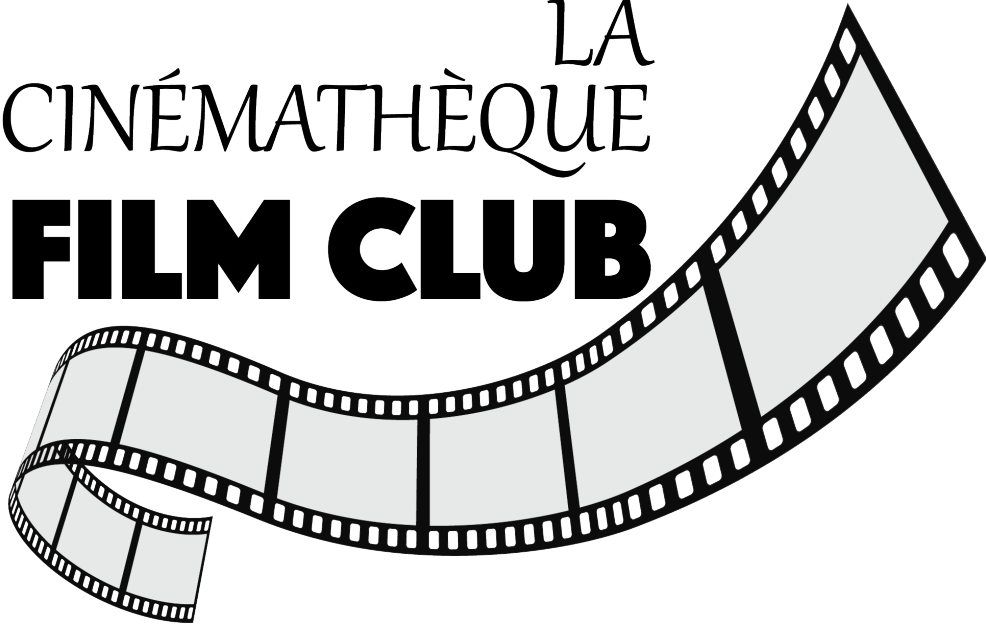


LA
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FILM CLUB



Latin American Film Series
Fall 2019

Javier Fuentes-León

Undertow
2009

Constructing Happiness With a Carnal Ghost

Manohla Dargis • Nov 25, 2010

Article sourced from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/26/movies/26undertow.html>

A small movie with a full heart, “Undertow” takes an old idea — the loving, lingering ghost — and gives it reverberant, resuscitated life. The story unwinds gracefully and with slow-building emotion in a tiny seaside village in remotest Peru, where, save for a few modern conveniences, people live much as they probably did decades earlier, pulling fish from the sea and bound by communal interdependence. There, a young fisherman, Miguel (Cristian Mercado), awaits the birth of his first child, an event that fills him with so much happiness that he shares his bliss generously with his beloved wife and his more adored male lover.

When the movie opens, Miguel is already in the throes of a passionate affair with Santiago (Manolo Cardona), a gentle outsider who has set up an artist’s studio among the shacks. Using secret messages, the lovers meet in isolated locales, including a smattering of derelict buildings that evoke the home — and, by extension, the community — that they might have had together in a different life. In the village they play near strangers, passing each other with scarcely a look. Santiago takes photographs of Miguel from a safe distance, while Miguel works and socializes with the other fishermen with an easy, rough affection that expresses the acceptable limits of one man’s love for another man. The arrangement suits Miguel, or so he believes, but it gnaws deeply at Santiago.

So profound are Santiago’s love and yearning that when he drowns, not long into the story, he remains in the village — or rather his ghost does. Yet in a pleasurable, satisfying twist, Santiago soon proves to be more than a vaporous apparition, a puff of memory come back to haunt his lover. Rather, in a shrewd move that expands the ghostly possibilities, the writer and director, Javier Fuentes-León, gives Santiago a corporeal dimension, albeit only for the initially freaked out but increasingly delighted Miguel. Although Santiago can’t be seen or heard by the rest of the villagers, he remains palpably real for Miguel, the forbidden lover he can continue to caress in private and wistfully, paradoxically, walk with in public.

