

## FILM REVIEWS

*Las acacias*. Dir. Pablo Giorgelli. Argentina. 2011. Dur: 85 min.

*Las acacias* tells a love story between two people bearing burdens. Rubén – immersed in late-middle-age loneliness and with no sign of change – is a long-distance truck driver asked by his boss to take Jacinta along on a trip to Buenos Aires. He is Argentine, hauling a load of logs from Paraguay, and she – carrying her five-month-old baby, Anahí, who “has no father” – is an economic immigrant off to join family members who moved to the city earlier.

That’s it for a fairly predictable story, which director Pablo Giorgelli tells without twists or flashbacks, focusing on the protagonists all the way to the end of the road and keeping his film free of all but the least dramatic of incidents. These choices keep the register subtle and allow a patient viewer to tune in to gesture, glance and the silences in between. This may sound boring, but it simply calls for a receptive audience, one ready to adjust its expectations to the pace of the film. *Las acacias* rewards such viewers with a subtly intense emotional engagement of a seldom seen kind.

Even just a dozen years ago this same story could not have been told as it is in *Las acacias*. Although opinions vary on the identity and accomplishments of the Nuevo Cine Argentino – as the generation of the last fifteen years is often referred to – it is undeniable that certain recent filmmakers successfully renegotiated the implied contract between film and viewer. The new filngoer they helped create is at the same time less demanding of star-power and production values but more patient and active, willing to take responsibility for their own boredom and contemplate an image even when it may not serve to forward a narrative. Although this viewer still makes up a small sector of the general public, it makes Giorgelli’s *opera prima* possible, and he rewards it with the distilled pleasures of *Las acacias*.

The most obvious precursor in the Argentine context – to the degree that national frontiers are still relevant in the context of today’s film festival circuit and internet cinephilia – is Lisandro Alonso. He employs non- or semi-professional actors embedded in the reality in which the films are set, and asks the viewer to discard the usual expectations. But unlike the maker of *La libertad* and *Los muertos* – whose sole male protagonists have little human contact – Giorgelli explores affect and non-verbal communication between individuals in a way the sound cinema has often forgotten how to do.

The opening shot is the only time the film begs allegoresis. Resonating with the apocalyptic tone of our times, a nearly static image of a dense forest canopy is seen from below as a revving chainsaw is heard. This carefully composed image of protective backlit branches with rays of sunlight penetrating far into the shade below is soon destroyed, when a tree falls across the image and lands in the bottom of the frame, thrusting us into a postlapsarian world where trees and human dreams alike are exposed to the vagaries of that omnipresent but unnamable pressure that has determined the precarious life courses of Rubén and Jacinta.

The rest of the film is mostly confined to the cabin of Rubén’s truck. Playing the poker-faced driver is Germán de Silva, an actor clearly at ease behind the wheel. The female protagonists are very well played by non-professionals Hebe Duarte and Nayra Calle Mamani. Giorgelli’s faith in the relationship between his audience and the filmic image allows him to refrain from spicing things up, and the dialogue stays minimal, giving more importance to glances and expressions, especially those exchanged between Rubén and baby Anahí. The refreshing lack of the typical charisma of actors is necessary for this kind of project, and is – if the reader will forgive further abuse of an overused phrase – a feature not a bug. Neither of *Las acacias*’ very believable adult protagonists can aspire to much beyond immediate survival, economically speaking, and are in a sense naked, shame and candor visible in their bodies and faces. But it soon becomes evident that the need for solidarity and human contact is just as pressing as economic concerns.

Rubén does not want the hassle of taking anyone along for the drive, and is visibly unhappy when Jacinta shows up with a baby. While he does not make a scene nor pretend to be pleased, he offers her no help, in spite of her new-born burden. Anahí is introduced as an utter annoyance, complete with close-quarters wailing, but she soon becomes an effective mediator between the two adults, an affective link through which they open up to each other. In the course of the journey each learns a few facts about the other: Rubén's somewhat more middle-class younger years, followed by thirty years on the road, a son he hasn't seen in years and a sister he seldom visits; Jacinta's economic desperation.

When Rubén finally delivers Jacinta and Anahí in Buenos Aires, it turns out they have a large group of relatives there. The enthusiastically affectionate welcome mother and daughter receive leaves Rubén in one of those consequential moments of decision that if not taken leave one with eternal regret: Should he slip away after the family sweeps Jacinta and Anahí inside the house, leaving him alone on the sidewalk? Or should he linger and take a shot at forming a lasting link with them?

*Las acacias* won the *Cámara d'Or* at Cannes (best first feature film) and prizes at several other international festivals, but due to its lack of star power and its appeal to a minoritarian public the film ran into difficulty finding its way onto screens in Argentina. Opening on only twelve, less-commercial screens, the film did fairly well. Due to the publicity surrounding its festival success, however, *Las acacias* has found better distribution overseas.

Matt Losada

*Año bisiesto*. México, 2010. Dir. Michael Rowe. Dur. 94 min.

*Año bisiesto* cuenta la historia de Laura, una mujer oaxaqueña que trabaja como reportera y vive sola en un apartamento de la Ciudad de México. El único interés de Laura parece ser traer distintos hombres a su apartamento para tener relaciones sexuales. Ninguno de los hombres se queda con ella o se interesa por conocerla. Ella tampoco hace nada por retenerlos y los deja escabullirse en la mañana. Otra de las ocupaciones del ocio de Laura es hablar con su madre viuda que vive en Oaxaca y recibir en su casa, de vez en cuando, la visita de su hermano. Laura vive en una auto-reclusión atormentada, comiendo sopas Ramen, mirando televisión en un aparato viejo para paliar una soledad atroz y se entretiene figoneando la vida de sus vecinos, sobre todo de una pareja, a la que ella mira mientras se masturba tras las cortinas. Estas escenas recuerdan el cine de Kieslowski, por ejemplo en su *Decálogo* en cuanto al tono urbano y existencialista.

Arturo (Gutavo Sánchez Parra), uno de los amantes de Laura tiene una afición especial por el sadomasoquismo. El juego inicia con una cachetada, pasa al estrangulamiento y lentamente va subiendo de tono, por ejemplo, cuando el hombre la derriba de una cachetada en la sala, le ordena que retire la mesa de centro y orina sobre ella. La escena los muestra después satisfechos compartiendo una cerveza o un refresco en el sofá como la aburrída pareja que ella figonea mientras miran apaciblemente una película. Laura limpia el orin desnuda, como si hiciera el aseo de la casa. Arturo le pregunta: ¿Cómo se siente que te orinen? ella responde explícita: caliente.

Laura espera con anticipación la fecha de la muerte de su padre que acació en un año bisiesto. Febrero 29 está mareado en su calendario como una fecha clave. En una de las conversaciones post-coitales con Arturo, ella revela que la primera vez que tuvo sexo fue a los doce años, cuando él pregunta con quién, ella responde: "no es de tu incumbencia". Es probable que la visión tan gris de Laura hacia la vida sea resultado de una violación por parte de su padre. Laura le pide a Arturo, durante una de las relaciones más explícitas de la película, cuando ella lo masturba diciéndole que ella quisiera que la degollara con un cuchillo, que la cortara y que se viniera dentro de ella cuando ella lo mirara con amor por dejarla ir de este mundo en un acto de violencia y sexo perverso. Lo que para Laura empezó como un juego erótico se convierte para ella en una ruta de escape para su melancolía y como resolución a sus conflictos internos. El amante accede a venir a las diez de la noche del