

MONOPOLISING ADDICTIONS

Film comment: *Birds of Passage*, (*Pajaros de verano* – literally ‘Birds of Summer’.)
Humphrey McQueen, 14 October 2019

‘Savage capitalism’ headlined the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* review of *Birds of Passage*, (28 September) the 2018 feature film about the origins of the drug trade out of Colombia.

All capitalism is savage. It came into the world dripping dirt and blood from every pore and has never ceased to do so. The devastation wrought by drugs is still being more than matched by the horrors out of the conquest in pursuit of gold, silver, copper, beef, oil, sugar and coffee. (Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America* 1973).

However, capitalism is barely a bit player in this film. If you know the fuller account, you can join such dots as are presented. Otherwise, the danger is that audiences might leave feeling that the Indian clans brought devastation upon themselves. They were superstitious and greedy. That possible reaction needs to be balanced against the danger of assuming that the locals are never more than passive victims. Given their limited options in harsh social and physical environments, some seek a way out by whatever means are at hand. The film portrays a range of responses but also reveals how a search for an easier life slides into a corruption of their traditional values.

The gringos turn up as Peace Corps volunteers who are many times more anxious to get hold of marijuana than to hand out their anti-Communist leaflets. That is pretty likely to have been the case in the late 1960s. The only other Yanquis shown are three pilots to courier thousands of kilograms of pot. They make one brief and fateful appearance. Otherwise, the crops are sold to unnamed and unidentified buyers. Not until the final minutes does anyone mention Medellin.

Birds of Passage deals with one corner of the drug trade before 1980 in the desert in the far north of the country. The drug is marijuana, not cocaine. There is no sign of a civil war, no kidnappings, no death squads and no FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

A feature film is not a documentary. They rarely have footnotes. Nor should it be a political tract. Those needs are supplied by Oliver Vilar and Drew Cottle’s *Cocaine Death Squads and the War on Terror U.S., Imperialism and Class Struggle in Colombia* (2011). The authors set out two factors essential for getting beneath the news as propaganda and propaganda as ‘all the news that fit to print’. One: the FARC is the current expression of more than 150 years of rural resistance to the landowners. There is, of course, much more than the drug trade driving the struggles of the Colombian people, as there is to the centuries of revolution and resistance across the continent, whether the Tupamaros in Uruguay or the electoral majorities in Bolivia.

Vilar and Cottle deliver a second rule for penetrating the surface of Colombia’s drug deals: cocaine is just one more commodity, produced and traded according to the laws of capitalist accumulation in its era of monopolising, Bukharin’s and Lenin’s Imperialism.

For the British, forcing opium on the Chinese was far more than a matter of profit-grabbing by adventurers like Warren Delano, maternal great-grandfather of U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Reasons of state decided the British to wage the Opium Wars from the 1830s in order to get back the Indian silver with which Britain paid for all the tea out of China. The East India Company grew the opium; William Jardine and William Matheson smuggled it into China. Today, the firm they founded is a pillar of Hong Kong business.

From the 1940s, the United States Air Force was feeding its pilots methamphetamines to keep them alert. From there, 'speed' moved into workplaces to intensify and prolong labour-times for the extraction of surplus-value from barristers and baristas. Nowadays, meths is at work both nourishing the 'ice' epidemic and being force fed to children guilty of Attention Deficit Disorder. Many of those kids are victims of how the anti-social media, notably games, are addicting them to instant gratification, as Susan Greenfield shows in *Mind Change: How Digital Technology is Leaving Their Mark on Our Brains* (2015). More hyper-activity flows from food intolerances, documented by Sue Dengate, *Fed Up*, 2008).

The CIA was in the forefront of researching applications for LSD and in developing the chemical means to terminate with extreme prejudice. (Stephen Kizner's recent *Poisoner in Chief: Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA Search for Mind Control*.) Anyone who had been reading Alfred W. McCoy, starting from his *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* in 1972, could have predicted how Bush-Noriega-North cooked up Iran-Contra in the 1980s.

Like the Right's War on Drugs, the Left's focus on how the corporate warfare state both deploys anti-drug campaigns and employs drug overlords overlooks the political economy. Other drugs missing in action are tobacco (now vaping) and alcohol. No less poisonous are the food conglomerates pushing of fat, sugar and salt. Their need to expand sales is the pandemic of obesity. (see my 'Poisonous Food Industries', www.surplusvalue.org.au/mcqueen/currentpolitics)

As part of the curative rather than preventative medicine, Big Pharma goes on bribing GPs to over-prescribe antibiotics and more recently opioids. Their other big earner is from hormones to accelerate the growth of chickens, and antibiotics in cattle, both of which enter our bodies and water supply.

Birds of Passage is a wonder to watch, with tonal shifts across desert landscapes to match the changing fortunes. Spherical camera lenses enhance the magical sequences. Birds are central to the mythology; inhabiting dreams, they foretell death and revenge. The actors bring a conviction to a story as compelling as it is grim. To present an indigenous sense of time and its passing, the directors break from the tight, fast pattern of westerns and gangster movies. Instead, a singer shapes the plot into five cantos, or chapters.

There is much to praise. Nonetheless, we should not allow the excitements from watching *Birds of Paradise* to overlook that the directors are a long way from knowing how to integrate more of the forces in play, whether in Miami, Mexico or Manhattan. The U.S. warfare state and the drug cartels, illicit or sanctioned, are not even birds of passage.