As he makes the most of his obviously limited resources in this fine feature debut, Mr. Fuentes-León generally avoids the bullhorn, letting his themes drift in amid scenes of everyday life. Neither does he reduce the characters to caricature. Particularly gratifying in this respect is the complexity of Miguel’s feelings for his wife, Mariela (Tatiana Astengo), which have their own integrity and painful truths. Instead of a prickly, familiar ménage à trois, with the tragically betrayed (or vengeful) wife up against a nobler, truer gay love, Mr. Fuentes-León creates continually evolving, movable sets of relationships — Miguel and Santiago, Miguel and Mariela, Miguel and his new son — that don’t so much trump one another as slide over and under and around like endlessly dealt cards.

In some respects it is Miguel’s difficult, self-deceiving refusal to identify as bisexual much less as a gay man that liberates the movie (or almost) from some of the programmatic arcs that can turn stories about struggling human beings into didactic tales of uplift. Though there’s nothing truly surprising about the ending, which doesn’t earn the smiles it tries to force on you, the road there is consistently forked.

More than anything it is the image of Miguel walking in the village alongside the dead Santiago, shyly and then boldly touching his lover because he finally can, that illustrates this modest movie’s power. Like Santiago this vision of an effusive yet mournfully compromised happiness lingers, and it will haunt you.

Undertow

Written and directed by Javier Fuentes-León; director of photography, Mauricio Vidal; edited by Roberto Benavides and Phillip J. Bartell; music by Selma Mutal; art director, Diana Trujillo; produced by Rodrigo Guerrero and Mr. Fuentes-León; released by the Film Collaborative. In Manhattan at the Cinema Village, 22 East 12th Street, Greenwich Village. In Spanish, with English subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Cristian Mercado (Miguel), Manolo Cardona (Santiago) and Tatiana Astengo (Mariela).

Undertow

- **Director** Javier Fuentes-León
 - **Writer** Javier Fuentes-León
 - **Stars** Cristian Mercado, Tatiana Astengo, Manolo Cardona, Attilia Boschetti, José Chacaltana
 - **Running Time** 1h 37m
 - **Genres** Drama, Romance
- Movie data powered by IMDb.com

Last updated: Nov 2, 2017

A version of this review appears in print on November 26, 2010, on Page C4 of the New York edition with the headline: Constructing Happiness With a Carnal Ghost.

INTERVIEW WITH JAVIER FUENTES-LEÓN, DIRECTOR OF “CONTRACORRIENTE”

Jason Farbman • February 8, 2010

Article sourced from Latin American News Dispatch: <https://latindispatch.com/2010/02/08/interview-with-javier-fuentes-leon-director-of-contracorriente/>

As the Sundance film festival concluded last week, Javier Fuentes-León took home the Audience Award for World Cinema Drama for his first feature-length film. “Contracorriente” tells the story of Miguel (Cristian Mercado), a fisherman who is expecting his first child with wife Mariela (Tatiana Astengo). At the same time, he has been having a secret affair with a man, Santiago (Manolo Cardona), a visiting painter renting a house in the village. When Santiago drowns, he returns to Miguel as a ghost, and for the first time they are free to express their love without fear. Yet Santiago’s ghost remains trapped in the village until his body is found and properly buried, forcing Miguel to choose between the lies he has told and confronting open homophobia.

Unlike most stories of gay love and openness about one’s sexuality, “Contracorriente” takes place far away from an urban setting. Shot in a remote fishing village in his native Peru, Fuentes-León’s project uses religion and magical realism to create a work that is much more than the sum of premeditated parts. It tackles the complicated issues of honesty about oneself, of machismo and what it means to be masculine in Latin America.

The Latin America News Dispatch had a chance to talk by telephone with Fuentes-León in his home in Los Angeles.

In the past year gay marriage has been legalized in Mexico City and Argentina. In Colombia big steps have been taken in terms of civil union rights. Obviously, when you finish a movie you want to put it out, but is the present a better, more receptive context to release “Contracorriente”? What is your view on the relationship of art to social change?

