

2022 San Francisco International Film Festival

Interview with co-directors of *The Time of the Fireflies*: “We saw it as a form of resistance”

David Walsh
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The Time of the Fireflies, co-directed by Matteo Robert Morales and Mattis Appelqvist Dalton, about a young Mexican immigrant in the US, was one of the more socially concrete and intriguing films at the San Francisco International Film Festival this year. Others must have thought so too, because the film received the festival’s Golden Gate Award as the best mid-length film (52 minutes, in this case).

At the center of the film, as we explained in a review April 26, is Miguel, who has been living in New York City for more than a decade, having left the extreme poverty of his hometown in Oaxaca, Mexico. His parents, who also spent years working in the US, have had difficult, toilsome lives. Miguel has made great sacrifices, working long hours and experiencing isolation and loneliness, to support both himself and his sister Rafaela, who also appears prominently in the film.

Morales, as he explains in the interview below, grew up in the same village as Miguel and Rafaela, and went to school with them. The filmmakers have commented that “we felt that people like Miguel and his family were being deprived of their human qualities by hate speech and targeted policies. This is when the intention to create a documentary that would rehumanize the Mexican migrant community in the USA, became more urgent. We wanted to provide Miguel with a platform to tell his story, to let his words confront the common paradigm of migration within and outside the United States.”

The WSWS spoke recently to the two young filmmakers on a video call.

David Walsh: Matteo, I understand you have some connection to Miguel, the central figure in the film. Can you tell us about your life history and your connection to him?

Matteo Robert Morales: I grew up in the same village as Miguel in rural Mexico, in Oaxaca. So we are actually childhood friends. We went to school together, I was very close friends with him and his sister Rafaela, we were also next door neighbors. At some point, I moved to Mexico City. And then he went to the US. So we lost track of each other. It was not until we started working on this film that we got in contact again.

DW: Can you tell me something about the village where you grew up?

MRM: It is a very, very small town. It is lost in the middle of a rural area where there are no cities nearby. It is a place where, when I was going to school, like Miguel and his sister, many children grow up without their parents, because they are away working. At that time, it was not something that seemed unusual. Then later, I realized that family separation strongly shaped this town and the way people live.

DW: And what was the immediate source or spark for this film?

MRM: Growing up there, being close to this family, sharing their stories as a child, really shaped who I am. The subjects of the film were very close to me. Knowing Miguel, having this very close relationship with him, was an opportunity to talk about these subjects, in a very intimate

and humane way.

Mattis Appelqvist Dalton: I think there was also the political climate, the context of the time. We started filming in 2017. When Matteo approached me, it was a period where there was horrible, demeaning rhetoric in regard to Mexican immigrants.

It felt increasingly urgent to create a platform for Miguel and his family’s voice to be heard. We saw it as a form of resistance. Devoting our craft to something in which we believed would bear witness to the everyday ties that bind the United States and Mexico, as well as to the political discord and violence that keep them apart.

We were also very inspired not only by the sacrifices Miguel made, but also his strong philosophy and vision. As you see in the film, he is always reading, on the subway, everywhere he can.

MRM: I was 10 years old when Miguel left the town. I met him again in 2017, when I invited Mattis to work on the film and we traveled to New York City. We had a certain idea of what the film could become, because I knew Miguel’s story, through what his parents had told us. But then when we met him and we realized what person he had become, then we understood what the story would really be about. To understand his struggle, everything he went through, at that moment, it was really inspiring.

DW: What is your own background, Mattis?

MAD: I am Danish, but I grew up in France. In 2016, just before we began the film, I received a scholarship to go and study at Brown, where I was studying the cognitive neuroscience of music. I was conducting research on how our perception of time in cinema is shaped and how music influences and distorts our perception of time. I have always been fascinated by music. So when I was invited to work on this film, we wanted to collaborate in a way that would enable a strong relationship between the sound and the visual media.

DW: Can either one of you, or both of you, describe the conditions that force people in Mexico to leave?

MRM: The condition, as Miguel says in the film, is extreme poverty. Really, no services. The house where he grew up had no electricity, no running water. So it is a really strong necessity that pushes them to do this.

MAD: Migration is not an individual economic choice. There is a family history as well. Grandparents and parents create ties that are then reproduced and followed up on by their sons and daughters.

MRM: What is also interesting is that, depending on the region in Mexico, people migrate to specific cities or areas in the US. So, for instance, from the village where I grew up, and where we shot the film, people mostly go to New York City. That is something that we also wanted to represent in the film, the strong, specific connection between New York and this town in the middle of rural Mexico.

DW: What are your own views about the immigration issue? In our opinion, whether it is Trump or Biden makes no difference. It is the same reactionary anti-immigrant policy.

MAD: We have strong views about the political situation and the way in which the system fails again and again, but we wanted to make a film that lacks a political agenda.

We feel that various stories become very politicized, stigmatized, which kind of limits our possibilities to empathize with the subjects. It is not to say that this is an apolitical film, because their lives are very much shaped by politics. I think the very possibility of people empathizing with Miguel suggests political possibilities, and it is Miguel himself who embodies crucial possibilities for change and reform by emphasizing the importance of migrant's rights and in particular access to education for all.

