

Review: Bird of Passage

“Birds of Passage” is a story of how greed and vengeance can corrupt people and their values and destroy families. Directed by the Colombian team of Cristina Gallego and Ciro Guerra and written by Maria Camila Arias and Jacques Toulemonde, the film draws from several genres – including gangster mob movies and tragic Greek plays. Yet it is somehow able to subvert all these tropes to provide a unique cinematic and narrative experience.

The film presents a perspective grossly unexplored in most drug trade movie. Framed with the haunting folklore song from a blind indigenous elder, this film is a cautionary tale of the devastating effects of drug trafficking on communities. It is inspired by the indigenous Wayuu people of the Guajira region of northwest Colombia in the 1960 and 1970s, years before the escapades of Pablo Escobar. It is a story of money and power, but also of tradition, family and the lengths one will go to protect them.

Like many drug kingpin or mob movies, “Birds” features family dynamics, business rivalries, and devastating betrayal. However, it lacks much of the extreme elements commonly found in the genre; much of the gruesome killing happens out of frame or off screen entirely.

The film also echoes the narrative flow of tragic hero prominent in a Greek tragedy or a parabolic novel like John Steinbeck’s, *The Pearl*. A story of a man who gains everything, then loses it all due to his own hamartia.

“Birds” opens with the *yonna*, a coming-of-age ritual dance featuring Zaida (Natalia Reyes) dressed in red cloth and red face paint gliding in a circle surrounded by family. This quickly turns into a courtship between Zaida and Rapayet (José Acosta), a young man returning to the Wayuu clan after spending years among the *alijuana* (outsiders). They engage in a dance

or sorts where Zaida chases him around. Her flaring movement and vibrant colors evoke those of a soaring bird. Rapayet makes his desires of marriage known through his uncle Peregrino (Jose Vicente Cote), a respected elder. He is met with staunch suspicion from Zaida's mother and Wayuu matriarch Ursula (Camina Martinez).

In order to afford the pricy dowry Ursula placed, Rapayet and alijuana friend Moises (Jhon Narvaez) capitalize on young Americans in the Peace Corps looking to score some weed. After striking a deal with his uncle Anibal (Juan Bautusta Amrtinez), a marijuana grower, a partnership is created that not only allows Rapayet to marry Zaida, but for the entire family to prosper. But this wealth and power come with a price. As Ursula warns her daughter early on, "what's hard is not making a family, it's keeping it together."

Indigenous groups in media have often been depicted as a violent antagonist or passive group exploited and forgotten. However, "Birds" bring the story of the Wayuu people to center stage and depict the characters with agency and complexity.

This is not just a story about the rise and fall of one drug lord gangster, but of an entire community and culture. As their business grows more prosperous, Rapayet and his family are pulled towards the Western world and stray further from their traditions and values.

Throughout the film, the tensions between the old and new, the familiar and outside world become stronger. They drive their Ford trucks wearing "modern" American-style clothing to attend sacred rituals. Ursula, tasked with keeping the talisman that protects her family, is privy to the Wayuu superstitions and recognizes sign that could pose a threat. She notes the appearance of several birds as a bad omen, and monitors Zaida's haunting dreams that foreshadow death. The characters are must navigate these conflicting worlds and their influence on the choices they

make along the way as they balance their desire for wealth with their desire to keep their family safe.

The 125-minute movie runs a bit long, but the script is concise, fluid, and humanizing. The audience is immediately pulled into this world, experiencing the culture almost first hand. The film is in the Wayuu native language with English subtitles, forcing the audience to keep their eyes on the screen. But that is not difficult with the gorgeous cinematography and the gripping background noise of buzzing insects, chirping birds, and dramatic drumming.

“Bird of Passage” is not the average drug mobster movie. It’s ability to combine classic genre tropes seen in “Narcos” or “The Godfather” with the unique culture of the Wayuu people creates a stunning cinematic experience that widens the lens through which stories about drug trafficking and indigenous South American people are told.