

news

## Documentaries Booming in the South: Docs Take Center Stage in Morelia, Mexico

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The biggest film festival in Mexico, the [Morelia International Film Festival](#), puts documentaries at the forefront. The producers of the festival have also become key players in the launch of [Ambulante](#), a traveling documentary film festival that is touring Mexico February-April of this year. The success of both of these endeavors has made it clear that the Morelia Film Festival has cut the ribbon in the South, initiating a new era of awareness and support for documentary.



The [Morelia International Film Festival](#) focuses on shorts and documentaries.

The third edition of the Morelia International Film Festival, which took place October 8-16 2005, featured nearly sixty shorts and documentaries and over thirty narrative features. The overwhelming audience inspired the Morelia Film Fest team to go national in reach by supporting [Ambulante](#), which is currently touring 16 Mexican cities and screening over 20 Mexican and international documentaries in each location.

Morelia is by no means mainstream. Founded in 2003 with the primary mission of supporting and promoting the new talents of Mexican cinema on a local and grassroots level, the festival

developed out of the Mexican Short Film Forum, an annual exhibition of shorts that was founded in Mexico City in 1994. The Forum served as a crucial venue for emerging filmmakers. When the showcase moved to Morelia, Michoacan, a city recently designated as a [UNESCO World Heritage](#) site for its many colonial architectural treasures, documentaries were added, and Morelia established itself as the only competitive documentary program in the country.

In relatively no time at all, the festival has become a premiere film showcase, having among its attendees representatives from [Sundance](#), [Telluride](#), [Huesca](#) and [Rotterdam](#) film festivals. The festival also shares a partnership with the [International Critics' Week](#) section of the [Cannes Film Festival](#), which presents a selection of features at Morelia each year, and subsequently a selection of the Morelia short film and documentary winners at Cannes.

The Morelia experience is greatly enhanced by the presence of distinguished special guests, which have included not only Mexican super stars like Salma Hayek, Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal, but also distinguished international directors like Werner Herzog, Barbet Schroeder, Gus Van Sant, Manoel de Oliveira, Raul Ruiz and Tommy Lee Jones, who this year opened the festival with *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, his moving film that explores the harsh reality of the US-



Amongst the personalities  
support at Morelia were Michoacan

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Mexico border. Face to face contact with these local and international figures has been invaluable to many young Mexican filmmakers.

The top prize for this year's Mexican documentary competition, chosen by a jury including Tom Luddy, Co-Founder of the Telluride Film Festival and Carlos Gutiérrez, Co-Founder and Co-Director of New York based [Cinema Tropical](#), was given to [Toro Negro \(Black Bull\)](#). The documentary, directed by Carlos Armella and Pedro González-Rubio, tells the story a young alcoholic, self-destructive bullfighter from the Mayan region in Mexico's southeast, whose life full of passion and hardship embodies the reality of today's remote Mayan communities. *Toro Negro* was also included in HotDocs, the San Sebastian Film Festival, and will screen in New York's [Pioneer Theater](#) on March 31st.

Morelia's distribution and outreach muscle has also been quite meaningful for participating documentaries. Four months after its debut at Morelia, Tin Dirdamal's [De Nadie \(No One\)](#), about a Central American immigrant who crosses Mexico on his way to the US, went on to win the World Cinema Prize for Documentary at Sundance. [Voces de la Guerrero \(Voices of La Guerrero\)](#), directed by Diego Rivera, Adrián Arce and Antonio Ziri6n, was produced in a photography and video workshop imparted to street children in one of Mexico City's most dangerous neighborhoods, and recently broadcast on the cutting-edge [Breakthrough TV](#). Alejandra Islas' [Muxes: Aut6nticas, Intr6pidas, Buscadoras de Peligro \(Muxe's: Authentic, Fearless, Seekers of Danger\)](#) is a depiction of a group of indigenous and mestizo homosexuals of Juchit6n, Oaxaca who defend their diversity and preserve their Zapotecan identity. The film was an award-winner at Morelia, and will premiere in the US this month at the [Miami International Film Festival](#). Antonino Isordia's [1973](#), an account of power, love and hate inscribed on the walls of a Mexico City housing project, has also acquired great acclaim as a cutting-edge nonfiction experimental film.

present at Morelia were NICK James, Editor of Sight and Sound Magazine, International Critics' Week delegate Jean Christophe, Patrice Carr6, an authority on short film coverage for all major festivals, and Former Director of Cahier du Cin6ma, Thierry Jousse.



[De Nadie \(No One\)](#) premiered at Morelia and went on to win the World Cinema Prize for Documentary at Sundance 2006.

The third edition of the Morelia festival also featured several special sections, including Cinema Without Borders, which, in the words of Carlos Garza, the festival's programmer, "invites us to look beyond the dynamics of power and marginalization, beyond the traffic of goods and the migration of peoples, and into the heart of our most cherished and unquestioned ideas about what constitutes a nation to begin with." This year, Cinema Without Borders included Immanuel Martin's [Diez](#), David Baum's and James Scurlock's [Parents of the Year](#) and Mark Becker's [Rom6ntico](#), the tale of Carmelo and his friend Arturo, two Mexican mariachi singers who roam the bars, restaurants and streets of San Francisco. Media

That Matters Film Festival Honorable Mention, [Keep The Change](#), a film by Beth Miranda Botshon, premiered in Mexico as part of Cinema Without Borders and was chosen to screen in Mexico's renowned National Cinemateque in January as part of the [Miradas Cruzadas \(Criss-Crossed Perspectives\)](#) screening.

One of the most interesting events at Morelia was Native Agents, which brought together indigenous filmmakers from Mexico and the US, curators, and scholars to share their thoughts on contemporary indigenous media production. The daylong conference included a screening program of narrative and documentary shorts and features. Among the panelists invited were Blackhorse Lowe, N. Bird Runningwater and Amalia C6rdova from the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. The panel was featured in the article [Mapping Mexican Media: Indigenous and Community Video and Radio](#) on the Native Networks website.

A major development that came out of the success of Morelia in October, is the decision to join forces with *The Corporation*, Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*, *Tarnation* and Media That Matters Film Festival winner, *The Sixth Section*.

Is this focus on documentaries a passing fad or an indication of a broader paradigm shift in Mexico and around the world? Next month, Elena Fortes, Co-Director of *Ambulante*, will share her experiences with the traveling festival and discuss *Ambulante*'s plans to support documentary film in Mexico and abroad. So stay tuned!



Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna on tour with *Ambulante*.

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