DW: The film is unusual in that there is a great deal of attention paid to the psychological, emotional consequences of immigration. You see the impact of fear, isolation, separation, loneliness. The film is very strong in bringing out these aspects.

MRM: When we see films about migration, often the film ends when the person arrives in the US. For us, I think, that was only half of the film—what comes after, and what do people go through once they arrive here?

DW: There is obviously great resilience in Miguel, but there is also a great sadness, because he has lost part of his life and continues to lose part of his life. He cannot go home, he has not seen his family for 13 years or more. It is a brutal situation.

MAD: Yes, he lost a big part of his youth, because he had to become an adult at the age of 16. To take on the responsibility of paying off the people who helped him cross the border, to help his family, his mother, later on his sister, he took on enormous responsibilities and had to become an adult extremely abruptly.

We wanted to focus on his childhood memories, because they gave us an insight into his longing for what he left behind. It is perhaps his relationship to his childhood memories that fuels his altruism and his resilience. But they are also something that kept him trapped in the past, because he misses his home.

MRM: Miguel has a lot of nostalgia about rural Mexico, about the countryside. That is something that we wanted to show in the more fictional parts of the film. At the same time, he is very conscious about why he left, what pushes people to leave this life behind. He talks about the opportunities that New York has offered him. He is very conscious about why he's there.

MAD: As well, his relationship to that place changed quite a bit during the filming process itself. We filmed with him for a period of three years. We also wanted, through the visual and the sound, to represent some of that evolution. In the beginning, New York was unbearably chaotic and hectic, and he felt lost a lot of the time. But with time, he also found a degree of peace and his home in this new place.

DW: Yes, to a degree, he has conquered New York, which overwhelmed him to begin with. Imagine arriving at 16 in New York with nothing and almost no one! But you used the word "nostalgia," which has a certain pejorative connotation. Do you think there is something romanticized about his vision of Mexico?

MRM: To a certain extent. As an immigrant myself, I can relate to that. I think when we leave a place behind, we tend to romanticize certain things. To a certain degree, this is inevitable. It has been 13, 14 years for Miguel. The only thing that remains from his home are his memories, and we know that memories change over time. Even though he has found a home in New York, he continues to miss the things he left behind and that New York cannot offer.

DW: In the film, you have included the fictional childhood scenes, which are more associated with memory, dream, nature, poetry. And then there is New York, which is harsher, but which has its own poetry. How

did you see the relationship between the images of New York and the images of Mexico?

MRM: That was an important goal for us, to work on those contrasts. For instance, the idea was to film New York with long focal length lenses, to try to capture the emotion of Miguel when he arrived in the city, this very overwhelming feeling. So by using long focal length, we could compress the sense of space and perspective. But then these feelings changed over time, he really conquered the city, he found his place in it. Now he feels more at home, so in the film we switched to normal focal length.

In Mexico, on the contrary, we tried to film more with wide angle lenses, to give this feeling of the immensity of the landscape. The nature of both places allows it. New York is a place where you cannot look in any direction and see the horizon. In the village, no matter where you look, you see fields, hills and mountains and the sky.

MAD: It also helps people get an insight into his reality. A phrase that resonates a lot for both of us is the moment when he says, 'in the countryside, you are trapped.' It is very paradoxical. There is this immense place with all the physical freedom and space, and yet Miguel felt trapped.

DW: Socially and economically trapped. In New York, physically trapped, but in some way, the opportunities are greater. It is a painful situation, obviously, because both realities have their serious limitations. What does Miguel long for? What would he like his life to be like?

MRM: We talked about his strong passion for books, it is where he finds solace. Also, helping other people to study, passing on his knowledge of math was one way of finding peace with himself as well. So education is such a central aspect of his life. It is also the reason why he left to begin with. Miguel still has his dreams of being able to continue to study. He wants to study music, he wants to study economics, he has so many things he would like to know more about. So, no matter what his life looks like, as long as there is some element of education and this ability to nurture his intellect, I think he will continue to stay connected with himself.

DW: His parents as well are remarkable, as well as his sister certainly. The scenes with her, when she is telling him on the phone how much he meant to her, are very moving. She is generous in acknowledging him, but it is somewhat painful for him probably, how much he sacrificed for her. It is a very dramatic, emotional moment.

MAD: When she first talked about how much he had helped her situation, we were filming in New York. Then we went to his mother's home in Mexico. We saw on the wall the diploma, which is dedicated "To my brother, for his unconditional support." It was an emblem of all of his sacrifices, the love he has for her. Knowing how important education is to him, this diploma was particularly powerful because he sacrificed his own dream to study in order to help her pursue hers.

DW: It is not a film with a political agenda. But we know what Trump and others were saying about the "rapists" and "criminals" and "murderers" from Mexico—and then you meet Miguel, who is the epitome of sensitivity, intelligence, conscientiousness and self-sacrifice. It is such an obscene contrast. So the film makes a strong argument.

MRM: We certainly hope so.



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