

Does the Success of 'Birdman' Impact Other Mexican Filmmakers?

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Another year, another major Mexican director abandoning his home country for the U.S. But not every talented Mexican filmmaker is looking to leave.



Last year, the Morelia International Film Festival (or [FICM](#), as its Spanish acronym runs) opened with Alfonso Cuarón's "Gravity." This year, that honor went to "Birdman," by Alejandro G. Iñárritu. Paired with "Pacific Rim" director Guillermo del Toro, these Mexican filmmakers known as "the three amigos" have done a lot to raise the [profile](#) of Mexican cinema around the world.

But now they all make films in English. What does this mean for the younger generation that's making films in Mexico right now?



"Güeros"

Some answers could be found in this year's Morelia lineup. The competition of Mexican films at FICM consisted of 12 films, most of them first or second features. Only two of the films had premieres at high-profile international festivals before premiering at home: "Güeros," from director Alonso Ruizpalacios, which premiered in the Panorama section of the Berlinale, and "The Absent" from Nicolas Pereda, which premiered in Locarno in the new (and somewhat obscure) Signs of Life sidebar.

Though the films are almost polar opposites in their approach to cinema and narrative, they do both suggest that current cinema from Mexico thrives on strong individual voices.

"Güeros," a black-and-white doodle about two aimless siblings during the 1999 student protests in Mexico City, is clearly indebted to the French New Wave, a connection that's easy to make since one of the key moments in the lives of the New-Wave generation were the strikes and protests of May 1968. In his first feature, Ruizpalacios [shows](#) he has a great eye for offbeat humor and camera angles, while alternating playful and more melancholic sequences in a way that's strongly reminiscent of French New Wave films. But "Güeros" is also very consciously part of the Mexican film landscape, as the film's divided into chapters named after the Mexico City neighborhoods where the characters find themselves as the [story](#) progresses: The brothers and their friends even end up at the swanky premiere party of a Mexican film that the slacker protagonists make fun of sight unseen.



"The Absent"

Morelia

If "Güeros," which means blond or fair-skinned, can be described as ebullient and aimless, "The Absent" from veteran filmmaker Pereda is perhaps one of those arthouse movies that the kids in "Güeros" are making fun of: an extremely slow-moving and [contemplative](#) film in which meaningful dialog -- the main motor of Ruizpalacios' film -- is almost entirely absent. Continuing in the vein of his other festival darlings, including Venice Horizons winner "Summer of Goliath," and with his regular actor Gabino Rodriguez in one of the main roles, "The Absent" again mixes the grammar and tools of documentary and fiction into a striking but opaque, almost enigmatic whole that's made up of minutes-long sequence shots that invite viewers to scrutinize every corner of the image for meaning. What little story there is seems to involve an old man's unwilling removal from his home, and the memories that come flooding back to him (Rodriguez's character could be the old man in his younger days) as he's forced out of his own house.

"Güeros" won both a shared best actor award for its male ensemble, and the best first or second feature prize in Morelia, as well as the audience award and the critics' prize, suggesting its breath-of-fresh-air quality was well-appreciated across the board. That doesn't necessarily mean, however, that Pereda's film isn't less commendable, just that it is not an easy crowdpleaser in the way Ruizpalacios' first film is.

A potent mix of documentary and fictional elements is also a key aspect of Carlos Armella's "En la estancia," which looks at a non-fiction filmmaker who [documents](#) the lives of a father

and son who are the last two inhabitants of a godforsaken village in the mountains. It would be a spoiler to reveal how the two types of cinema create a revealing back-and-forth, though suffice to say that Armella tries to do something that's both radically cinematic as well as telling about certain socio-political and demographic changes that are happening in the oft-forgotten countryside.

The always welcome Gabino Rodriguez can not only be seen in Pereda's film but is also a supporting player in another enigmatic and entrancing film: "I Am Happiness on Earth," the fourth feature of Julian Hernandez ("Raging Sun, Raging Sky," "Broken Sky"). The gay filmmaker's penchant for intricately choreographed camerawork and balletic choreography instead of dialogue to tell a story here finds its most literal expression, as the protagonists are actually a ballet dancer and a filmmaker specialized in dance films (and with a sideline in more erotic films). While from a technical standpoint, the film's terrifically crafted, the screenplay is rather weak and confused.

Diversity is Key



"Carmin Tropical"

Morelia Film Festival

However, the presence of "Happiness" (which opened in very limited release in the U.S. back in August) in Morelia does suggest a willingness on behalf of the festival to be inclusive of many different voices and different kinds of artistic expression (also evidenced by the inclusion in competition of the mainstream, crowd-pleasing comedy "Eddie Reynolds y los Angeles de Acero,"

Heavy Themes



"Plan sexenal"

Morelia Film Festival

from Gustavo Moheno, about a group of old rockers who get together again after U2 becomes interested in buying the rights to one of their hits).

Hernandez's film is one of two titles with queer protagonists, the other being the eventual winner of the festival's best film honors: "Carmin Tropical," from director Rigoberto Perezcano, who also made the 2009 festival darling "Northless" ("Norteado").

