



[Gael Garcia Bernal's search for brotherhood](#)

[Ian Betts](#) reflects on the importance of solidarity in Gael Garcia Bernal's films and others from the ¡Viva! Film Festival at the Cornerhouse - March 2012

Gael Garcia Bernal has starred in many definitive Latin American films: *Amores Perros*, *Y Tu Mama Tambien*

and

The Motorcycle Diaries

have all garnered international awards and credibility for the way they represent the social issues of their respective cultures. Ironically though, they all depict Bernal as the cunning underdog struggling to escape the confines of the societal entrapment they criticise.

What is it about Gael that is so appealing? Perhaps it is because he lacks the hyper-masculine posturing of many established Hollywood stars; in ***Amores Perros***, his character Octavio, a stubborn, beleaguered teenager, seeks to escape the squalor of his neighbourhood by entering his Rottweiler into dog-fighting competitions as he wishes to finance a new life for himself and his abused sister-in-law. A stubborn, beleaguered teenager, Octavio is an endearing and familiar protagonist who epitomises working-class ambition despite being failed by the promises of capitalism.

In fact, it is Bernal's ability to represent the poor and weak that makes him so interesting. As Che Guevara in ***The Motorcycle Diaries***, he calls for an end to the [narrow minded provincialism](#) he finds during his travels in the hope of forming a *united America*

. The actor seems drawn to narratives which consider the common [desire for equality](#) and repeatedly champions stories which recognise the victims of poverty and inequality. 'I have a strong commitment, with my acting comrades,' he is reported to have said, 'to making things happen in Mexico and in Latin America.'

Writer/director Carlos Cuarón has echoed his desire for unity, saying 'We are all brothers but we just haven't realised it yet,' in a Sundance interview about ***Rudo y Cursi***, another successful vehicle for Garcia Bernal. Cuarón has repeatedly collaborated with the actor to the point where he calls him a 'little brother', and perhaps it is a brotherhood we are all keen to share; Gael is an exciting, exotic cousin whose professional persona has come to symbolise our shared humanity. Although this may be an artificial and simplistic representation of the truth, nonetheless Garcia Bernal has been accepted as a kind of Spanish-speaking everyman by the film industry after his work with Diego Luna and Pablo Cruz on the [Ambulante Documentary Festival](#), and because of his avid pursuit of Latin-American solidarity which is articulated in each of the above films.

So, like myself, I am sure many people were keen to see a film starring Garcia Bernal as part of

the programme of the [¡Viva! Spanish & Latin American Film Festival](#) at the Cornerhouse this month. The festival's organisers have wisely recognised the tastes and interests of their diverse audience, and the resulting programme is a vibrant mix of new and established names from a family of Spanish-speaking countries and cultures; while shared language may be the obvious link between these films, this theme of brotherhood is critical to each of the cinematic narratives and of interest to an international audience.

In ***Tambien la Lluvia*** (Even the Rain), Garcia plays Sebastián, a filmmaker attempting to depict the landing of Christopher Columbus in Bolivia, though the real story is the making of the film itself. Footage of the actual production is juxtaposed with handheld excerpts from the making-of documentary and the epic scenes they produce, presented to the crew as rushes during the shoot. The resulting metanarrative deals with the exploitation of indigenous peoples as the country is overcome with angry uprisings over the monopolised cost of the recently-privatised water supply. It is a skilful combination of layers and a self-conscious revision of the Columbus story; its interest lies not in historical events alone, but rather the danger of history repeating and the social inequality and exploitation that is perpetuated by modern capitalism.



It is no wonder that Garcia Bernal became involved with this film: 'In Latin America... we share the same failed, neo-liberalist dreams,' he has suggested, 'and we share the same sense of disgust with what democracy has given us.' Though in ***Tambien la Lluvia***, it is not his character Sebastián who arrives at this realisation, as the film director is unable to give up on his project despite the Bolivian army's violent response to the protests. Instead, it is the money-minded producer Costa (Luis Tosar) whose unlikely conversion from materialism to compassion sparks the climax of the film. Abandoning the shoot, he decides to risk his own life to save the daughter of one of his local actors by driving into the middle of a bloody conflict to find her. Despite their separate upbringings, occupations and loyalties, the characters are united by their common humanity beyond any commercial gain.

