

San Diego Latino Film Festival 2016—Part 1

Films from Argentina, Spain and Guatemala: *El Movimiento, Hablar, Ixcnul and Tras Nazarin*

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28 March 2016

This is the first of three articles on the recent San Diego Latino Film Festival.

The 23rd annual San Diego Latino Film Festival was held March 10–20, featuring over 100 films and documentaries from all corners of the Spanish-speaking world.

In his introduction to the film festival catalogue, Ethan van Thillo, the founder of the event, writes, “I am saddened by recent events, but at the same time hopeful that the festival brings us together to fight for justice and equality. ... Despite ongoing divisive national political rhetoric, we feel that our film festival continues to serve as an excellent platform to facilitate more positive, engaging dialogue in ways that are more constructive to solution based thought.”

This is obviously a reference to the presidential campaign of the fascistic Donald Trump and his attacks on Muslims and threats to build a wall between the US and Mexico. Van Thillo’s remarks are no doubt well-meant, but the realities are considerably more complex and urgent. Trump is feeding off the anger of millions at the economic realities and their disgust with Barack Obama and the Democrats, who have presided over ever-deepening social immiseration. The artistic-intellectual answer to Trump is not “constructive dialogue,” in the first place, but work that penetrates the surface and exposes the myths peddled about the existing system by *both major parties, the media and the entertainment industry*.

One has to be frank. In so far as the festival, its organizers and some of the works screened lean toward identity politics—emphasizing sexuality, gender, racial or ethnic difference at the expense of more central facts of social life, such as class—this does not help get to the heart of the present situation, nor remedy it. Other films, fortunately, dealt more forthrightly with important problems.

San Diego is an immense city (eighth-largest in the US and second-largest in California) afflicted, like every other major urban center, with severe social inequality. Together with its sister city in Tijuana, Mexico (the combined regional

population is nearly 5 million), it is a modern-day metropolis.

To what extent did the conditions that people face every day find expression in the films represented at the festival? The situation for poor and working class people throughout Latin America is dire and the region is on the verge once again of social explosions. Did any of that find reflection at the festival?

Given time and other constraints, we were not able to see everything that sounded intriguing, but nonetheless we were able to gravitate toward the more serious fare. Happily, many of the films lived up to their promise, others not so much.

Even in the better films, and there were more than a few, a concrete understanding of history is still largely lacking. In particular, the history of the 20th century and its impact on Latin America were not as deeply explored as one would have liked. Castroism, the guerrilla movements, the defeats suffered by the working class in the 1960s and 1970s, the fascist military dictatorships—all of this has inevitably left its mark on the artistic psyche.

It is therefore not surprising that there is an understated (and occasionally *overstated*) pessimism in some of the works. Socialism is clearly still seen in artistic circles as “the god that failed.” Nonetheless, there were hopeful signs that consciousness is changing among the artists and especially audience members.

El Movimiento (The Movement) is an “experimental” film from Argentina set in 1825. Benjamín Naishtat’s film opens with a man staring into the distance for some five minutes; it is like a film by Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni on a very bad day. The man, it turns out, belongs to a gang of soldiers who torment an old peasant for selling them moldy bread. They tie him to the end of a cannon and blow his head off.

Even though the work only lasted 70 minutes, it felt interminable and pretentious. Despite the striking cinematography and stark black and white images, Naishtat’s film is depressing and self-indulgent. The “movement” is led by a charismatic figure who is actually a bandit, and his

followers are nothing more than drunks and cutthroats.

Why even bother setting *El Movimiento* in 1825, one wonders? The political subtext—that all revolts lead to further barbarism—is trite to say the least. The anachronistic music and inexplicably slow pace do not help matters either.

Hablar (Talk) from Spain is an interesting film featuring 20 interconnected stories in a city square all done in one 79-minute take! Various characters and stories emerge as people address the camera directly. Some are humorous and others more serious. A man is trying to meet his date, who keeps leaving him clues where to follow via cellphone. A son is arguing with his mother over his pornography addiction. A man in a surgical mask and gloves keeps telling the audience about an impending apocalypse.

