

SCREEN DAILY

Javier Fuentes-Léon, *The Vanished Elephant*

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The LA-based writer-director came to attention outside his native Peru in 2010 when *Undertow* (*Contracorriente*) scooped an audience award at Sundance. Now he's back with another meditation on reality, albeit one that inhabits the noir milieu.



In his second feature *The Vanished Elephant* (*El Elefante Desaparecido*, Peru-Colombia-Spain), Fuentes-Léon follows Edo Celeste, a crime writer (Salvador del Solar) troubled by memories of his disappeared fiancée as he prepares to write the concluding book in his series.

The title derives its name from a famous elephant-shaped rock cluster in Paracas that was engulfed during Peru's 2007 earthquake. *The Vanished Elephant* premiered in Toronto and is available to buyers at the AFM through worldwide sales agent Mundial.

How did this story come together?

I wrote this originally thinking of LA. The first draft was set in LA and it was called *Highway*, named after the David Hockney collage [*Pearblossom Highway*] that was the inspiration for this. It's an intersection in the desert. But I realised I had such a good collaboration [with various people on *Undertow*] and I wanted to show more of Peru in my films, so it grew. So I thought of the elephant and then the elephant became a metaphor not only for the [missing fiancée] but the fact that the main character will disappear soon.

Lima and its environs look great on the screen

What got me excited about moving the location from LA to Peru would be to borrow some of the main characteristics of noir and locate it in Lima. That was exciting. Lima is very grey in the winter – there's this hanging fog above buildings. There's this nostalgia and melancholy to the city in winter and you can go for weeks without seeing the sun. And it does rain, so I loved the idea of starting the movie in a city that's grey and foggy like the character, who is working hard to find clarity and he will find clarity when he goes to Paracas, which is where the sun is.

Where did you shoot the rock formation we see in the movie?

This location was three hours south [of Lima]. When I looked for locations for *Undertow* a fisherman told me about the elephant. It looked like the elephant we created, some way out in the ocean. The real

thing looked a bit underwhelming so we shot another rock and a friend created an elephant out of that rock.

***The Vanished Elephant* is a sinuous and intricate story. What's it about?**

In the end what makes the movie a little more... not as linear... is that we are following the character [Edo Celeste]. The movie presents itself as the story of a man who has lost the love of his life and is trying to find her and fill that void and that is the premise of the drama. Later the real drama is he will realise he was somebody else's creation.

If you see the movie from the point of view of Rafael [the man who turns out to be the real writer in the story] he is really the god of the universe. He is writing his last novel in which he is giving his character the ultimate mystery to solve. I always thought the ultimate mystery for [great detective fiction characters] would be for them to realise they were not real.

What are Rafael's motives?

Rafael is using the novel to confess to himself and to his wife that he was a cheater and that he took a lover [Celia, the fiancée] to Paracas and left her and the earthquake struck and probably the ocean took her. He's using the novel to confess because he's tired of being that man and wants to shed that mystery.

What themes about the notion of the writer's power do you explore?

I always feel like the writer is the god of the universe. Does god exist independently of us and do we create him and therefore he creates us? If we stop thinking about god will there be a god?

Were there stories or writers that inform your film?

Paul Auster, Borges, Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*, *Mullholland Drive*, *Blow -Up*, *Chinatown*, *The Maltese Falcon* and classic noir in general as influences. Especially a short story called *The Continuity Of Parks* [by Julio Cortázar]. That story was a very big influence. It's only one page and you start at Point A and when you get back there the context has changed.

Your stories use daring devices. In *Undertow* you explored the idea of ghosts to tell an intimate story

I'm not interested in the realistic portrayal of something. I love fantasy or surrealism. Something that can fly with its imagination, which is why Fellini is an inspiration. It's funny how you start to find your themes. Latin American cinema is so famous for being realistic: a depiction of a socio-political state or a community. Yet people think of magical realism when they think of Latin American literature. I didn't even mention Peru [in *Undertow*] because I wanted it to be a fable about living in a closed society and feeling that you need to be who you are and fight for it. That fable could have happened in Sicily or South Africa. The ceremony was something I made up.

How has *The Vanished Elephant* performed in Peru?

It opened on October 8 through New Century Films and the reception was amazing. They're usually tough on Peruvian films. The reviews for *Undertow* were OK.

Was there government support for the film?

There's support but not a lot from the Ministry Of Culture Fund and from IBERMEDIA [the Ibero-American Support Fund.] My movie is a co-production with Dynamo, who co-produced *Undertow*. We also got support from Tondero.

Indeed Michel Ruben from Dynamo appears in a scene as a broadcast journalist in this film

Michel has been crucial. He reads everything and gives me great feedback. He used to work for Almodovar for 10 years. He started as an actor at first. He showed up in a few of Almodovar's films.

What's your assessment of the Peruvian film industry now?

It's definitely growing. Peru and Colombia are the two countries that have developed economically and quickly in the last 15 years. There's an explosion of cuisine. For the first time we are dabbling in genre film, so there are comedies that are being made here. One last year broke all box office records [*Asu Mare*]. Ten percent of the country went to see it – that's three million people. The producers are called Tondero and they're co-producers of my film. But there are also horror films that have done really good box office. Colombia has managed to get a lot of support from their government so they have amazing laws and they are the headquarters for a lot of US companies. We are not at the level of Colombia but we are getting there. Salvador de Solar wrote and directed his own short film and stars in *The Vanished Elephant*.

What's next for you?

This is the first break that I am going to have. I have three or four projects in different stages. One of the things is a rock musical. I play guitar and I love music. It will be in the vein of *Hedwig* and it's called *Sinister*. There's a screenplay I wrote before *Undertow*. It's a love story with touches of fantasy. I wrote it a long time ago and feel I have grown so I will reconnect to it. I have a comedy that I would love to shoot in Peru. The first two could be in English. I might move into English-language [cinema] since I live in LA. I just wrote a pilot TV series that could take place in the US or Peru. It's about the creation of a prophet and it's called... *Prophet*.

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