

## and 20 other films to watch

Today Mediatico presents a post by new contributor [Ignacio M. Sanchez Prado](#). Sánchez Prado is an Associate Professor of Spanish and Latin American Studies at Washington University in Saint Louis. He is the author of five books, including [Screening Neoliberalism Transforming Mexican Cinema 1988-2014](#) (Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), [Naciones intelectuales](#) (Purdue Studies in Romance Literatures), which won the 2010 Latin American Studies Association Mexico Section Book Award in the Humanities and of over fifty articles on Mexican literature and cinema.

Ever since the late 1980s, Mexican cinema has undergone at least three rebirths. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a generation of now-famous directors (Carlos Carrera, María Novaro, Alfonso Cuarón and Guillermo del Toro, among many others) produced bold and innovative films that redefined the industry and reconstructed its reputation after the so-called “crisis” of the 1980s –a decade that needs revision beyond this overblown term. After the production hiatus that resulted from the 1994 economic crisis, a second rebirth took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as directors like Cuarón and Alejandro González Iñárritu conquered the international market while others, most notably Antonio Serrano, Luis Estrada and Fernando Sariñana, constructed an unexpectedly viable domestic market with their films. And, in the past three years, a third rebirth has taken place, both at the Festival level (where directors like Amat Escalante, Carlos Reygadas, Michel Franco and Gerardo Naranjo have earned tremendous recognition) and in the commercial market (where juggernauts like *No se aceptan devoluciones* and *Nosotros los nobles* defied the conventional wisdom about Mexican film). It is hard to remember, however, that Mexican cinema produces a considerable amount of films, and that many of those works are unable to reach an audience that match the quality of their efforts, given the fact that a country that subsidizes a sizable production only grants 7 to 10 percent of its screens to domestic production. For many films of great quality and interest, this paradox means that they reach a very limited number of spectators or sometimes disappear into oblivion. In consequence, I

believe that one of the great challenges facing critics and scholars of Mexican cinema is to contribute to diversifying the canon of Mexican film shaped by commercial and festival success and introduce in the conversation films that may have faded too soon into oblivion, regardless of positive, yet ephemeral, reception during their release. In the spirit of this, I want to offer the following list of great Mexican films that do not register much in the memory of spectators and critics. The films listed here, many of them at least, have detractors, but I am of the belief that they are unfairly dismissed sometimes due to small flaws overblown under the lens of the generalized prejudice many critics and spectators have against Mexican films. I constrain myself to the post-1988 period because that is the one I have researched, but I am pretty sure that if one started this exercise from the 1960s onwards (when Mexican cinema no longer enjoyed the shine of the Golden Age), many such films would emerge. In an era where the listicle has proliferated as a critical genre, this is not a new exercise. It has been done elsewhere. For instance, a critic of the magazine *Replicante* did a list of [15 films of the 2000s](#) that he considered great, but nobody else saw. I offer a larger period of films than other lists, and I would definitely like for this exercise to multiply itself on the internet. In addition, I offer this not as a definitive list, but as a highly personal selection that is both debatable and amendable, as it is based on personal taste and on the subjective limit of what I have been able to see myself. In fact, I have excluded documentaries, a genre about which I know much less, and short films, which are nearly impossible to see systematically unless one has steady access to archives and film festivals. Besides these criteria, and the limits of my taste and my ability to see films, I added one more: that the film is available in DVD format, as it would be futile to recommend a film that would require excessive archival archeology to be seen. Some of the films are on YouTube, but I do not link them here as I suspect that they are bootlegs and, as much as I have to use that resource for research, I do not think it is appropriate or legal to link them in an article. For the list offered here, I comment on my fifteen favorites at length and I offer a supplemental list of twenty films that, in my opinion, definitely merit watching.

