Gabriel’s likening of humanity to rats underscoring the point. The work becomes heavy-handed after a while. The director almost seems to revel in the violence and backwardness he seeks to criticize. The film explains little about Mexican

society, much less the world at large.

If *The Castle of Purity* is really meant to be an attack on conservative, bourgeois society then why are the police the saviors in the end? This reviewer has only seen this one film by Ripstein, but if this is what he was up to in 1972, one has reason to be skeptical about his subsequent development.

To be continued

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