His film is a mystery of sorts about a "muxe," a physical male who dresses like a woman, who returns to her village of birth in the state of Oaxaca when one of her muxe friends has

gone missing and later turns up dead. The film zooms in on the search of the protagonist, who's a lonely nightclub singer, for the truth about her friend and is refreshingly devoid of a lot of the stereotypes one would associate with a story of this kind, essentially presenting the story as a kind of personal investigation that runs parallel to the one conducted by the police. Expect this to turn up at a major festival soon (perhaps in Berlin, which has the queer Teddy awards?).

Though Gael Garcia Bernal is one of the associate producers of "Güeros" and "Miss Bala" director Gerardo Narajo was one of the producers of "Plan sexenal," the first film of Santiago Cedejas that rather surprisingly went home empty-handed, the film in competition with the biggest internationally recognizable name was without a doubt "Sand Dollars," from the directorial duo of Israel Cardenas, a Mexican, and the Dominican-born Laura Amelia Guzman. Their film stars Geraldine Chaplin as an aging European woman who's been in a relationship of sorts for three years with a young and poor Dominican woman for whom affection is less of an incentive than money.

Though it is a story and a dynamic we've seen before, in films such as Laurent Cantet's "Heading South" and more recently in Ulrich Seidl's "Paradise: Love," the narrative here feels more even-handed and finely etched than those earlier efforts, perhaps because Guzman as a Dominican manages to bring an insider perspective to the proceedings (something she also did in the couple's previous film, "Jean Gentil").

Money and, more often, the tension and unhealthy power relationships that develop between members of the poor and working classes on the one hand and the well-off bourgeoisie on the other is a recurring theme that informs not only "Sand Dollars," but also many of the remaining films in competition. These include "The Beginning of Time," in which a couple of grandparents is forced to sell food on the street when their pension is cut off — until it seems they might be rescued by their well-off if estranged adult son.

In "Hilda," an aging materfamilias of a wealthy family looks for a maid that she hopes she can treat equally, with disastrous results. "Los Muertos" looks at the insistent obliviousness of the grown-up children of the moneyed classes. "Las oscuras primaveras" is about a relationship between a secretary and a married repairman that gets completely out of hand when he uses his wife's money to buy something extremely expensive that becomes an unlikely symbol for his infidelity.

The biggest discovery, for this critic's money, was the earlier mentioned "Plan sexenal," which is both a domestic horror film and a relationship thriller with Lynchian touches, and which marks first-time director Santiago Cendejas as a name to watch. Made with very modest means and just a couple of actors and locations, the film is drenched in atmosphere and high on tension. It's also a savvy commentary on how middle-class Mexicans hope to use their money to lock themselves up in their own homes and leave all the country's problems outside.

Overall, the dozen films in competition present a wide-ranging overview of what Mexican cinema has to offer today: comedies and dramas alike that range from accessible, arthouse-light fare that addresses some of the social problems in the country to more rigorous and demanding films that will excite only tiny niche audiences. In any case, it offers a very lively perspective on a cinema that's clearly in good health even after the "three amigos" left the country and dedicated themselves to making English-language fare for bigger, not necessarily Mexican audiences.

Life After "The Three Amigos"

"There's indeed a wide variety of subjects, styles and approaches," said Daniela Michel, the director of the festival and responsible for the programming of the competition, which, as she put it, "includes everything from a broad comedy to fiction films that are almost documentary-like or include elements of documentary filmmaking." Since Michel helped launch the festival a dozen years ago, "we've not only seen an increase in the number of films shown here but also a greater diversity. At the festival, we try to highlight the discourse on Mexican identity that these films offers."

For Michel, the decision by successful Mexican directors to work in the U.S. is not a cause for concern. "Even though the three amigos have left for the U.S., they are still making personal films and are still considered auteurs," she said. "It is not the goal of every Mexican filmmaker to follow in their footsteps and leave for the States." She cited acclaimed Mexican directors Carlos Reygadas and Amat Escalante, who both won best director at the Cannes Film Festival and have remained in the country. "They don't only make their own films," she said. "They also support others and have state-of-the-art facilities right here in Mexico."

In general, the attention for Mexican filmmakers because of films such as "Gravity," "Pacific Rim" and now "Birdman" seems to help more than hurt the local business in addition to

inspiring local filmmakers. "I wouldn't consider the latest films of Cuarón, del Toro and Iñárritu necessarily Mexican cinema," said "Plan sexenal" director Santiago Cedejas, "but rather personal filmmaking that's interesting in its own right without having to belong to any category or national identity. It certainly inspires a lot of filmmakers from Mexico, but it doesn't necessarily affect it."

As for newcomer Cedejas himself, he said he might work abroad as well, though not necessarily in the U.S. "There are some stories that I'm interested in that don't happen in Mexico," he said. "There's a tendency for international co-productions and I think that would be an interesting way to work in the U.S or other countries."

For Cedejas, the entire discussion surrounding national cinemas misses the point. "I sometimes have a problem with the category 'Mexican film,'" he said. "I think in some ways it ghettoizes the films and it's something I would like to escape from."

Whether the filmmakers will continue to make Mexican films or segue to more international productions, at least the competition in Morelia seems to suggest there's enough directorial talent in the country for a bright cinematic future.