## 1. **Ciudad de ciegos (Alberto Cortés, 1990)**

Even though I had owned this DVD for years, I just recently watched it in Mexico's Canal 22. This film is an omnibus of sorts, as it tells ten different stories (from different writers but all directed by Cortés) all centered in the same apartment in Mexico City's Colonia Condesa. It is a condensed masterpiece, shot in a tone that balances the grittiness of 1980s social dramas with a poetic tone that shines in scenes such as the one excerpted in the video below. Released in the same period as blockbusters like *Como agua para chocolate* and *Sólo con tu pareja*, this film has been forgotten as part of the first neoliberal rebirth, but it is truly a superior piece of work. The amount of talent that went into this film is considerable. Cortés is one of Mexico's most fascinating and underrated independent directors, and his work includes other films worth watching like *Amor en la vuelta de la esquina* (1986), *Violeta* (1997) and *Corazón del tiempo* (2009). The writing credits include highly respected authors like José Agustín, Hermann Bellinghausen, Paz Alicia Garciadiego and Silvia Tomasa Rivera. The cinematographer, Carlos Marcovich would go on to shoot some of the most iconic films in the 1990s, and then to direct his own, highly praised documentary, *Who the Hell is Juliette?* (1997). And, for the trivia lovers, the actors include not only some of the best Mexican performers of that generation (Gabriela Roel, Claudia Ramírez, Claudette Maillé), but also members of three of Mexico's most iconic rock bands: Santa Sabina, Caifanes and Maldita Vecindad. This aggregate of talent results in one of the most intimate, memorable and, sadly, forgotten masterpieces produced in Mexico, and shows a variety of sophisticated urban filmmaking that can be considered the missing link between 1960s classics like *Los caifanes* and the sophisticated urban cinema of the 2000s

## 2. *Ángel de fuego* (Dana Rotberg, 1992)

A gritty, Buñuelian tale about a young girl in a circus, against the backdrop of early neoliberal reforms. This is the case of a work that did get attention in its time, but has gradually faded in the cultural memory of Mexican cinema. It is a very brave film that lives up to the legacy of *Los olvidados* better than any other Mexican work. *Ángel de fuego* tells the story of a world in the margins of the city, always looking at modernity from afar, full of sexual exploitation, gender violence, religious fanaticism and crushing poverty. In a blockbuster performance, young Evangelina Sosa, playing a young acrobat from a lumpen circus, transmits the innocent, burgeoning sexual desire and rapid psychological awakening of a young girl trapped in the wastelands of capitalist development. Dana Rotberg does not enjoy the widespread recognition that other female directors of her generation (especially María Novaro) have received, due perhaps to the fact that, after her three early films, she has only made a movie per decade. This work never fails to be notable and she has, in fact, directed three other notable fiction films worth watching: *Intimidación* (1991), *Otilia Rauda* (2001) and *White Lies* (2013).

## 3. *En el aire* (Juan Carlos de Llaca, 1995)

Released amidst the economic crisis and forgotten because it was sandwiched between the first two rebirths of the 1990s, *En el aire* is, in my view, one of the best three Mexican films of the mid-decade (the other two, *Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda* and *Cilantro y perejil*, are more widely remembered). The film tells the story

of Alberto, a disc jockey at a nostalgia 1970s radio station on the verge of disappearing under the pressures of its corporate owners. During the last night of broadcast, Alberto reminisces about his life in the 1960s and 1970s. In long flashbacks, we see the romance between Alberto and his ex-wife Laura (endearingly played by Dolores Heredia) unfolding during the turbulent years of the student movement and the rise of communes and guerrilla movements. This kind of film that reflects on the lost politics of the sixties and the seventies while facing the challenges of the neoliberal era gained currency in the 1990s with the unexpected success of Gabriel Retes's *El Bulto*. I nonetheless find De Llaca's film to be more complex and elegant, with more interesting and less contrived emotional registers than *El Bulto*. De Llaca would achieve wider recognition a few years later with *Por la libre*, but his earlier masterpiece is a film that deserves further critical and audience consideration.

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/a5z38omdz1t8nwt/En%20el%20aire%20clip.mp4?dl=0>

#### 4. **Vivir mata (Nicolás Echeverría, 2002)**

One of the things I have found in researching contemporary Mexican cinema is that romantic comedies were essential for the commercial revival of the industry and additionally, for creating links with the middle-class audiences of the neoliberal era. From Cuarón's *Sólo con tu pareja* to Martha Higareda's many vehicles, the romantic comedy is a genre that captured both the *zeitgeist* of Mexico's neoliberalism and the imagination of the audience. *Vivir mata* did not reach the commercial success of

