

Document Citation

Title	Pulp nonfiction
Author(s)	Ed Morales Ed Morales
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	2001 Apr 03
Type	article
Language	English English
Pagination	126
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Amores perros (Love's a bitch), Iñárritu, Alejandro Gonzáles, 2000

'Amores Perros' Leads a Mexican Revival

PULP NONFICTION

BY ED MORALES

"Ten years ago this was a peaceful city," says director Alejandro González Iñárritu about Mexico City, the exhilaratingly complex canvas of his Oscar-nominated *Amores Perros*. "As a result of the socioeconomic inequality and the corruption of the government, this is a society that has lost its innocence. To live in Mexico today is to live in fear." González Iñárritu has become something of a national hero for depicting Mexico's painful recent economic upheaval and commanding the gringo Academy's attention. But *Amores Perros*' success also represents a triumph for the nation's struggling filmmakers—high box office numbers and international distribution put the movie at the forefront of a renaissance in Mexican cinema.

"I have been a victim of violence, not through videos and comics, like Tarantino—my family has been held up, my mother was beaten," says González Iñárritu, bristling at early reviews that compared *Amores*' triptych narrative to *Pulp Fiction*'s. The 38-year-old director is part of a not-so-young generation that is finally able to make films that speak to a new urban Mexico. But while the kidnappings, murders, poverty, and homelessness that punctuate *Amores Perros* are the fallout of free-trade economics, it was a proto-NAFTA shift in policy that precipitated

the current film-industry boomlet.

In the early '90s, Mexico's movie theaters, previously a state monopoly, were privatized and ticket prices were deregulated. The once run-down theaters—which showed government-funded art films by directors like Arturo Ripstein and Jorge Fons to sparse audiences—were cleaned up, new ones were built, and despite a rise in ticket prices, what passes for the middle class returned to the movies. Hoping to take advantage of this new environment, Alfonso Cuarón made *Solo con Tu Pareja* (*Love in the Time of Hysteria*), a surrealist comedy about a womanizing yuppie who mistakenly discovers he is infected with HIV.

Cuarón funded his film in the only way Mexican directors could at the time, through Imcine, the film institute of the Mexican government. But he was frustrated by the corrupt ruling PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), which also had a hand in the mid-'90s economic catastrophe. "The relationship between the state and artists was a paternalist one—they determined who could make projects and who couldn't," says Cuarón from his New York office. "When I had the audacity to say my movie should be exported, the Mexican state called me an imbecile because Mexican film was not of interest to anyone outside of Mexico." Imcine delayed the movie's premiere for two years and Cuarón, who had taken the film on his own to the Toronto Film Festival, escaped to El Norte, where he made *The Little Princess* and *Great Expectations*. Soon afterward, Guillermo del Toro, who opened eyes abroad with the vampire movie *Cronos*, also landed in Hollywood with the bug flick *Mimic*.

Despite the international attention garnered by Cuarón and the ubiquitous *Like Water for Chocolate*, by the mid '90s, film production in Mexico hit historic lows. Gems like Jorge Fons's *Callejón de los Milagros* (*Midaq Alley*) barely kept Mexico on the map. In a last-ditch attempt to shore up the industry in late 1997, President Ernesto Zedillo created a \$16 million fund for Imcine to administer. In 1998, Titán Films went into production on *Sexo, Pudor y Lágrimas* (*Sex, Shame, and Tears*), partly funded by Imcine. The yuppie sex comedy set the all-time Mexican box office record and wiped out its stiffest American competitor, *Star Wars: Episode I*. The film also received private funds, proving that a Mexican film could actually provide a return on a local investment.

Meanwhile, the Mexican conglomerate CIE (Interamerican Entertainment Corporation) partnered with the venture-capital arm of the Grupo Financiero Inbursa (owned by Carlos Slim Helu, whom *Wired* called "Latin America's richest individual") to create Alta Vista Films, which coproduced *Amores Perros*. "We wanted to make films that would communicate directly with a mass audience," says Alta Vista's Martha Sosa. "We found a lot of young filmmakers who had original and easy-to-make stories—they're influenced by American cinema and are not shy or ashamed about that."

The current revival has implications undreamed of during the Golden Age of the '40s and '50s, when more than 100 films a year were produced. Both Alta Vista and Titán believe that the growing Latino population in the U.S. will be drawn to Mexican films no longer typified by pastoral hacien-

das and romanticized rural poverty. Titán head Matthias Ehrenberg, an associate producer on *Before Night Falls*, believes that a pool of Spanish and Latin American actors is forming. "The old star system is coming back," he says. "People want to see films because of Javier Bardem or Penélope Cruz or [*Sexo, Pudor y Lágrimas* star] Damien Bichir." *Amores Perros*' Gael García is starring in Cuarón's return to Spanish-language film, *Y Tu Mamá También*, and is currently shooting in Argentina with *All About My Mother's* Cecilia Roth.

As for Imcine, the institute has scaled back its involvement with Mexican film, announcing last April that it was focusing attention on auteurist projects. The success of Titán's *Sexo*, as well as an embarrassing scandal surrounding the Sundance prizewinner *La Ley de Herodes* (*Herod's Law*), prompted the shift in policy. Highly critical of the then ruling PRI, the film was the subject of a botched censorship attempt: Imcine threatened to remove all funding and was accused of showing distorted prints at last year's Acapulco festival.

For now, the focus remains on *Amores Perros*, a film that Mexico's filmmaking community is hoping will make significant inroads on the U.S. market. While the new Mexican cinema has successfully incorporated Hollywood's light-entertainment formulas, *Amores Perros* is something of an anomaly. González Iñárritu says, "This movie wasn't made as a product of marketing, nor is it a global cinema that is homogenizing film." It's a movie that was made not just for the new Mexico, but as its epilogue says, "because we are also what we have lost." ■

VV 4/3/01 p. 126