Fuentes-León: I think cinema can help — art in general — can help change people’s minds. I do think though what will really change people’s minds will always be having somebody else next to them say, “hey, I’m gay.” Somebody they love or admire or respect. And seeing them live their lives as who they are. I don’t want to

diminish the power of cinema and art, but I don't want to overstate it either. This is an issue that we've been dealing with for a long, long time. At some points it has been something that's more accepted, then definitely not, then back again. I'm happy about a lot of the things that are happening in Mexico and Argentina and Colombia and hopefully people will see this film as something they can relate to as a love story and that will help be part of that movement that is making people change their minds. Because I think it's about time.

We are going to release it in Peru, we are going to release it in Colombia, and we want to release it all over Latin America. We'll see what the reaction is, but getting into Sundance and winning [the audience award] has already made a big splash of news in Peru and in Colombia. To have that kind of stamp, it's great, because it says to people "this is a movie you should see."

You shot "Contracorriente" in a small fishing village in Peru, Cabo Blanco. Do you think that brings an added authenticity?

Fuentes-León: My intention was not to talk about the political context of Cabo Blanco, of a man in this particular town in Peru that deals with being gay or with a homosexual relationship. I don't even mention that it's Cabo Blanco — you see it on a few boats, some of them say Cabo Blanco, but I don't even say it's Peru. There was even a line that was taken out that talked about Lima, because I wanted it to be an archetype of a town, more than the political and social context of a specific town and country. I guess that's what helps people connect from other cultures, because it looks like a small town that could be set in South Africa, or Italy, or Colombia, or Thailand, or even maybe Louisiana you could find something like this.

The guy who plays the painter — the Colombian actor, Manolo [Cardona] — is a huge star in Colombia, but also in Latin America. He was the male lead in Beverly Hills Chihuahua. So there's an interest on his part in crossing over and coming to the United States. Whereas Christian [Mercado], who is also a very good actor, and very well-known in Bolivia, he's not actually that known outside his own country. He has an important role in Steven Soderbergh's Che Guevara movie, in the second film about Bolivia. I think Christian's aspirations are not to be this big star. For him the pressure was a little less because he didn't really have this big following of fans. That doesn't mean it was easier. I think for both of them they were challenging roles, and not just because of the physical aspect.

But for Manolo it was definitely a bigger risk, and people told him not to take it, that this was a career suicide and blah blah blah. But he's always wanted to be a serious actor and in order to be that he needed to take roles that were not just going to perpetrate the idea that he is a hot, macho guy. Which is what he's done in the past quite a bit. He's always been the lover, the mafia guy, the cool detective, you know. He wanted something challenging — which the physical aspect was — but he also has to be vulnerable in this film, be sensitive, he has to be loved and show it. So for him it was a big risk, career-wise. But he's very proud and has been wanting to support this film and go wherever it's being shown. So we're very happy.

In the film, the heterosexual sex scene was shot very differently than those with Miguel and Santiago. Was there a conscious effort to portray these differently because the two male leads are heterosexual?

Fuentes-León: I had in mind the audience that was going to see this film, mainly a Latin American audience. I made this film for as many people as can get to see it, but I had the Latin American audience in mind, and I

wanted to highlight the romance and the love between the two men, and be a little bit careful about how much to push that envelope. I didn't want to lose [the audience], especially because [scenes with Miguel and Santiago] come early in the movie. That's one side, but on the other hand, in terms of story, when Miguel and his wife have sex, it's really Miguel trying to prove to his wife and to himself that he is a "man" that he wants to be and she needs him to be. It is a make-up sex, but a "proving that I am a man" sex. It's not only that I was afraid that one sex needs to be more intense than the other, but storywise it makes sense that Miguel would be more intense with his wife, at that moment in their relationship. That is when he is trying to prove "I have forgotten the other one and I am not gay."

You told audiences at Sundance that you could not find funding in the United States for a film which dealt overtly with homosexuality and was also in Spanish. Can you talk a bit about how you did get the funding?

Fuentes-León: Some governments — especially in Germany and in France — have some money for project that are not shot in their own country, to help developing countries with their film industries. We got that first funding in Germany because of [the Berlin Film Festival/Berlin Talent Campus]. Which is amazing, because this is Germany, and this German producer is interested in a story in Peru. And I lived in L.A., so there was no connection to Germany whatsoever. And it was through them that we got our first funding. This other company in France heard about it and came to us to read [the script]. They really liked it and applied to this government funding from France which is for industries of developing countries. We got that one too. Ironically, the governments of countries that had nothing to do with Peru were the first ones to support this film.