other romantic comedies, since it was more of an attempt to restore literary and aesthetic density to the genre than to participate in the commercial market that became prevalent in the early 2000s. Written by famed novelist and chronicler Juan Villoro and directed by Nicolás Echeverría, of *Cabeza de vaca* fame, the film narrates the romance between a struggling artist (played by Daniel Giménez Cacho) and a radio host (Susana Zabaleta), who must encounter each other as they face the monumental obstacle of Mexico City's traffic and chaos. One of the reasons why this film is so underrated is that it was panned by many critics who considered the film too great of a departure for Echeverría (who is more respected for his work as a documentarian) or too much of a sellout. I have watched this film many times and I have enjoyed it since I saw it in theaters in Mexico when it opened. It has an intelligent script, a very deft use of Mexico City as a setting for the romance, and memorable performances from the entire cast. I have always thought that one of the reasons why this film never found its audience was due to its occupation of middlebrow space, which rendered it too intellectual for the commercial market and too superficial for the art cinema world. The absence of this middle ground, however is not a flaw of the movie but of the Mexican film industry, and the film is one of the most sophisticated comedies in Mexican cinema, showcasing a style of the writing, directing and acting that Mexican critics and filmgoers have only begun to recognize with the recent success of the films of Manolo Caro [like *No sé si cortarme las venas or dejármelas largas* (2013) and *Amor de mis amores* (2014)], which share many stylistic traits with *Vivir mata*.

**5. *Francisca, ¿de qué lado estás?* (Eva López Sánchez, 2002)**

One of the finest political films in Mexico, it tells the story of an agent from the RDA that is co-opted by the Mexican secret service to go after the student movement in the 1970s. *Francisca*, was rendered possible by an unusual co-production agreement between Germany and Mexico. This film achieves an insightful reflection on the lost dreams of the movement and the ruthlessness of its repression. It is one of three films by López Sánchez, all of which are excellent. Her first, *Dama de noche* (1993) stands with *Ciudad de ciegos* as one of those unexpected masterpieces of early 1990s cinema that have been forgotten and her third film, *La última y nos vamos* (2009), is one of the smartest portraits of middle-class youth in the neoliberal era. *Francisca* is the jewel of her *oeuvre*. López Sánchez engaged in dialogue with actual leaders of the movement and managed to explore the experience of the sixties in a way rarely seen in Mexican cinema, particularly considering the many failed attempts to convincingly represent the Tlatelolco massacre. I believe it deserves a special place with *Canoa* and *Rojo amanecer* as one of the best films on those turbulent times.

**6. *Acosada* (Marcela Fernández Violante, 2002)**

Marcela Fernández Violante is a veritable cult director, a woman that has been able to build a solid directorial trajectory, overcoming both structural sexism and the complexities of four different periods in the Mexican film industry. *De todos modos*

*Juan te llamas* (1975), *Cananea* (1977) and *Misterio* (1980) are three of the best films of the 1970s in my estimation, and her reputation is solidly grounded in those films. She does have a following and keeps earning fans as people become acquainted with her sometimes hard-to-find works (my friend and fellow Mexicanist Niamh Thornton expresses [here](#) admiration at her work and frustration at the difficulty of finding her movies.) But I also really like her under-watched 2002 film *Acosada*, an unapologetically feminist film about a young woman who has to fight impunity and state institutions after her apartment gets robbed. It is a thesis film about the vulnerabilities of gender and citizenship, and it is definitely schematic and pedagogic to a fault. However, it is one of the rare efforts in Mexican cinema to fully engage the question of citizen vulnerability from the perspective of a female character. One of the strengths of the film is the screen-filling presence and performance of Ana Colchero, one of the greatest Mexican actresses of the 1990s. Colchero landed this film after first being vetoed in Televisa for being one of the initial performers to make the switch to Televisión Azteca, and later, resigning from her popular role in the soap opera *Nada personal*, alleging excessive corporate interference on the show. Colchero leads a cast of excellent women performers who embody the everyday realities of gender violence victims in Mexico. It is telling that Fernández Violante has not directed another film since *Acosada* and that Colchero retired from acting: a symbol of a cinematic industry unable to handle strong-willed women directors and actors.



### 7. **Así del precipicio (Teresa Suárez, 2006)**

Teresa Suárez reached box-office success in 2014 with *¿Qué le dijiste a Dios?*, a campy and enjoyable musical based on Juan Gabriel songs and the skewering of class relations in Mexico. But, before this success, she directed a bold feminist movie, *Así del precipicio*, which garnered some attention at the time. *Así del precipicio* is the story of three middle-class women, brilliantly played by Ana de la Reguera, Gabriela Platas and Ingrid Martiz, shot through the palette of a lush hyperrealist cinematography. Suárez is at her best when she explores genres and narrative registers from melodrama and other traditionalist genres in a subversive way, highlighting the emotional complexity of her female characters and questioning the patriarchal presumptions of cinematic stories. Suárez takes many risky decisions and pulls all of them off masterfully, achieving a film that is beautiful, witty, tragic and emotionally intense at the same time. Undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of recent Mexican cinema.

