

## San Diego Latino Film Festival 2016—Part 3

# From Cuba a grim drama (*La obra del siglo*) and from Argentina a political thriller (*El Clan*) and a road trip (*Camino a La Paz*)

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*This is the third and final of three articles on the recent San Diego Latino Film Festival. See also, part one and two.*

## *La obra del siglo* (The Project of the Century) from Cuba

A number of Cuban films premiered at this year's San Diego Latino Film Festival, including *La obra del siglo* (The Project of the Century), directed by Carlos Quintela.

Combining archival footage and a drama shot in black and white, the work tells the story of a nuclear power plant begun in Juragua, Cuba, in 1976 and finally abandoned some 20 years later, in the mid-1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Juragua facility and surrounding town were intended to supply Cuba with energy in the face of the vicious and vindictive embargo imposed by the US and also become an important cultural center. Today, the operations lie in ruins, and the central story concerns three generations of men trying to make sense of their disappointment and loneliness.

The black-and-white imagery tends to accentuate the overall feeling conveyed by the locale today—that of a ghost town. The only productive activity apparently associated with the area in recent decades was the planting of coconuts, shown in a clip from the 1990s. There was no economy to speak of after the project of developing nuclear power—the industry the whole community was built for—came to a halt.

Although *La obra del siglo* is intelligently acted and produced, and to some extent no doubt accurately reflects certain moods in Cuba today, it is not a very satisfying effort, politically or aesthetically. The film concentrates on the minutiae of the men's lives, everything from their failed relationships to their pets. They get into fights and argue constantly. These difficulties must have something to do with their lives having been spent on a project that is rusting away and contributing nothing to society.

The filmmakers, one assumes, have something more in mind than the failure to build one power plant. Depicting the “Project of

the Century” as lying in ruins certainly has wider implications. How much Abel Arcos (co-writer) and Quintela (co-writer and director) understand of the history and social character of the Cuban Revolution, as well as its relationship to Stalinism and imperialism, remains an issue.

A clip of Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet cosmonaut and the first human in space, is shown almost nostalgically. This imagery is contrasted with that of an apartment block in Cienfuegos, a city on Cuba's southern coast, as one of the characters remarks that it looks like a rocket about to blast off. We hear rumbling and see “smoke”—and the next shot takes in a group of workers fumigating to stop the spread of dengue fever. Cuba, it would seem, has regressed from space-age technology to fighting swamp diseases.

There is not much of a plot. The oldest man does not approve of his son's new girlfriend, the grandson misses his ex, the grandfather yells and makes everyone around him angry, etc. One of the archive clips shows him considerably younger as an actor on a television show. Better days presumably.

During a dinner shared by the three men and the son's girlfriend, the grandson gets a telephone call from the woman in his life. The conversation ends unhappily, and he throws the phone at his grandfather's most prized possession—a fish tank. A compassionate moment: instead of anyone throwing a fit, the grandfather quickly tends to his fish, while the son and girlfriend start to clean up the mess. Something comes through about the difficulties of poverty and relationships that seems to be understood by all those involved.

There are a few humorous moments: at one point, everyone thinks the old man has stopped breathing, but he is merely sound asleep. However, the overall pace and look of the film is rather gloomy, and one grows tired of the goings-on after the two-hour mark.

## *El Clan* (The Clan) from Argentina

Argentina's *El Clan* (The Clan) is a fictional version of the true story of the Puccio crime family. The film, directed by Pablo Trapero (*Crane World*, 1999), was also the country's submission to the Academy Awards for best foreign picture.

The Puccios were an upper-class family led by Arquimedes (Guillermo Francella). The latter was an intelligence officer in the "Dirty War," the military dictatorship's reign of terror against the working class in the 1970s and 1980s in which thousands of left-wing activists, trade unionists and students were "disappeared" and murdered as part of the CIA-orchestrated "Operation Condor."

As the 1980s wear on and Argentina makes the transition toward "democracy," the Puccios are forced to resort to kidnapping people from rich families and extorting them for money. Francella is effective as the fascist patriarch leading everyone in prayer and behaving in public like a good citizen and loving father. With his piercing blue eyes and calm demeanor, he looks and sounds like death.

*El Clan* is most effective when it highlights these contradictory traits and demonstrates how reactionary the family institution is. Alejandro (Peter Lanzani), the son, is a star rugby player who is oblivious at first to the nature of the family business. He slowly and tragically becomes involved.

It is only a matter of time before Arquimedes is caught and the other family members are arrested, as well as their accomplices. Now, Alejandro decisively turns against his father, and we see the whole family edifice come crashing down.

Although its story is intriguing and its action fast-paced and effective, *El Clan* as a whole feels like a missed opportunity. Director Trapero tends to brush aside the historical-political elements and emphasizes the abduction scenes, done in a sensational style to the accompaniment of rock music. This sort of thing, however, has been done to death in countless Hollywood films, and while here the events are not especially gruesome, they seem a bit tasteless at times.

The characters are not sufficiently developed, and the family drama could have made for a better movie. Certain scenes do ring true. In one, Arquimedes visits an old friend in jail, someone who was nabbed for the same types of crimes the Puccios have been carrying out. The friend asks how long the new democracy will last. He advises Arquimedes to rely on his old military contacts to avoid arrest, since in reality they still wield the power. It would seem the Puccios must have lost their military protection at some point.

### ***Camino a La Paz* (Road to La Paz), also from Argentina**

The title *Camino a La Paz* (Road to La Paz) has two meanings: "La Paz" is the capital of Bolivia, but it also means peace.

The film stars Rodrigo De la Serna (*The Motorcycle Diaries*, 2004) as a 35-year-old unemployed man named Sebastian living with his girlfriend in Buenos Aires and jamming with his rock band. People are constantly calling the house and asking for Magellan Taxi, and Sebastian is obliged to tell them they have the

wrong number.

After his girlfriend becomes pregnant and loses her job, Sebastian decides it is time to get serious. Now, when people call the house asking for a taxi, he replies, "At your service!" One of his regular customers is an old man named Khalil, a devout Muslim.

*Camino a La Paz* is humane and genuinely comical, something of a rarity.

Khalil eventually asks Sebastian to drive him to La Paz, 1,650 miles away, to visit his brother, so they can make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Khalil also needs the help of a dialysis machine and medicine to stay healthy, making the journey no small feat. The two take on additional passengers, including a stray dog and a young woman. Various twists and turns complicate what is essentially a road-trip movie, albeit a highly enjoyable one.

The scenes where Khalil worships and prays with fellow Muslims, who are no different from members of any other major religion on earth, are especially memorable. To show Muslims as human beings has sadly become something of a politically courageous act in America at present.

Although they initially cannot stand one another, Khalil and Sebastian become devoted friends before the journey is over. Khalil even dubs Sebastian a "true Muslim." This may not be the most earth-shattering material, and we might have seen it before, but *Camino a La Paz* proves a warm and uplifting experience. The soundtrack by Vox Dei, a rock group from Argentina in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was also sublime and revelatory.

We felt this film to be the most hopeful of those we had the pleasure of seeing at the San Diego festival. Despite great differences in age, culture, religion, and nationality, and of course, socioeconomics (to a point), we are all essentially the same, Francisco Varone's film argues.

And on that note, we recognize the critical value of film and art in this age of political repression and tension, and increasing authoritarianism. The best films allow us to see the world through other eyes and from different vantage points. They make us appreciate and consider the enormous complexities of other people's lives and the difficulties they have to get through every day, and they can also suggest that another way of organizing life, more human and just, is both possible and on the horizon.

*Concluded*



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