

December 18, 2007 Spanish Cinema Now. 5. Around round from James Van Maanen; a few notes follow.

Fuego de Angel Spanish Cinema Now continues its mixed bag of attractions with Shortmetraje, a program of seven short subjects of unusually diverse style, subject and length. I am not a particular fan of shorts, but this combination, gathered by film curator Marta Sanchez strikes me as about as interesting a blend as you're likely to see in any 90-minute sitting.

Libra (yes, the astrological sign) begins the program on a brief, quizzical note, as a young woman faces her questioner and explains the problem she has with taking her final law exams. In only four minutes, writer/director Carlota Coronado and her two-person cast Helena Casteñeda and José Angel Egido manage to hold us rapt and then surprise us.

Updated through 12/19.

At the screening I attended, an audience favorite, garnering spontaneous applause, appeared to be Lucina Gil's fourteen-minute The Happy Man. Concerning three foreign anthropologists studying the phenomenon of happiness in Spain, this would get my vote as the clinker in the bunch due to its utterly simple-minded approach and conclusion. Our learned educators discover an elderly married man who is happy, yet – shock, shock – does not own the latest hot sports car or vacation property and is not even famous. Can Spaniards – or Americans or any Europeans – really be so dense as to imagine that some people might find happiness elsewhere? Guess so. There's no mention, either, of the basics of life – food, shelter and so forth – being necessary to achieve this much-vaunted state of being. Produced and acted pleasantly enough, this is, I presume, the work of a very young filmmaker.

Weird and oddly memorable, Avant pétalos grillados harks back to those low-budget, black-and-white sci-fi films of the 50s - and appears to have been pieced together from found footage having to do with slaughter, space aliens and laundry. Beginning in the middle of things (ending there, too), Velasco Broca's ten-minute compilation is utterly bizarre and occasionally hilarious (intentionally? who knows?). But it's short and, in its freaky manner, quite fun.

Claymation gets a 12-minute Spanish slant in Said's Journey, a lovely fable of imagined immigration from North Africa to Spain by Coke Riobóo. Full of bright color, music and charm, this little gem is at once a "Welcome to Spain/You Have No Idea What You're In For" warning and a short subject interesting enough to mull over, post-viewing. Is it an anti-immigrant statement posing as advice? A slap-on-face to the Spanish immigration system? Maybe a sweeter version of

the old Monkey's Paw saw about being careful what you wish for. All three, I think, and all the stronger for this special combination.

The longest piece in the program is also one of the most accomplished: Traumalogia, from writer/director Daniel Sánchez Arévalo. If the usual eight minutes of commercial breaks were added to this 22-minute narrative, it would qualify as a clever, classy, half-hour sit-com, and I would not be surprised to learn that the filmmaker is already working on a full-length feature based on what's here. Why not? He already possesses a keen understanding of character, storytelling, dialogue, cinematography, composition, editing and more, as he spins a funny, witty, quick-paced tale of family, wedding and hospitalization. We'll be hearing more from Señor Arévalo soon, I suspect.

That old misogynistic chestnut comparing a woman to a dog walking on its hind legs gets a kind of comeuppance in the penultimate short on the program. Cristina Lucas's ten-minute You Can Walk, Too begins with a young woman (perhaps the director herself) musing on this ineffably stupid quote, and then provides a visual compilation of dogs, all kinds, walking on their hind legs. It's funny as hell and, after a while, you ask yourself, Why is this quote so famous? This is, I would guess, Ms Lucas's point. The "comparison" is clever, nasty and stupid. Replace women with blacks, gays, Irish – your pick – and the result is the same. Still, the idiotic aperçu continues to haunt us. Which may also be Ms Lucas's point.

The final segment, Fuego de angel (Angel's Fire), a documentary about the child labor in the Peruvian brick industry, is brief (13 minutes), quiet and compelling, as it uses visuals of the children at work and play, along with bits of their own explanation, to create a portrait of lives mostly harsh and unfair. The film's most evocative moment comes as one child, with a tact that seems extraordinary, given the circumstances, tells the filmmaker that he would prefer not to speak about the beatings he gets from his father. By simply allowing us to watch and listen, writer/director Marcelo Bukin contributes more than do certain famous documentarians who prefer to sermonize and scream. The program of Spanish shorts was screened last Saturday and will be screened twice today, Monday.

- James Van Maanen

Posted by dwhudson at December 18, 2007 9:31 AM