### 8. **Eros una vez María (Jesús Magaña Vázquez, 2007)**

Jesús Magaña Vázquez is a filmmaker forging new territory for Mexican cinema, balancing experimentation with the appeal of commercial cinema. These efforts garnered attention recently, after the well-received release of *Abolición de la propiedad* (2012), a quirky and smart adaptation of José Agustín's novel starring Aislinn Derbez, the daughter of superstar Eugenio and Mexican cinema's most recent commercial muse. Before that, though, he directed a really great film called *Eros una*

*vez María*, the chronicle of the mental collapse of a Tonatiuh, the character of most of Magaña Vázquez's films, after the suicide of his girlfriend María, played by Ana Serradilla, in the opening scene of the film. From there, we witness the deconstruction of Tonatiuh's masculinity, deftly performed by Julio Bracho, as he falls in love with different girls also named María (and played by some of Mexico's best character actresses, like Verónica Jaspeado and Mónica Dionne) while being haunted by the original one. The film is part of a now-trilogy focused on Tonatiuh, played by a different actor in each film: Humberto Busto in the bare-bones and somewhat clumsy *Sobreviviente* (2007) and Claudio Lafarga in *Alicia en el país de María* (2015), which is enjoying an extensive pre-release social media campaign at the time of writing. The gender politics of the film are ambiguous, as Magaña Vázquez oscillates between the deconstruction of Tonatiuh and his exploitative gaze, but ultimately the film achieves a thorough presentation of the psyche of the contemporary Mexican middle-class macho. Its narrative, based on fragments, flashbacks and the meshing of reality and dream sequences, keeps the spectator absorbed, and the performances by the entirety of the cast are truly notable. *Alicia en el país de María*, if successful, may elicit interest in *Eros una vez María*. The film continues the exploration of Tonatiuh's psyche and his female counterparts. Magaña has added in his newest film a new female character to his roster, Alicia, and that the new film features two powerhouse performers opposite Lafarga's Tonatiuh: Stephanie Sigman and Bárbara Mori.

### 9. **Purgatorio (Roberto Rochín, 2008)**

I must confess that when I saw this film at the Cineteca Nacional, I did so as a literary snob expecting to hate it. The film is an adaptation of three stories by Juan Rulfo –“Paso del Norte”, “Un pedazo de noche” and “Cleotilde”- and the awful adaptations of *Pedro Páramo* normalized the idea that this great master of Mexican narrative was not translatable to cinema. I was completely wrong. *Purgatorio* is a beautiful, haunting movie that perfectly captures the spirit of Rulfo’s stories. Its work with atmosphere is flawless, the art direction and cinematography of all three stories a perfect rendition of each of their tones, and the performances, particularly those by Pedro Armendáriz and Ana Claudia Talancón in the third story, are truly memorable. The film may be a bit of a difficult proposition for some viewers (the stories are not really connected to each other, making it more a compilation of three short films), but they are three really solid pieces of filmmaking. As it often happens, the film’s journalistic coverage was not about its merits, but rather its fight with distributors, who promised fifty screens for the release weekend but only delivered 15. Also, *Purgatorio*’s 2009 release was disrupted by the influenza epidemic that hit Mexico City that year. Rochín never directed again (although he is listed as a producer of *Canela*) and currently works as a video game developer, becoming another unfortunate case of great cinematic talent lost to the distribution problems that plague Mexican film.

### 10. **Amor, dolor y viceversa (Alfonso Pineda Ulloa, 2008)**

This is my favorite Mexican film of the past 10 years. Based on a short story by Blas

*Valdez, Amor, dolor y viceversa* is an incredibly sophisticated thriller about a man and a woman who dream of each other and whose real-life encounters become increasingly violent for reasons that we do not quite gather until the end of the film. The film is fueled by the magnificent performances and screen presence of Bárbara Mori, who has become of late the muse of Mexican independent cinema, and Argentine actor Leonardo Sbaraglia. But perhaps its greatest achievement is in the art direction: a noir-ish atmosphere constructed through dreamy settings and a lush cinematography, representing love and obsession from its lightest to its darkest manifestations. I have unfortunately been unable to see the follow-up film *Restos* (2012), also a psychological thriller starring Sbaraglia, since it is still waiting for a possible 2016 commercial release. His third film, *Espectro* (2013), is an extraordinary horror film also worth watching. As part of this larger *oeuvre*, *Amor, dolor y viceversa* is a unique product in Mexican and Latin American cinema and indicates possible new directions for independent film.

