

San Diego Latino Film Festival—Part 2

Conditions in Latin America, treated concretely...and more abstractly

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This is the second of three articles on the recent San Diego Latino Film Festival. Part 1 was posted April 3.

Sin Muertos No Hay Carnaval (Such Is Life in the Tropics)

From Ecuador comes Sebastian Cordero's *Sin Muertos No Hay Carnaval*. The English-language title is *Such Is Life in the Tropics*, but the original in Spanish comes from a piece of the film's dialogue, and translates roughly as "You can't have a carnival without a few deaths."

The film opens with shots of the Ecuadorian jungle as a group of tourists engages in bird watching. The seemingly idyllic locale is violently disrupted when a shot rings out and a young German boy falls dead before his father's eyes. The shot came from a group of hunters, wealthy landowners, who run away, but not before being identified by a witness.

So begins *Sin Muertos No Hay Carnaval*, but the main strand of the plot concerns the landowners' plan to evict a community of squatters from a shantytown they own. Talia, the makeshift community, is on the outskirts of the capital, Guayaquil, and will be sold by the wealthy Emilio Baquerizo (Daniel Adum Gilbert) once the squatters are cleared out.

Emilio and his bourgeois family rely on the services of a corrupt lawyer, Lisandro Teran (Andres Crespo Arosemena), Talia's self-appointed authority. Teran collects money from the town, promising to improve conditions with lighting, but is actually going to sell everyone out after receiving his cut from the land sale. Arosemena does an excellent job, like all the actors in the film, in portraying a certain social type.

Some of the town's residents becomes suspicious of Teran and refuse to pay until he explains what is really happening. Celio Montero (Diego Catano Elizondo), one of Talia's residents and boy friend of Teran's stepdaughter, Samanta (Antonella Valeriano), publicly confronts Teran on "pay day" and earns the wrath of the lawyer and his goons.

Teran negotiates with Emilio and his family. The patriarch, Don Gustavo Miranda (Erando Gonzalez) refers to the poor as "rabbits" and asks Teran how many will die if they begin forced evictions. Teran responds two or three, prompting Don Gustavo to comment light-heartedly, "You can't have a carnival without a few deaths."

Emilio is eventually arrested for the death of the German boy, although it becomes clear that he is taking the fall for the real perpetrator. Don Gustavo hires Teran to defend Emilio. When the latter is taken away in handcuffs, Teran pleads with the cops, "Are the handcuffs really necessary? After all, he is a public figure." The cops oblige. The scene rings true.

Don Gustavo is also the owner of the Guayaquil football (soccer) team

and lashes out at the club for losing a game. In that sequence and others, we see how the bourgeois really function behind closed doors; we see their coarseness, vulgarity, boozing and drug taking. Their entire moral universe revolves around money. Don Gustavo lectures his sons, "Necesita plata para tener plata," or "You need money to make money." Much of the richness of the language, unfortunately, is lost in translation.

Cordero makes the case that maintaining the high level of social inequality is only possible through large amounts of violence, carried out by the state in collusion with gangster elements.

If there is a criticism to be made, then perhaps *Sin Muertos* wraps up its story a little too neatly. Moreover, a number of sequences are reminiscent of other films. The accidental shooting, for example, strongly brings to mind a plot device in Alejandro Inarritu's *Babel* (2006).

However, these are minor points. The considerable strength of the film is the manner in which it honestly explores various segments of Ecuadorian society. That social honesty, combined with its cinematography, editing and gripping pacing, make *Sin Muertos* not only one of the best films shown at festival, but also one of the better films shown in the US this year.

Oscuro Animal (Dark Beast)

Director Felipe Guerrero's *Oscuro Animal (Dark Beast)* tells the story of three women attempting to escape violence in the war-torn Colombian countryside by finding refuge in Bogota. The film is entirely without dialogue, and that is probably not for the best.

Rocio (Marleyda Soto) is a villager who flees her home after finding it ransacked by troops, although the guilty party is never made clear—the government, paramilitary forces or FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the guerrilla movement)? She flees into the wild before we find out.

La Mona (Jocelyn Meneses) is abused and raped by her boyfriend, a paramilitary member. After a miscarriage, she stabs him to death while he sleeps and takes off before his comrades take revenge.

The final character is Nelsa (Luisa Vides Galiano), a paramilitary fighter herself who becomes disillusioned after killing a group of farmers. She provides sexual favors to her commander, before she, too, escapes to the city.

That is more or less the plot of *Oscuro Animal*. The long takes are tedious, and even agonizing. The film never makes clear what the civil war in Colombia is about. For that, one would need dialogue and an actual story with characters who have some inner life. In this case, the audience

is left to guess anything and everything.

Striking images, by themselves, do not add up to significant art. They have to be charged with meaning and convey some larger-world context. Filmmaking, generally speaking, is not just sight, but sound as well. What are we left to make of the sequences here other than “all women suffer”?

But what is the source of this suffering? Who is responsible for the bloody war in Colombia, the longest-running conflict in Latin America? None of this can even begin to be answered by *Oscuro Animal*'s approach. It has some remarkable visual moments here and there, but they are few and far between.

