

Miss Bala



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Miss Bala

Directed by: Gerardo Naranjo

Year: 2011

Certificate: 15

Country: Mexico/US

Language: Spanish

Running time: 113 minutes

Keywords: thriller, crime, Spanish language, contemporary Mexican cinema

SYNOPSIS

23-year-old Laura, played by model-turned-actress Stephanie Sigman, is an ordinary girl whose dreams of becoming a beauty queen lend her hopeful ambition of escaping her humble circumstances in the Mexican border city of Baja. In the wrong place at the wrong time, Laura is an innocent witness to a crime and becomes caught up in the thick of the ruthless and horrifying world of Mexican gang violence. From that moment on, the gang leaders begin to use her as a pawn in their battles whilst Laura desperately, yet courageously, struggles to break free. A gripping and bold thriller from director Gerardo Naranjo.

Suitable for: KS4/5 Media/Film Studies, Citizenship, Spanish

BEFORE VIEWING

Introduction

Miss Bala is the latest example of the resurgence in contemporary Latin American cinema. Gerardo Naranjo was celebrated for his 2008 feature *I'm Gonna Explode* and *Miss Bala* was Mexico's 2012's official Academy Awards entry. Naranjo is now mentioned in the same breath as fellow Central American directors Carlos Reygadas, Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro González Iñárritu. Watch or research some of these directors' films such as *Japón & Battle In Heaven* (Reygadas), *Y Tu Mamá También* (Cuarón) and *Amores Perros* (Iñárritu), then use your findings to help you answer the questions below:

- What are the thematic concerns of these films and Mexican cinema in general in the twenty-first century?
- Is there anything notable about the narrative structure of these films?
- To what extent are Mexican cinema and representations of poverty and corruption intertwined?
- Are there any similarities in the cinematography of these films?
- Research how these four directors' careers have progressed and what films they have gone on to make. IMDb will offer a good starting point for your research. You may be surprised by some of your findings!

Production and institution

Miss Bala is a Mexico/US co-production. One company responsible for its production is the Mexican film company Canana. On the US side, Fox International Productions is a branch of 20th Century Fox.

- Find out which actors founded Canana. What Mexican and North American films have you seen them in?



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- What other films have Fox International Productions collaborated on?
- Can you find out which of the films directed by all four of the filmmakers above are co-productions or 'multi-partnered' features?
- Investigate smaller production and distribution companies such as Fox Searchlight, Lionsgate and Legendary. How many are subsidiaries of the major film studios and what sorts of films do they tend to make?

Opening sequences

The opening shots establish Laura's day-to-day routines and concerns. She seems relatively carefree, and glamorous images of American pop culture icons adorn her bedroom wall. After an astonishing and devastating massacre in a nightclub, Laura is very swiftly engulfed in the corrupt underworld of Mexican gangs and drug cartels.

- What meaning or significance could you attach to the glamorous images in the opening shot signify? To what extent is their presence in such a deprived area ironic or critical?
- How do the auditions at the beginning of the film (as the contestants line up against a wall) contrast to comparable scenes in Hollywood films and reality talent shows? Consider camera moves, costume, mise en scène and sound.
- What reasons do the competitors have for entering the beauty pageant?
- When the massacre happens, does the cinematography change? What impact does the sequence have on you, and how does it achieve this?

Representation

Gang violence, class and corruption are issues that are often addressed in Latin American cinema. In *Miss Bala* all of these things are experienced from Laura's point of view. Even the action sequences are seen through her eyes, the camera refusing to capture the violence in a more traditional way.

MEXICO

- What visual suggestions are there in the film of the political and social situation in Mexico, as the director sees it?
- What areas of Mexican life and society does the film suggest crime has control of?

CRIMINALS

- Is there anything appealing, glamorous or exciting about the criminals as depicted in *Miss Bala*? In what way do the criminals look either villainous or relatively normal and mundane? Give some examples.
- Is there anyone in the film who appears genuinely uncorrupted or innocent?
- What contrasts and comparisons are drawn between beauty contests and drug running?

WOMEN

- What role does Laura have within her family throughout the film?
- How is Laura's body objectified, utilised and desecrated during the story?
- What symbolism can you derive from the scene in which money is strapped to her body?
- How does Laura's femininity help or hinder her?
- By the time Laura finally takes the stage in the beauty pageant, how has her attitude and outlook changed? Is there any reward for her, ultimately?
- Did you spot any times in the film when Laura conforms to any of the following female stereotypes? Explain your answer:
 - Damsel in distress
 - Victim
 - Strong woman
 - Sex object
 - Action heroine
 - Mother



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Miss Bala: action icon?

Though the promotional material for *Miss Bala* seems to connote an action packed, Tarantino-style thriller full of sex and violence, the film's adult content is not presented in a titillating way. In fact, the more mature and challenging scenes are unconventional and full of meaning.

- *Miss Bala* reverses the trend for filming urban thrillers in a hand-held, gritty way. How would you describe the style of cinematography the film opts for instead? Consider shot types, editing and pacing.
- What is unique and striking about how the major action sequences and shootouts are constructed? Consider camerawork and point-of-view.
- Find an image of the DVD cover on the internet. To what extent do you feel it is representative of the film?
- In what different ways could you interpret the film's title *Miss Bala*? A Spanish-to-English dictionary may be required!

Final scene and lasting impressions

Miss Bala has been described as a 'sombre' film by Sight and Sound magazine (volume 21, issue 11). Many filmmaking elements combine to give this sensation. Director Naranjo has commented on the 'violence and inequality of life in Mexico' and that he believes his film is 'socially accurate' so as to 'educate foreigners in what is happening there'. (Sight and Sound, Volume 21, Issue 11)

- Why do you think Naranjo has opted to use carefully controlled, long steadicam shots if realism is his priority?
- How does the camerawork and sound design add to the sombre feel of the film?
- How would you describe the last shot of the film: hopeful? Ambiguous? Unsatisfactory?
- What is unique and special about the use of sound in this final shot?
- Do you feel the film lives up to the director's intentions as stated above?



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ACTIVITIES

Real life inspiration

Miss Bala is loosely based on a series of real-life events surrounding a beauty pageant scandal and law enforcement corruption.

- Go online and investigate the scandal of Miss Sinaloa. How closely have the filmmakers stuck to the real-life events?
- Investigate the current social and political situation in Mexico. Are the facts and figures as devastating and hopeless as the film might suggest?

Practical

There are rarely any close-ups in *Miss Bala*. The film features long, controlled shots even during action scenes. Laura is often filmed from behind, the back of her head centred in the frame.

- Film your own short sequence adhering to the underlined criteria above. What opportunities and restrictions do these rules allow?
- Have another group film the same sequence using different criteria that you have created. Which sequence is the more effective?
- As a supplement for these tasks, watch Lars Von Trier's documentary *The Five Obstructions*. In this, he challenges a fellow filmmaker to remake his own short film five times, each time under a different set of strict conditions.

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