#### 11. **Cosas insignificantes (Andrea Martínez Crowther, 2008)**

Featuring yet another extraordinary performance by Bárbara Mori, *Cosas insignificantes* is an endearing film focusing on a teenager (played by Paulina Gaitán) who keeps a box of mementos and trinkets. The film's story is constructed by developing the story of three of the objects, their former owners and the personal relations tied to them. Mori shines in one of the stories as the mother of a child sick with cancer. The film was produced by two really important figures Guillermo del Toro and Bertha Navarro, but even those names were not able to prevent a release

plagued with delays and lack of support from distributors. Regardless, this precise and endearing film has a small cult following that deserves expansion. Martínez Crowther recently released a well-received documentary, *Ciclo* (2013), but has yet to return to fiction.

## 12. **Vaho (Alejandro Gerber Bicecci, 2009)**

The unpredictable distribution of Mexican cinema sometimes allows spectators to find films in the unlikeliest of places. *Vaho* is the only Mexican film I have ever been able to see in a theater in St. Louis since I moved to the city in 2006. It was part of the official selection of the 2010 St. Louis Film Festival, although, as it happens with most Latin American films, it was shown only a couple of times in one of the festival's less prominent screens, the auditorium at Webster University. Make no mistake, though, this is another unheralded masterpiece: a thriller that connects a shared incident in the protagonists' childhood with the complexities of the yearly enactment of the Passion of the Christ in Mexico City's large, impoverished region of Iztapalapa. The film has many layers of narrative and ideological meaning, and the film is both smart and emotional. That talent runs through his veins should not surprise those who know his sister Verónica, one of Mexico's most interesting young writers and a fantastic visual artist. In *Vaho*, like in his most recent feature *Viento aparte* (which Olivia Cosentino recently reviewed in [Mediático](#)), Gerber Bicecci shows a great cinematic eye for the artistic study and portrayal of Mexico's contradictions and inequities. *Vaho* is not a thesis film, but rather a representation of the everyday

violence of one of Mexico's marginalized corners. Gerber Bicecci's work responds to the urgency of thinking through the pitfalls of contemporary Mexico with cinema of great quality and aplomb. *Vaho* is, in my view, one of the finest representations of Mexico City in cinema, a vision that complements the many representations of the elite cross-sections that have been proliferated in the productions of the neoliberal era.

### 13. **Preludio (Eduardo Lucatero, 2010)**

*Preludio* is a film that exemplifies the long waits that films have to endure to achieve distribution in Mexico: it was well received in festivals in 2011, got a modest theatrical release in July 2013 (where it drowned in blockbuster season), and then had to wait another year and a half to be available on DVD. This is truly a shame, because Lucatero directs the kind of intelligent yet enjoyable fare that should have more space in the commercial circuit. His first feature, *Corazón marchito* (2007), is a charming romantic comedy in which two friends (played by the charismatic Ana Serradilla and Mauricio Ochmann) must deal with the line between friendship and love. *Preludio* is a more original project: shot in a single long take, the film registers the conversation between a woman (played by Serradilla) and a man (Luis Arrieta) who first meet on the rooftop of a Mexico City building. It is a smart romantic comedy of sorts -as it chronicles the moment in which a relationship may start. It shares style and spirit with the best of the U.S. genre known as *mumblecore*, the minimalistic and conversational cinema developed by directors like Andrew Bujalski and the Duplass

brothers. It is an endearingly smart and enjoyable film. *Preludio* is definitely the kind of risky project that, along with films like *Eros una vez María*, have established Serradilla as a star of both the commercial and the indie film circuits in Mexico. Lucatero has not shot a fiction film since, but he has made two documentaries, one of which, *The Living* (2011), is an intriguing take on funeral workers in Quebec.

#### 14. **Fecha de caducidad (Kenya Márquez, 2012)**

I am a big fan of dark humor and *Fecha de caducidad* is as good as it gets. It is the story of a widow (played by the legendary Ana Ofelia Murguía), who seeks her missing son Osvaldo. It features Damián Alcázar as a cartoonish yet sinister character and Marisol Centeno as Osvaldo's girlfriend. The casting itself is a merit, because it is very difficult to find such a great role for a woman of Murguía's age, and she delivers one of the best performances of her career. Alcázar is also a joy to watch, particularly in a role different from the Luis Estrada films that turned him into a movie star. And Marisol Centeno, who had a fantastic run as a child star in the 90s, overcomes that image and truly delivers the best performance of her adult career. The film is very fun yet troubling at the same time. It is also notably agile thanks to excellent work in the editing room. *Fecha de caducidad* is a very original take on Mexico's violence, highlighting the absurdity of the grotesque situation of disappearances and killing that plague the country. The film has deservedly accumulated a number of awards and positive assessments, although it also suffered from the chronic problems of distribution. Kenya Márquez has yet to announce

whether she has a follow-up project, but she is definitely someone to watch.