Tempestad (Storm)

The Mexican documentary *Tempestad (Storm)* is a poetic look at state violence against two women by director Tatiana Huezo. One of the women, Miriam, is never shown, but she narrates her story against a backdrop of images of contemporary Mexico.

The camera work is slow and patient as we travel across the countryside, seeing buses and terminals, and the ever-present police and their checkpoints. Equipped with US-supplied military gear and hidden by ski masks, they resemble death squads. These images, along with the continuous rain, make for a melancholy ride, but there is an almost cathartic quality to the proceedings.

The director was wise not to show Miriam's face and, instead, films images of young, traveling women. Any one of them could be kidnapped (or worse) by criminal gangs, or police, the film seems to suggest. While the “long take” has become something of a cliché in “independent” film, here the result is quite moving and impressive, if a bit startling at first.

Miriam explains how she was working as a customs officer in an airport, until she was accused of trafficking narcotics. She maintained her innocence, but was thrown in an “autonomous” jail run by prisoners and gangs. She recounts how she was forced to pay bribes to *pagadores* (payers) to ensure her safety by collecting money from relatives. She recounts torture and corruption on the part of the police, who themselves function as gangs.

The second story, intercut with the first, features Adele, a circus performer, whose teenage daughter was kidnapped a decade prior. The scenes of carnival life and young children playing as acrobats provide much-needed relief. Adele's story is perhaps even more heartbreaking. She recounts how her investigation led her to believe her daughter's kidnappers were human traffickers working with police.

The film is difficult to watch and even write about, in no small part because the violence here is *suggested*, causing the viewer to pause and consider what they are hearing. These are stories of unimaginable suffering that deserve to be told. However, to what extent does such a “lyrical” approach add to our understanding of the drug war in Mexico? Is there a danger of simply piling on horror after horror, without providing any deeper analysis of what is going on?

At times, *Tempestad* felt a bit long, abstract and passive. And yet there was something to the final shot of the film, an underwater scene pointing to the sunlight breaking through above the surface of the water. Does this signify some sort of light at the end of the tunnel?

For these moments alone, *Tempestad* is a film one can recommend, but not without some reservations. Again, concrete historical and social information is what is missing here. The working class is not just a victim, it can also fight back.

Death by a Thousand Cuts

Death by a Thousand Cuts, directed by Juan Mejia Botero and Jake Kheel, is a documentary focusing on the death of a Dominican park ranger. But its broader subject is the illicit charcoal trade in the neighboring countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. What comes to light, above all, are the irrationality of national boundaries and the terrible social inequality prevalent in both countries.

The first interviews concern the death of Eligio Eloy Varga, the ranger working in a national park in the Dominican Republic directly bordering Haiti, who was hacked to death with a machete.

Varga's principal job was to seek out “charcoal ovens” and destroy them. The social devastation in Haiti (the poorest country in the western hemisphere) compels many to cross the border and cut down trees to produce charcoal. Most of the land on the Haitian side is deforested or desert-like.

The machete attack, we learn, was likely committed by Haitians who were attempting to harvest wood for charcoal production in the national park just across the border.

Many of those employed at the Dominican national park are Haitian, and they provide fascinating interviews. One of the workers explains how he has a difficult time shutting down the illegal charcoal ovens. He feels sympathy for those harvesting charcoal: “You're eating and he isn't, because you destroyed his oven.” In another discussion, workers explain, “Circumstances force people to make charcoal,” and they discuss how Haitians don't have money for the basic necessities of life.

Death by a Thousand Cuts traces the different aspects of the charcoal trade. Some impoverished Haitians undertake small illegal operations, but there are also larger businesses headed by Dominican owners who reap the majority of the profit. A comparison is made to the drug cartels and how one must be careful in finding out too much about the operation. The inequality within the business mirrors the broader social crisis and corruption on the island.

After the charcoal is bagged in the forests, it is loaded onto mules or trucks, taken to a port or across the border, and finally ends up in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, where it is sold in markets. Here, we find out that people use charcoal as virtually the only power source to cook their food with, propane being too expensive or unavailable.

In an interview with the *Guardian*, co-director Kheel mentions how the two impoverished peoples are exploited and pitted against one another. “The tragic irony, of course, is that along the border, working class Haitians and Dominicans work side-by-side and have rich and complex intermixing of language, cultural customs and traditions,” he explains.

Indeed, one hears the same xenophobic rhetoric from the Dominican establishment in the film, which, changing what needs to be changed, one encounters in the US in the right-wing media and pronouncements from the Trump administration.

The anti-immigrant chauvinism whipped up in the Dominican Republic finds expression in several hate crimes carried out against Haitian immigrants following Varga's death. One immigrant community is burned down, and two Haitians, relatives of the suspected killer, are found murdered in a reservoir.

Along with Varga's parents, the documentarians interview his Haitian partner and the mother of the couple's children. Although the children are to stay with his parents in the Dominican Republic, we find out that the family may be torn apart, as Varga is at risk of deportation back to Haiti along with her eldest son. She also tells us that she can't claim her partner's pension because she is Haitian. The brutality of the immigration policies documented echo those of the United States and Europe.

A caption at the end of the film points to the violence around the world and how it is fueled by rampant inequality. The subject of the film is

fascinating, and *Death by a Thousand Cuts* deserves a wide audience.
To be continued



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