



Photo by Jim Block.

Diego Luna on the Berkeley campus, December 2011.

U.S.–MEXICO FUTURES FORUM

Holding a Mirror to Mexico

by Harley Shaiken

“**M**iss Bala,” a riveting film by Mexican director Gerardo Naranjo, opens in a parched, dusty area of Tijuana where the intense sun burns brightly, but prospects for residents are notably dim. Laura (Stephanie Sigman), a striking 23-year-old, shares a small house with her younger brother and father, who ekes out a living from a clothing stall. Trapped in an impoverished world, Laura views her beauty as a possible ticket out and enters the Miss Baja California pageant to seize her chance.

Instead, she becomes enmeshed in Tijuana’s murderous cross currents, as drug cartels fight ruthlessly to carve up territory and each other. Laura winds up in the wrong club at the wrong time and witnesses a massacre between rival cartels that also cuts down U.S. drug agents. Before the bodies are cold, her world becomes frighteningly real and disturbingly surreal simultaneously. A simple act of decency — trying to find her friend who was also caught in the crossfire — sucks her into the bowels of the cartel, threatening her life and

the lives of everyone around her. Nothing is as it seems. When Laura seeks help, a corrupt policeman delivers her instead to the drug boss. Later, a courageous act to save a high official’s life causes her to be subjected to vicious beatings and new death threats under his orders.

The violence bleeds into official corruption and impunity at all levels, corroding everyday life. The beauty contest, for example, is decided not by the judges or the desires of the audience but by a nod from the drug boss. Laura realizes her dream only to enter a nightmare.

The journey into this maelstrom is told convincingly, and hauntingly, through Laura’s eyes, but in the process, the film illuminates the traumas savaging Mexico and its citizens. Filmed in Aguascalientes, the director takes us down mean streets and holds us there. Naranjo’s skills as a director are impressive. His camera unflinchingly captures the horror and humiliation of the violence, while at the same time drawing viewers into Laura’s world and making them care deeply about her future and the future of her country.

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And it is a future inexorably linked to the United States. The film's toxic mix of violence and corruption blurs borders. While "Miss Bala" doesn't deliver an explicit political message, it unmistakably shows the conflict as a bi-national entanglement, not simply a Mexican drug war. Although the story unfolds in Tijuana, the license plates are from California, the currency is dollars, the guns are imported from across the border, and the principal drug market is the United States. The carnage, however, remains in Mexico.

The message is that we are in this together. We slowly realize that we are not simply witnessing a tragic story but, rather, are complicit in the web that has entrapped Laura. She endures unspeakable horrors, and the ending is far from happy. Nonetheless, her will to survive and her decency endure. After seeing this searing film, one leaves the theater not so much with a sense of hopelessness as with a sense of urgency. The status quo is more than horrific: it is unsustainable for both Mexico and the United States.

CLAS organized an advance screening of "Miss Bala" in December 2011 for an overflow crowd of more than 700 in Wheeler Hall, with hundreds more unable to get tickets. Without question, the excitement at Berkeley went into overdrive due to the presence of the film's producer, Diego

Luna, who is also among Mexico's most gifted actors and directors. After the screening, Luna engaged in a dialogue with the audience. "[The film] confronts you with your reality, with your fears, with your demons," he said. "And I agree with the idea of urgency. This has to stop."

Luna rooted part of the problem in the economic desperation many Mexicans confront. "The amount of money you can make in a second, as soon as you start learning how to use a weapon," he said, "it changes your life. It gives you everything you have been dreaming about, and many people would definitely choose a few years of that life [rather] than 20, 30, 40 years of having nothing and seeing their families, their people, their loved ones starving."

When asked about the *Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* (Movement for Peace With Justice and Dignity) — the organization created by Mexican poet Javier Sicilia, whose son was murdered by the cartels — Luna responded that he found it deeply moving. "I think it is the purest way of a movement to start," he said. "It is just victims asking for justice, asking for people to join on their struggle, to share their fear, their loss." He added, "I hope you don't have to wait until you are a victim to do something. I think that we say today that the whole country has been a victim of what is happening, and we have to react and get together."

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Diego Luna addresses students in "The Southern Border" course taught by Professors Beatriz Manz and Harley Shaiken.



Photo by Jim Block.

“Miss Bala”



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The images on this and the following pages are from the film “Miss Bala.”
(Courtesy of Canana Productions.)







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While Luna avoided simple solutions during the discussion, he pointed out that both the United States and Mexico would be better served by money invested in development rather than walls. “The wall is obviously not working,” he commented. “What if that money were invested in development in Latin America? Things would change, for sure.”

While on campus, Luna also visited “The Southern Border,” a class with 400 students taught by Professor Beatriz Manz and myself that focuses on the relationship between the United States and Latin America, with a particular focus on Mexico. Luna engaged in a wide-ranging discussion with students on what it means to be an actor and filmmaker today, as well as the issues that Mexico faces. He also may have inadvertently demonstrated the power of social media. While following the discussion with rapt attention, at least a few students clearly sent a tweet or two since 50-plus unfamiliar “guest” students showed up and occupied every available seat and bit of floor space.

On a more serious note, Luna spoke passionately about his next project: directing a biopic that focuses on the early years of the legendary labor organizer César Chávez and his emergence as a leader of the United Farm Workers union. The producers of the new film, Russell Smith and Lianne Halfon — who have produced a range of critically acclaimed films including “Juno,” “Young Adult” and “Which Way Home?” — accompanied Luna to campus.

[Lianne Halfon, Russell Smith, Diego Luna and Harley Shaiken outside the Bancroft Library.](#)

Luna, Smith and Halfon spent time that afternoon in the university’s Bancroft Library, intently listening to two tapes of Chávez speaking on the UC Berkeley campus during the early years of the movement. One of the talks coincidentally took place in the same auditorium as the screening for “Miss Bala” on Cinco de Mayo 1975.

Luna concluded the conversation following the screening of “Miss Bala” with a tribute to the university. “I have to say, what I have witnessed today, and the whole experience of being here in Berkeley, has been inspiring, amazing,” he stated. “It makes sense that we keep doing these films because there is an audience that is willing to take risks with us.” He linked filmmaking and citizenship in an unusual and thoughtful way: “This is the feeling of freedom,” he said. “Just remember that by choosing to see a film or not watch a film, you are making a choice that defines the world we live in.”

Many in the audience seemed to agree. He received a sustained standing ovation.

[Diego Luna is a Mexican actor, director and producer. He discussed the film “Miss Bala” on December 1, 2011.](#)

[Harley Shaiken is the chair of the Center for Latin American Studies and a professor of Geography and Education at UC Berkeley.](#)



Photo by Jim Block.