#### 15. **Más negro que la noche (Henry Bedwell, 2014)**

One of the structural problems in the reception of Mexican cinema (and within the industry) is that the most commercial of cinema, the film that actually gets high box-office receipts, carries a certain level of stigma. The rejection of Eugenio Derbez by some parts of the industry, regardless of the fact that he directed and starred in the highest-grossing film in history, and the reluctance to recognize any of the highest-grossing films in the Arieles (Mexico's Oscars) may be one of the reasons behind the disconnect between an audience that sometimes gives Mexican cinema a chance and an industry that fails to find viewers. I personally celebrate the existence of this kind of popcorn film, because having films that actually get an audience, in spite of prejudice, distribution pitfalls and other obstacles, is a historical achievement. In the spirit of this, a film like *Más negro que la noche*, a crowd-pleasing remake of Taboada's classic horror romp, is precisely the kind of film we should be watching and valuing more. Horror is one of the most interesting sites of development in contemporary Mexican cinema as films both commercial and independent have begun to emerge beyond the stigma that the genre attracted since the Abel Salazar vampire films and the kitsch monsters of wrestler movies. Films like *Km. 31*, *Somos lo que hay*, *Morgana* and *Viernes de animas* explore different narrative traditions of



the gothic and the influence of global manifestations of the genre, such as J-horror. *Más negro que la noche* opts instead for the reimagining of the 1975 classic, and tells the story of Greta (Zuria Vega), a young woman who inherits a house from her mysterious aunt, in exchange for taking care of her cat, Becker. Greta moves into the house with a group of friends, one of which kills Becker, unleashing the fury of the spirits that haunt the property. It is everything one wants from this kind of film: sexy, fun and kitschy, with serious scares and thrills. *Más negro que la noche* was a box-office hit and had an unusually large distribution, with over 1,000 copies in Mexico and support from Televisa and Lionsgate's distributor Pantelion for a limited release in the United States. So this is definitely not a marginal film, but its overtly commercial nature and its genre will probably cause it to be ignored in some circles. Director Henry Bedwell also directed an underrated romantic comedy, *Avisos de ocasión* (2004), featuring Kate del Castillo, and his production company L-Mento is developing many interesting projects, including a forthcoming horror film entitled *El diario de Karem* and a rape-revenge TV series entitled *Azul violeta*.

## 20 other films to watch:

1. **Desiertos mares (José Luis García Agraz, 1994)**. An intimate film about the personal and creative challenges of a film director. A symptomatic work of the early

effects of neoliberalism in Mexican cinema.

2. **Elisa antes del fin del mundo (Juan Antonio de la Riva, 1996)**. A bold and original thriller about a nine year-old girl that plots to rob a bank after her father loses her job. An unusually bold Televisa production from the company's brief attempt to break into the cinema market in the 1990s.
3. **El cometa (José Buil and Marisa Sistach, 1998)**. Young Ana Claudia Talancón and Diego Luna shine in this historical melodrama about a girl who joins a traveling circus. She is in search to get money to Madero's movement as revenge for her father's arrest by the Díaz regime. Luna plays the young operator of a cinematographer, and the film also becomes a reflection on the early magic of cinema in Mexico.
4. **Fibra Óptica (Francisco Athié, 1998)**. One of Mexico's finest political thrillers. It focuses on a journalist, played masterfully by Roberto Sosa, who is mysteriously hired to investigate the death of a politician after a Brazilian woman was apparently framed for his murder.
5. **Cuento de Hadas para Dormir Cocodrilos (Ignacio Ortiz, 2001)**. A magical realist movie with poetic tonalities borrowed from Rulfo and García Márquez, this film tells the story of a family clan from Oaxaca through whom we see the history of Mexico. A truly unique piece, which, regardless of winning the Ariel, had a very difficult time finding an audience.