We see two female street cleaners arguing back and forth; one of them almost tears down a Podemos (the pseudo-left party in Spain) poster out of frustration, but the other is a supporter. A singer sings an amusing song about the banks, the highlight of *Hablar*. A mother with child has to shoplift with her friend in order to eat.

Collectively, it may not sound like much, but something of the anarchy of everyday life comes through. Although shooting a film all in one take could be a gimmick, here the pace flows naturally and the action seems realistic.

That being said, there were also scenes not as successful. It seems doubtful that on any given night various people would make long-winded speeches on the spur of the moment—and do people really yell into their phones and get into arguments so everyone can hear them? Still, the film, which presumably took months and months to rehearse and create, is impressive and its subject matter, people of all ethnicities and social backgrounds, even more so.

Ixcánul is a beautiful and heartbreaking film from Guatemala. For those who think cinema should be about guns, explosions, and endless pop culture references, this will probably bore them to tears—their loss! Living on the side of a volcano and picking coffee beans with her mother and father, Maria is a 17-year-old Mayan girl whose marriage to the landowner has been arranged. She is in love, however, with Pepe, a fellow coffee bean picker who dreams of leaving for the US. Pepe impregnates Maria and abandons her. When Maria is forced to tell her parents her situation, they decide to get rid of the baby lest her betrothed find out and kick them off the plantation.

Every scene is constructed meticulously and artistically. The sequences on the volcano look like they take place on another planet. Director Jayro Bustamante never condescends to the peasants, all of whom one assumes are non-professional actors—his camera is one of compassion.

The tremendous backwardness and poverty of the indigenous population has a source, the semi-feudal relations that still exist in 21st century Guatemala, a semi-colony of the US. Although *Ixcánul* is not explicitly political, there are moments that suggest a deeper cause of all the suffering.

Ironically, when Pepe and his friends are out drinking, he talks about how in America everyone has cars, the electricity never runs out, and they have clean water. But of course tell that to people living in Flint, Michigan, or San Bernardino!

Without giving away too much, the conclusion of *Ixcánul* is as deeply moving as it is tragic. The question remains: which way out for the oppressed of this world? And here we reach the central weakness of a film like this, because it is almost taken for granted that Maria and everyone else will return to their old lives. Might not the volcano also erupt?

From Spain comes a documentary entitled *Tras Nazarin (Following Nazarin)*, an account of the making of *Nazarin* (1959), directed by Luis Buñuel. Combining archival footage and photography with contemporary interviews, *Tras Nazarin* (directed by Javier Espada) recreates what made Buñuel one of the most compelling filmmakers of all time. Included are interviews with filmmakers such as Mexican Arturo Ripstein and actress Silvia Pinal, who featured in a number of Buñuel's films.

Buñuel, originally from Spain, was part of the surrealist movement. After the defeat of the Spanish Revolution (during which he adamantly supported the Stalinist Popular Front line) and the consolidation of fascism in Spain, Buñuel lived in exile in Mexico where he made one third of all his films.

Nazarin is one of the least well known of Buñuel's films, which include *Un Chien Andalou*, *Viridiana*, *Belle de Jour*, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and many others. In fact, we have never seen it, but—judging by the documentary—it deals with the absurdity of religion in Mexico, a familiar topic for Buñuel who was an outspoken atheist and one-time member, as noted, of the Spanish Communist Party.

Obviously it would help to have seen the original film before watching the documentary, but the latter holds up remarkably well on its own. Many of the towns shown in the film with difficult to pronounce Indian names are still around today, but are now paved with roads and have cars everywhere. In the late 1950s when the film was made these same towns look as if they are from the Middle Ages and have dirt roads and horses.

The medieval and obscurant character of the Catholic Church comes through in the film, as well as the beauty and vitality of the Mexican countryside. The pounding of the drums from the town's musicians stays with the viewer long after the film is over.



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