After that, when you start having a bit more money, people start paying more attention to you. The next chunk of money came from Colombia and Peru around the same time. Peru also has a government fund, and funds five films a year — not completely, but you get like \$150,000. Which is how most films are made around the world except in the U.S. and in India. There are some films made with European money that are not dependent on the government, but even then they get benefits for taxes and incentives. Pretty much all the other film industries in the world depend on the governments a lot.

Do you think it's easier to get a hearing for new voices or ideas when financing comes through the government?

Fuentes-León: Well I think that what is good about all this government funding is that directors have final cut. And in most cases you don't have to return the money. It's basically a gift in most cases. In Hollywood if you have private money that is invested in your film, those people need that money returned. And hopefully they gain some money also. So there's more of a pressure to perform, for these films to connect with an audience and therefore there's this whole obsession with "Ok, this thing worked, this formula works, this actor works, this genre works. Repeat it." Where as film makers in France that very much funded by their own government and don't have to return that money, they have more freedom to fuck it up. Therefore they can do whatever they want.

I'm generalizing of course, but that's what the French government wants. They take pride in the fact that they're creating auteurs. Films are made in France with the intention of being commercial successes, but

definitely when you have a government that doesn't ask you to return the money and leaves you alone to make the film you want to make, you are allowed to tell stories that are more out of the norm. I even have a bit of private money from Colombia — quite a chunk of our money came from Colombia — but I was always allowed to do what I wanted. Which was great, and I don't know if this would have been the case if it had been made — well it would not have been made — under a Hollywood studio. I would not have had that freedom, especially being a first time film maker.

I read that you finished medical school and then decided to pursue film.

Fuentes-León: I had always wanted to be in film. It's just that when I came out of high school and had to choose a career, that was not an option really. And not because my parents didn't want me to, but because there wasn't really any place to study film or even practice. And also in the society in which I grew up, all the men, all the boys would choose the typical five or seven conventional careers. Out of those I chose medicine. I enjoyed studying it, but as I grew older and more mature I realized this is not what I really want to do. So by the time I graduated from medical school, which I had decided I needed to do, I had been accepted into Cal Art [California Institute of the Arts]. I graduated from med school in April 1994 and by September of that same year I was already here studying film. So it wasn't like I finished medical school and just decided to become a film maker. I had wanted to, but the decision to actually do it took me awhile.

What is your next project going to be?

Fuentes-León: Well it depends on which one gets financed. I have another one that is a love story, this time between a man and a woman. It's not a forbidden love, but it's not a love that people understand. The other one I'm about to finish is a film noir, a psychological thriller, that takes place in L.A. I live here so I also want to make films here, but I also want to continue making films in Peru or wherever I can.

Filmography as Director

- 6 episodes of **Wild District** (2018) TV Series
- **The Vanished Elephant** (2014)
- **Undertow** (2009)
- **Géminis** (2004) short
- **Espacios** (1997) short

Javier Fuentes-León

From Film Independent: <https://www.filmindependent.org/people/javier-fuentes-leon/>

After graduating from Medical School in Peru, Javier Fuentes-León made a radical change in his life and moved to Los Angeles in 1994 to pursue an M.F.A. in film directing at the California Institute of the Arts. His thesis film, *Rooms*, won the National Award for Short Films from the Peruvian government in 1997. In 2000, the National Theater of Peru considered his play *Mr. Clouds* among the best of the year and published it in the compilation *Dramaturgia Nacional 2000*.