6. **La habitación azul (Walter Doehner, 2002).** Erotic dramas of good quality can be hard to find in Mexican cinema, due to the stigma against eroticism still lingering from the *fichera* period. *La habitación azul* is a compact and intense film about two lovers who re-encounter each other after they are married to other people. The film belongs to the larger effort of the producing house Argos to reinvent melodrama in television and cinema for 21<sup>st</sup> century Mexico.
  
7. **Conejo en la luna (Jorge Ramírez-Suárez, 2004).** A really good political thriller about a family that gets framed for a political assassination, which exposes them to the underworld of corruption and violence. It has a good mix of drama, black comedy and grittiness.
  
8. **Dos abrazos (Enrique Begné, 2006).** This film tells two stories of emotional connection. The first one is between a young boy facing family trouble and a supermarket employee dealing with her labor situation. The other is between a taxi driver and the daughter of a man who died in his car. It is a solid drama, written by Paula Marcovitch, with fantastic performances from Ximena Sariñana and Jorge Zárate, who won the Ariel for his role.
  
9. **Párpados azules (Ernesto Contreras, 2006).** This is a cult movie that enjoyed great critical success but has faded ever since. After winning a trip in a contest, the protagonist (played by a wonderful Cecilia Suárez) realizes she has no one with whom to share it. After her sister wants to take advantage of the trip, the protagonist reconnects with an old classmate. The film is beautifully shot and the director

Ernesto Contreras, widely recognized as one of Mexico's great talents, recently released his latest feature, *Las oscuras primaveras* (2014).

10. **Cumbia callera (René U. Villarreal, 2007)**. I owe this one to Olivia Cosentino, who has become a champion of the film and is currently studying it in depth. *Cumbia callera* is a daring experimental film. Set in Monterrey and told with minimal dialogue, *Cumbia callera* boldly explores issues of class and gender through a love triangle. The film is also notable for its use of Monterrey's colombiana cumbia to tell the story.
  
11. **40 días (Juan Carlos Martín, 2008)**. Road movies have become very prevalent in Mexican cinema, particularly after *Y tu mamá también* and *Por la libre* gave great visibility to the genre. *40 días* is one of its more original manifestations. A trio of upper-middle-class Mexico City artists face different personal failures by joining for a road trip to the United States and back. Written by Pablo Soler Frost, one of Mexico's best writers, the film shines particularly because of its fascinating representation of post-industrial North America, with its highlight scenes in Louisiana after Katrina. The best element of the film is Miguel López's cinematography, which turns *40 días* into one of the most visually beautiful Mexican films.
  
12. **Norteado (Rigoberto Perezcano, 2009)**. This film is a beloved fable of border-crossing, focusing on a would-be migrant who seeks to join his family in the United States but yet gets stuck in, and captivated by, the city of Tijuana. It is a perfect

movie: great script, terrific direction, excellent performances. A true jewel.



13. **Nos vemos papá (Lucía Carreras, 2011).** *Nos vemos papá* is a beautiful take on mourning. After her father dies, we see the protagonist (in another memorable performance by Cecilia Suárez) facing the personal, social and psychological consequences of her loss. It should not be surprising that director and writer Lucía Carreras provided such great material for Suárez to shine. She is, in fact, the author of the script of two of the most iconic films in recent Mexican cinema: Michael Rowe's *Año bisiesto* (2010) and Diego Quemada-Díez's *La jaula de oro* (2013).
  
14. **Pastorela (Emilio Portes, 2011).** Emilio Portes is Mexico's best director of comedies right now and *Pastorela* is his best film. Joaquín Cosío, fresh from his successful role as "El Cochiloco" in Luis Estrada's *El infierno*, portrays a federal police officer who exacts revenge on his neighborhood's church and his betraying friends when he is no longer allowed to play the role of the Devil in the yearly Christmas play. It is a romp with equal doses of classic Mexican film humor and sociopolitical critique, and is a joy to watch from beginning to end.

