

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Beauty Queen and Drug Wars

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, January 26th, 2012

It's a full three minutes before we see Laura's face in Gerardo Naranjo's film *Miss Bala*. Until then we've been tracking Laura (actor Stephanie Sigman) over her shoulder, following her as she goes about the daily chores in her house, where she lives with her father and younger brother, in a border city in Baja, Mexico.

When Laura finally turns to talk to a friend – she's outside now, overlooking the ocean – we see her in profile, smiling, with the vital innocence of a young girl about to enter a beauty pageant, which she is about to do.

Laura may be innocent, but she's a real person in her real world, and she knows the rules of the game she is about to enter. Soon she's unwittingly entangled in the narco wars between drug traffickers, Mexico's army and the US DEA. Because she's grown up in this place and navigated its daily life, where gunfire may break out at any moment and it isn't remarkable to see a murdered man hanging from a bridge, she is able to wind her way through a criminal labyrinth.

There are chases, pitched battles with police, explosions, kidnapping, international drug dealings and more – yet Naranjo has not so much fashioned a thriller as procedural, and that's the film's great strength. Mátyás Erdély's camera work doesn't manipulate the audience with close-ups, and Naranjo's editorial style (he edited the film himself) refuses action-oriented cutting within scenes. Instead, the camera remains an observer, objectively surveying the scene, not moving even when we expect it to move to catch a glimpse of a narco's face, or to follow Laura when she drops her pageant crown.

This makes the audience work. We have to notice details, and glimpse action in mirrors and around corners, much as Laura must do for most of the film. The details are fascinating. In this realistic portrayal of the sad, desperate lives of people involved in Mexico's drug wars, there are no gaudy mansions, European cars or prostitutes draped poolside. Instead, we find ourselves among people who live and fight and die the only way they can. Even piles of money seem like tools of the trade, like a gun or ammunition: something you need for your dusty, weary business, nothing more.

When last we see Laura, we've come to know her face, we've seen it change and suffer through her trials, but she has turned away from us again, walking away from the camera in *Miss Bala*'s final shot. In this film, Mexico's first to address its drug wars so openly, Laura comes to stand for all the characters and for Mexico itself, facing an uncertain future, walking toward it because there's no other choice.

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