

The Box: “Everyone in the north of Mexico depends on the factories”

David Walsh
8 November 2022

Directed by Lorenzo Vigas: written by Vigas, Paula Markovitch and Laura Santullo

The Box (La Caja) is a film about life in northern Mexico, directed by Venezuela-born Lorenzo Vigas (*From Afar*, 2015). A teenage boy latches on to a man he claims is his father, someone who hires impoverished workers for garment factories. The youth undergoes disturbing, eye-opening experiences and receives a cruel education in the ways of the free enterprise system.

Venezuela’s submission to the 2023 Academy Awards opens in New York City on November 11.

Vigas’ film was screened at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in September 2021.

As we noted at the time, *The Box* and other socially oriented films were exceptions. The Toronto festival and other such events have become officially mesmerized in recent years by race and gender politics.

Social inequality, accelerated and amplified by a horrific pandemic, dominates every corner of the globe, and a handful of conglomerates and billionaires relentlessly strengthens its grip on economic life. A new world war threatens. However, to a certain comfortably off, aspiring social layer, the crucial questions involve personal identity. In effect, de facto quotas along racial and gender lines have increasingly been established.

The Toronto festival has launched various initiatives aimed, it asserts, at promoting “diversity, equity, and inclusion in film.” “Share Her Journey,” begun in 2017, is a “campaign and commitment to address gender parity and championing women in front of and behind the camera.” Festival organizers envision it as part of a “global movement ... dedicated to building frameworks, empowering creators, and forging paths for women to succeed as storytellers who help shape our cultural landscape.”

The festival boasted this year that since 2016, “we have had an equal 50/50 gender split in selected participants for

our Talent Development initiatives such as TIFF Filmmaker Lab, TIFF Writers’ Studio, and TIFF Rising Stars. 64 percent of the speakers at our 2021 Industry Conference were women.”

Women and Hollywood, which “Educates, Advocates, and Agitates for Gender Diversity and Inclusion in Hollywood and the Global Film Industry,” enthused in August 2022 that “TIFF announcements continue to flood in, and the filmmaker gender stats are getting better and better. The festival has confirmed the 2022 slates for its Discovery, Midnight Madness, and Wavelengths sections, and, overall, women, femme, non-binary, and/or genderfluid directors helmed a whopping 59 percent (24) of the 41 feature-length films.”

There is no evidence that the slightest improvement in the breadth and depth of filmmaking has occurred as a result of these efforts. This is a struggle going on within a layer of the affluent middle class for positions and privilege.

In 2021 the Toronto festival announced “Every Story,” a fund “to support and celebrate film’s under-represented voices and audiences.” It was intended to create opportunities for “equity-seeking creators.” A press release explained that 76 “of this year’s Festival selections were either created or co-created by cisgender or transgender women, or non-binary or two-spirit filmmakers. Seventy-five percent of Industry Conference speakers identify as Black, Indigenous, or a person of colour. This is the beginning of a journey to highlight the stories that may have previously been untold and address the reasons for their erasure.” We cannot be the only ones to find this type of language insufferable.

One of the “three primary pillars” of this program, along with “celebrating diverse storytellers and audiences; and creating opportunities for creators who are Black, Indigenous, people of colour,” is said to be “challenging the status quo.”

The establishment of racial and gender goals does nothing to challenge the status quo. The film festival itself is very much part of the status quo, its officialdom enmeshed in that wing of the Ontario and Canadian establishment that promotes identity politics, racial, ethnic and gender divisions, as part of its strategy for remaining in power.

The great barrier making it possible for some “stories” to be “told” while others go “untold” remains, above all, social class. The lives and problems of the vast majority of laboring, suffering humanity arouse little interest in leading industry circles, and nothing about the various film festival initiatives will alter—or are intended to alter—that situation.

Filmmakers worldwide feel these pressures as well. Some respond to the present crisis of society in a narrow, self-centered manner and thus disqualify themselves from the ranks of serious artistic figures. There are more than enough identity politics-obsessed films to go around, if one seeks them out. Other writers and directors look beyond their noses at the general state of society and consider the dilemmas of those whose conditions are far worse, and in some cases tragically worse, than their own.

In *The Box*, a teenager, Hatzin (Hatzín Navarrete) travels north to the state of Chihuahua to collect the remains of his father, who died in a mining accident. On the street, Hatzin spots a man he believes to be his supposedly deceased father and begins to dog the latter’s tracks. Eventually, Mario (Hernán Mendoza), who claims the boy is mistaken, hires the persistent Hatzin as his assistant.

Mario works for the management of various *maquiladoras* and other factories recruiting workers from villages and towns. In every location, Mario’s other helper recites the same spiel, something like this: “We’re at war ... we’re at war with the fucking Chinese.” Chinese women and girls, he tells the crowd, have “tiny hands. ... What happens if they’re faster than us? We lose our jobs. Are we going to let them take our jobs?” Mario and his crew deliver busloads of desperate workers to the gates of giant plants.

Hatzin discovers that Mario is cheating the workers in various ways. One girl, Laura Morales, speaks up. She complains that the factory is making her and the rest of the workers work 14 hours instead of the promised 12. Laura confronts Hatzin with the fact that the workers were actually charged for their bus trip to the factory, again, contrary to what was promised them. Mario shouts at her for “riling people up.” Then, Laura suddenly “goes

missing.” Her mother, who comes looking for the girl, is threatened with a note: “If you go back to the police, we’ll kill the rest of your family.” At first an enthusiastic and adept apprentice, Hatzin ultimately develops a conscience.

Mario has other means of accumulating the capital necessary for the business he wants to start, including stealing a truckload of sewing machines.

The Box is not flawless, at times a little drab, but Vigas places his finger squarely on a vital matter.

The director, the son of a painter, was born in Mérida, Venezuela in 1967 and now lives in Mexico City. He studied molecular biology at the University of Tampa in Florida and film at New York University. The new work is the last in a rough trilogy of films about fathers and sons, including *From Afar* and a documentary, *The Orchid Seller* (2016).

Variety noted that *The Box*, which was “shot over 10 weeks in 10 different locations across the Mexico state of Chihuahua, also explores the riptide effects of poverty on violence, specifically regarding migrant and factory workers who risk their lives every day to earn a wage on which most Americans—and most people worldwide—could not survive.”

“It’s not just happening in Mexico, but across the whole Latin America—you have so many kids growing up alone, without their father,” Vigas told *Variety*. “That’s the main theme of the film. But, it’s also about the disappearance of women in the north of Mexico, which is terrible. It’s something like 100,000 women have disappeared, for unknown reasons. Women working for these big factories in Mexico. And I got very interested in that story.”

He told Reuters, “Everyone in the north of Mexico depends on the factories. ... I am not saying that all the factories treat people badly, but you have factories that imprison their workers, much worse than what you see in *La Caja*.”

Vigas has created a valuable film.



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