15. **Halley (Sebastián Hoffman, 2012).** This is a very divisive film, but I find it utterly fascinating. *Halley* is the story of Alberto, a zombie facing his last days. After years of hiding the fact that he was dead, he enters a state of decay that the movie chronicles in great visual detail. It is haunting and also gruesome (some even call it disgusting). Hoffman, nonetheless, manages to explore an area of scatology and thanatology that film rarely ventures into, with unique results. Definitely not for the faint of heart. Nonetheless, it struck a nerve in the international circuit: the film was supported by the Rotterdam film festival. An interesting fact is that this is the first release by Piano, a new company directed by Hoffman that will release Mexican art films in luxury editions. *Halley's* DVD set includes a book with various materials and Hoffman's precursor short film. Piano's future plans include an anniversary version of *Temporada de patos* and a box-set of Taboada's films.
16. **Ocean blues (Salomón Askenazi, 2012).** *Ocean Blues* is one of those rare, sophisticated Indies that Mexico produces every so often that attests to the great quality and originality of its productions. This lush film (which hides the fact that it was made with a 20,000 dollar budget) tells the story of a theater director who persuades an actress to perform a monologue of his authorship, unleashing a passionate artistic and personal relationship between them. The film works at all levels, thanks to a tight script, smart directing and excellent acting. Askenazi works far beyond the narrative and stylistic norms of Mexican cinema and the film can be considered a good sample of the cutting edge of the industry.
17. **Un mundo secreto (Gabriel Mariño, 2012).** *Un mundo secreto* is another road-

film, this time focused on the journey of self-discovery of a teenage girl (the title refers to the world expressed by the ideas and thoughts she records in a notebook). It is mostly set in La Paz, with exceptional exterior shots and emotional scenes that used the whales of the region (something that may have proved a serious challenge for the director). It is a very quiet, low-key film that expresses itself through silence and ambiguity, a refreshing change compared to other Mexican road films, where the moral lessons are generally too open and schematic. The film works mostly due to Lucía Uribe's moving and subtle performance, although one certainly must acknowledge the detailed work of director Mariño and the efforts of people like Jesús Magaña Vázquez and Ernesto Contreras in production.

18. **El sueño de Lú (Hari Sama, 2013).** Echoing topics from *Nos vemos papá* and *Un mundo secreto*, *El sueño de Lú* is another film about loss. Úrsula Pruneda offers a moving performance as Lucía, a mother mourning the loss of her child. The film never feels melodramatic, and the emotions in it are raw, partly because it is inspired by real loss: director Sama and Pruneda lost their child to an automobile accident. The story, nonetheless, is fictional, and beyond the personal experience, the film is excellent all around: stylistically and narratively. Hari Sama had previously directed a comedy (*Sin ton ni Sonia* (2003), an entertaining work), but *El sueño de Lú* brands him as one of the most remarkable filmmakers in recent years.
19. **No sé si cortarme las venas o dejármelas largas (Manolo Caro, 2013).** This film had commercial success, but I include it here because I think it indicates a new direction in the industry. Directed by Manolo Caro, and produced by Alex García

(whose company AG Studios is reshaping Mexican and Latin American film in considerable ways), the film adapts the director's acclaimed play into the screen. Caro's film features two couples from the same building whose lives get disrupted with the arrival of a new neighbor (a plot twist that reminds another play turned into a successful film: *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*). The film boasts a lot of acting talent from television and commercial cinema, including Ludwika Paleta, Zuria Vega and Luis Gerardo Méndez, and it works through the correct balance of drama and comedy. Caro's films are clearly influenced by his time in Spain and it is not inaccurate to consider him an heir of Almodóvar. His follow-up efforts are also of interest: *Amor de mis amores* (2014) is a comedy based in Mexico and Spain featuring another all-star cast, and, at the time of writing, the promotional campaign of his new film, *Elvira, te daría mi vida pero la estoy usando*, starring Cecilia Suárez, was launched with the video of the theme song, written and performed by indie superstar Julieta Venegas.

20. **Las horas contigo (Catalina Aguilar Mastretta, 2014).** *Las horas contigo* is the last film I saw before writing this piece, and I decided to close with it because I think it shows the increasing role of talented women in Mexican cinema, regardless of the still-entrenched structural sexism that plagues the industry. A young woman, played by Cassandra Ciangherotti, returns to her grandmother's house upon finding out she's pregnant, and there, she has to rebuild her relationship with her mother. The cast is a multigenerational who's who of women actors: beside Ciangherotti, who is in her own right a major presence in recent Mexican cinema, María Rojo plays her mother and Isela Vega her grandmother, with other roles going to Arcelia Ramírez, Evangelina Martínez and Isabella Camil. The cast is rounded up by two great actors:



## 15 Great Post-1988 Mexican Films You Have Not Seen But Definitely Should

Julio Bracho and Humberto Busto. The film was produced by Roberto Sneider and the director, as her familiar names show, is the daughter of two of Mexico's most famous writers: Ángeles Mastretta and Héctor Aguilar Camín. The merits of the film, though, fall on Aguilar Mastretta: it is a finely crafted family drama, with a strong and emotional script beautifully delivered by the cast. Really one of the best works from last year.

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