Such fraternal dedication is also explored in [Arrugas](#) (Wrinkles). A retired bank manager, Emilio, is admitted to a care home after exhausting his son's patience and finances; he is confused and forgetful, possibly suffering from the early onset of Alzheimer's Syndrome. There he meets Miguel, a charming Argentine trickster with a knack for scamming his fellow residents out of 10 euro notes; poker-faced except for a knowing smile, he sells imaginary tickets to the Orient Express and acts as an agent for surprise 'administration charges'. Is it exploitation? By indulging their delusional wishes, Miguel says he is giving his companions what they want. Care homes profit from the elderly by presenting themselves as 'five-star hotels' to put relatives' minds at ease, while Miguel attempts to reassure the patients themselves by fulfilling their confused whims and childish fantasies. Which is the greater illusion?



Arrugas deals with this question by showing the reality of elderly life in such an institution, and the trials that its residents face. Ageism, loneliness and suicide are all issues that are explored by this film, but it is done with a great sense of mischief and joy. Watching Miguel hatch scheme upon scheme to sharpen Emilio's wits is a true delight, and his resulting dedication to one friend, despite having profited from everyone else, is a touching triumph of humanity which recognises our need for companionship at any age.

Like fellow comic-book adaptation *Persepolis*, the film uses animation to tell an intimate, personal story against the backdrop of wider social adversity; both films present scenes which are grounded in realistic settings but that can also dissolve into dreams, delusions or internal

narratives. It is a charming and versatile medium that allows us to experience the characters' difficulties in emotional terms, and in **Arrugas** we see how money seems to influence every decision that is made about the lives of the elderly, from the level of care that they can afford to the cost of Christmas presents for the family. As John Hutchinson wrote in his review of [La Mirada Invisible](#), 'these days of austerity may mean that we can empathise more with those in hardship and poverty', and the presentation of money as a corrupting force in these films only strengthens the argument for developing empathy, charity and solidarity across the modern world.

This tension is at the heart of **La Hora Cero** (Zero Hour), where a group of hitmen use brutal force to demand private medical attention for a pregnant woman when public hospitals are closed during a strike. It is a clever premise that allows director Diego Velasco to explore the divisions running through Venezuelan society despite the socialist intentions of the [Bolivarian Revolution](#), and which portrays much of the discontent and public uprisings which have impacted upon the country for a number of decades. Unlike Argentina and Mexico, Venezuela does not have an internationally-renowned film industry so this entertaining movie is a satisfying and edifying addition to the festival's programme.

Luckily, it's also a thrilling cinematic experience because **La Hora Cero** is Velasco's trip to the Venezuelan Grindhouse. The film is a gun-toting, hip-thrusting, Latin soap opera of ridiculous proportions as the hospital is besieged by gangmen on motorcycles, trigger-happy SWAT forces and swelling crowds of protestors. Moments of violence are quickly followed by inane comedy, or satirical news reporting, all to the audience's amusement. You just can't take your eyes away from the screen. It's a potent and ambitious combination of ideas which at times feels derivative; the narrative often relies on stereotypical representations of gangsters, cops and journalists to tell this complex story, which is explained through a series of superficial flashbacks to hitman Parco's youth. It may not be an innovative approach, but it is the combination of these elements which is invigorating and pulsing with testosterone.

This is exploitation cinema at its finest; **La Hora Cero** has been designed to appeal to all your

B-movie vices and it is highly enjoyable - and violent - as a result. Perhaps its comic moments are the biggest surprise: my favourite is when one of the gangsters, comb lodged in his afro, begins to serenade a drowsy and naked Miss Venezuela in order to kickstart his musical career having interrupted her breast enlargement surgery. You just can't predict moments like that and the film is viciously good fun as a result.

Does it solve the widening class gap in Venezuela? Probably not. But ***what links these films*** is the way they champion marginalised groups within our societies, from the impoverished indigenous peoples of Bolivia who work as extras in

Tambien la Lluvia

to the forgotten elderly or the poor barrio-dwellers of Caracas. These films do more than just entertain and in taking on important social issues, they reassure us of the value of artistic endeavours in times of austerity. Moreover, they remind us of our common humanity by presenting us with familiar and moving struggles in countries where the effects of a global depression are being felt more greatly than here.

Is brotherhood important? Not as much as solidarity between the genders. It is equally important to recognise that all of these films are dominated by men and masculine attitudes, and that our film industries continue to promote patriarchal views by preferring male actors in lead roles. We should be mindful of establishing a one-sided fraternity that champions the poor but marginalises women as a result. This is by no means the fault of the programmers, who have taken care to include female-driven works such as

[Las Malas](#)

and

[Intenciones](#)

[La Mirada Invisible](#)

in this

Viva!

festival; they should be applauded for stimulating discussions about all of these issues.

However, the observation is valid and perhaps the lasting impression from all these films is the human cost of our greed.