In the following years, Fuentes-León worked as the lead writer for two law-enforcement reality TV shows at the Telemundo Network in the U.S., subtitled films for major Hollywood studios, and worked as an editor of commercials and TV shows—including Rachael Ray’s *Tasty Travels* for the Food Network—while focusing on his own writing and directing projects. His second short *Gemini* premiered at Outfest 2004 and screened at various international film festivals. The screenplay for his first feature *Contracorriente (Underton)* won several prizes around the world in important venues such as the 2004 La Habana Film Festival and the 2005 Berlin International Film Festival. A co-production between Peru, Colombia, France and Germany, *Contracorriente* had its world premiere at the 2009 San Sebastian Film Festival, where it received the Sebastiane Award for best film with LGBT content and its U.S. premiere in the Sundance Film Festival’s World Cinema Competition, where it won the Audience Award. Since then, *Contracorriente* has won over 50 awards at film festivals around the world, including Audience Awards at Cartagena, Montreal, Miami, Chicago, Utrecht, Lima and Galway, as well as Jury Awards in Madrid, San Francisco, Seattle, Toulouse and Philadelphia, among many others. *Contracorriente* was also chosen as Peru’s official submission for the 2011 Academy Awards (Oscars) and received a nomination as Best Latin American Film at the 2011 Goya Awards in Spain.

His second feature film, *The Vanished Elephant*, won the prestigious production grant from the Peruvian Film Commission and had its world premiere at the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival, where it was chosen as one of the top 10 foreign films to watch. A coproduction between Perú, Colombia and Spain, *The Vanished Elephant* recently had its Latin American premiere as a main gala at the 2015 Cartagena International Film Festival in Colombia.

Currently, Fuentes-León is developing his next three film projects: *The Woman Who Feared the Sun* (based on his play “Mr. Clouds”), a love story with touches of fantasy, which was invited to Film Independent’s 2011 Screenwriting Lab and garnered interest at the 2011 Berlinale Co-production Market, the 2011 Film Independent Fast Track and the 2011 IFP’s No Borders Market; *Noblesse Oblige*, a comedy of manners about the class divide in Peru, and *Sinister*, a rock musical set in a restrictive society of the near future, for which Fuentes-León is also writing the music. Fuentes-León is also developing a TV series called *Prophet*, about an unwilling prophet whose otherworldly gift attracts a power-hungry media tycoon.

Fuentes-León sits on the board of directors of Film Independent, the non-profit film organization behind the Film Independent Spirit Awards and the LA Film Festival.

'Undertow:' The Pull Of A Lover, Even After Death

Bob Mondello • Nov 27, 2010

Heard on NPR's All Things Considered: <https://www.npr.org/2010/11/27/131629702/-undertow-the-pull-of-a-lover-even-after-death>

Awards season has arrived in Hollywood, bringing pictures large and small with Oscar hopes. Peru's nominee for best foreign-language film, *Undertow* (*Contracorriente*), is one of the small ones, but it has a big heart.

The story centers on Miguel, who lives with his very pregnant wife in a tiny fishing village on the coast of Peru. Village life is simple and unhurried. When a fisherman dies, the whole town is at the funeral, hearing Miguel promise to "take care of the body, so God may take care of the spirit and ensure it doesn't wander without rest."

On the fringes of the funeral is a photographer -- Santiago, a quiet, handsome outsider. To watch Miguel, you'd have no idea the two men knew each other. But after burying the fisherman at sea, before going home to his wife, Miguel veers off to meet Santiago in an abandoned building outside town, and they kiss.

Miguel does not seem troubled by their affair. He talks excitedly about his wife and the baby they're expecting. But Santiago chafes at having to hide his true feelings -- feelings so strong that when he accidentally drowns, his spirit spirits the film into magical-realism territory by hanging around, visible and audible only to Miguel, a real and substantial presence in his life.

Unlike the fisherman who was buried at sea, Santiago's spirit must wander without rest, at least until his body is found and offered to God. And Miguel, who couldn't choose between his lover and his family before, still can't. The difference now is that his lover is everywhere Miguel looks, present in ways he wasn't before. If you think about it, that's a pretty fair representation of how grief works.

First-time filmmaker Javier Fuentes-Leon both wrote and directed *Undertow*, and against considerable odds, he's made its unlikely ghost story complicatedly real. The mix of selfishness and compassion Miguel brings to his relationships, the feelings he and his wife must struggle with, the reaction of the town -- all are persuasive and wrenching and human. *Undertow*, for all its narrative tricks, has been given the rhythm and texture of real life, as well as emotional undercurrents that are haunting.

(Recommended)