



[¡Viva! La Mirada Invisible](#) , [Cornerhouse](#)
Reviewed by [John Hutchinson](#) March 2012

The 18th Viva film festival has now finally made it, at least according to the BBC's ***The Culture Show***

(Friday, 3rd March) - recognition, too long in coming. This is a major artistic event which Manchester, and the Cornerhouse and the Instituto Cervantes have made it into the greatest celebration of Hispanic film in the UK.

It deserves wider recognition, and it certainly is not necessary to be a Spanish speaker to get a tremendous amount out of this festival. It entertains, intrigues, challenges the attendee's cultural values and presents multiple perspectives, which in these days of austerity may mean that we can empathise more with those in hardship and poverty. The diverse voices of Latin America may speak to us more powerfully, more relevantly and with a greater confidence than before.

What makes the festival particularly vibrant and interactive is the presence of the creators of the works. This Saturday I experienced the insights, anecdotes and imaginative takes on the world of two very different artists, Minerva Cuevas and Emilio Aragón. As *Ian Betts* has already very ably reviewed these two on this site (see

[Viva! Opening Gala](#)

), I will add a few brief perceptions before moving on to

La Mirada Invisible

.

One can read Cuevas' art as a form of subversion as Betts implies. It often imitates corporate branding and plays with the themes of global warming and scientific achievement. It intermingles the past and the present with the old magic lanterns, microscope projectors and 16mm film from times when these represented human scientific curiosity and a desire to understand the world not to control it. There is, for example, a montage which resembles a compass in clear green, yellow, black and shades of grey which according to the artist is actually inspired by Aztec and Mayan cosmology/science. It is bold, fresh and disorientating although simple.

Probably the best exhibit in the show is the 16mm film ***Landings*** which gives the presentation its title as it moves through the origins of life, and primitive human beings to the symbolism of putting men on the moon. Where we land in terms of evolution, the past and the future is up to the individual viewer's perception as we journey through fact and fantasy, the aspiration of technology and its achievement and unfulfilled potential. Overall, the exhibition somehow reminds us of the limitations of our digital age.

One of the most remarkable springboards of the artist's imagination is a project which dates

from 1998 when Cuevas founded the Mejor Vida Corp (Better Life Company). This began as a series of interventions distributing free subway tickets, barcodes to reduce the price of food in the supermarket, letters of recommendation, student identity cards to the people of Mexico City and the website which spawned these anti-capitalist initiatives took on a pseudo-corporate life of its own as an exponent of “militant Utopianism”. It is that freedom and power which is captured in this exhibition.

Emilio Aragón’s film *Pájaros de Papel* could also be said to be about freedom and power. Whilst perhaps recognizing that Betts’ criticisms of the opening and near closing generic scenes have validity, neither these blemishes nor the force of the screen music should stop us from acknowledging what this writer, director cum composer is trying to do.

To pigeon hole this movie, then it is in the historical fascination and obsession with the Spanish Civil War, expressed in all art forms and especially literature and film. So is this saying anything new? The rifts caused by the trauma of the Civil War have not yet healed, three and four generations from 1936-9. It is only recently that there have been signs of coming to terms with the horror and destruction of the times. The war ripped families apart, set brother against sister, so this is an attempt to construct a virtual family out of the ruins of tragedy.

In their bizarre and precarious domesticity, *Jorge de Pino*, *Enrique* and *Miguel* do indeed resemble a family. Jorge, the father, is consumed by bitterness and nihilism through the loss of his own son and wife in an air raid, Enrique, the gay comedian in an era when homosexuality was despised (the poet and playwright Lorca was executed not only for his political views), plays the wife cooking for the three of them. Miguel, the young boy who steals the show, is left to fend for himself with his insane mother held under the protection of nuns.

The continuity of acting and performing, always a fragile profession, serves as a counterpoint to the supposed permanence of the Catholic values and conformity of the Franco regime. In fact, the Spanish Vaudeville tradition, on which this film is based, more or less died out by the 1960s, according to the director himself. Franco lasted until 1975. A lot of the brutality and barbarism of the times is understated, which is not a Spanish characteristic, as the Spanish public often revels in physical directness.

This therefore an attempt to reconstruct human relationships out of the emotional rubble of dictatorship and through the vehicle of comedy which trespasses on satire without the audience feeling the full impact of the regime other than in the bullet at the station which finishes off Jorge.

Whether this is sufficient to achieve a reconciliation with the past has to be left to the individual reaction of each viewer.

With ***La Mirada Invisible*** (The invisible Eye), we can make a connection between the past and the present, as the backdrop to this film is the dictatorship of Galtieri and its location is Buenos Aires in Argentina. Tensions around the Falklands are growing again today, although unlikely to lead to an invasion which fundamentally changed both British and Argentinian politics in 1982.

The movie takes place in March 1982, just before the disastrous invasion of the Malvinas. This event was the only way the dictatorship could see itself clinging to power - by diverting the public's attention to an external, patriotic cause, away from the domestic social and political groundswell of protest and outrage, especially over the "desaparecidos", the dissidents who had disappeared in the brutal repression of this period never to be seen again. The film is based on

a novel by the writer Martin Kohan, ***Ciencias Sociales***, and is set in the cloistered high walls of the elite Colegio Nacional. It is both an emotional prison and a metaphor for the regime itself.



The film centres on the life of a young teaching assistant who zealously pursues the authoritarian rules of the school. She is seen filing her nails with meticulous precision on her journey to school via the underground. The slightest violation of the rules is rewarded with immediate punishment. Although the school is co-educational, any physical or inappropriate contact between the sexes is, of course, stamped upon. "El Secreto de la Buena Disciplina es la Vigilancia" – the secret of good discipline is vigilance is the prevailing motto both inside and outside the school walls.

We see a huge difference here between the mainstream commercial Hollywood movie (and *Pájaros de Papel*) in which every film is aggressively pitched and the pace, action and ingenuity of plot are the main drivers. This is very slow, intense, and self-destructive, where the action implodes rather than explodes as it reaches a violent climax.

What is presented is a very powerful example of sexual repression, mirroring the totalitarian regime and focusing on Maria Teresa, the lonely assistant teacher whose blind acceptance of the school's rigid discipline is undermined by her own sexuality - as she cannot escape an obsession with one of the pupils. Maria, in turn, attracts the attentions of a senior teacher who has predatory intentions but allows her to continue with her attempts to uncover a group of boys she believes to be secretly smoking within the school walls.

A toxic cocktail of sexual repression, violence and aggression is now unleashed. Anybody interested in seeing the outcome, and the significance of the nail file previously mentioned, has a further opportunity at the Cornerhouse on Saturday, 17th March at 14.00. The festival continues until Sunday, 18th March, and there is a great deal to enjoy and digest.