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Birds of Passage (Pájaros de verano) by Directors Cristina Gallego and Ciro Guerra, 2018. Colombia: Palace Films. 125 minutes.

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This film tells a visually stunning story of how a Wayuu clan in northern Colombia build, and are destroyed by, their marijuana-trafficking empire. Compared with Guerra's last feature, 2015's Oscar-nominated *Embrace of the Serpent*, this new film *feels* entirely different, perhaps a reflection of its co-directorship by Cristina Gallego. In place of the monochromatic and claustrophobic forest setting of *Serpent*, the new film features color-saturated, wind-whipped vistas of endless plains and sky. Instead of following a lone, wandering male through a homeland made strange by his isolation, this film pulses with engaging, multigenerational members of a vibrant indigenous society. Two of the film's pivotal characters are fully realized, agential women—in keeping with matrilineal Wayuu culture and the historically important role of Wayuu women in (marijuana) trading.

Thematically, however, the films have much in common. Both pivot on indigenous life-worlds, with much of the dialogue in indigenous languages—still far too rare in feature films. Both films are concerned with indigenous societies' negotiation with change, both internal and exogenous (*Birds* spans the period from the late 1960s to 1980). Both films imagine change not through the tired lens of timeless “tradition” vs. pulsating “modernity,” but as embedded within the ongoing dynamism of people with history. Thus while the plot of *Birds* is set in motion by the arrival of an “outsider” (more on him below), the viewer has already been introduced to a syncretic culture of seasoned entrepreneurs who, as one character remarks, have centuries of experience negotiating with pirates.

The film opens with a lavishly depicted ceremony during which Zaida (Natalia Reyes) emerges from a year of seclusion and is initiated into womanhood. She catches the eye of Rapayet (José Acosta). Raised in the city, away from his people, Rapa is the archetypal liminal figure, with a foot in two worlds. He's also broke, and cannot meet the dowry set by Zaida's powerful mother Úrsula (Carmíña Martínez). Through a chance encounter with Peace Corps volunteers, he stumbles into the marijuana business as the middleman who links his weed-growing cousin's family with his urban friends who market the drug. He quickly earns enough for the dowry. Thereafter, he leads his clan-by-marriage in securing their niche in an incredibly lucrative trade. The film's depictions of the three worlds spanned by this supply chain—the cloud-shrouded forests of the growers' ranch, the sun-scorched flatlands of the Wayuu, and the multi-ethnic urban retail milieu—is a visual treat and welcome depiction of the stunning social and ecological diversity of the Guajira Peninsula.

The bulk of the film focuses on the power struggles, double-dealing, and violent retributions by which Rapa reluctantly consolidates his position in the business, particularly after Americans enter the picture to supply the U.S. market directly from Colombia. Those dynamics are juxtaposed with intimate explorations of the ways in which Úrsula and her clan contend with the massive wealth and prestige that they are accruing. Rapa's growing but almost ambivalent swagger is both reinforced and challenged by his mother-in-law's, who simultaneously condemns and is empowered by Rapa's dealings with the *alijuna* (outsiders), as she insists that they respect Wayuu codes of behavior. The ensuing tension between these sometimes opposing, sometimes synergistic poles of power—anchored in Colombian machismo, on the one hand, and Wayuu matriarchy on the other—electrifies the film.

Not surprisingly, the clan's dizzying climb doesn't last. The seed of its final destruction is sowed within itself, in the long-simmering discontent of Úrsula's unmoored nephew. He stirs up trouble that leads to a spectacularly blood-soaked reckoning as the Wayuu clans massacre each other. The associated cultural annihilation is symbolized by the gratuitous killing of the neutral messenger, or “word carrier.” In the end, destitute, only Zaida's daughter is left.

Meanwhile, the marijuana business is taken over by almost comically villainous thugs from Medellín.

It would be tempting to emphasize the ways in which this film offers a refreshing prequel to the massive oeuvre on the rise of the Medellín cocaine cartels (who did—in fact—get their start in the marijuana business). For this reviewer, however, the film's broader relevance is less historiographical than immediate. That's because it raises the important question of why—for the film's Wayuu as for many indigenous groups in the present day—is the encounter with illicit economies so likely to catalyze social and cultural ruin? After all, trading in marijuana brings the Wayuu clan material wealth and social prestige without, crucially, any accompanying loss of land or territory. Yet we know it will all fall apart. Why?

Too often, this question is answered with recourse to culture: to the idea that indigenous ontologies naturally succumb in the face of western acquisitiveness. But to its credit, this film complicates that simplistic narrative. It shows Wayuu-ness as already deeply woven with far-flung, cross-cultural, and sophisticated trading relations. We first meet Úrsula's clan as wealthy, revered—and proudly Wayuu. So how is that trafficking drugs is so much more culturally devastating than trading goats or rustling cattle?

Not to reduce this superb film to a policy position, but one way to answer this question is to consider the role of economic regulation—specifically, prohibitionist drug laws. When a commodity like marijuana is made illegal everywhere, it necessarily follows that: it will become more valuable than legal goods; profits from its trade will be massive, reorienting (moral) economies wholly towards that sector; trafficking will require secure, trust-saturated networks of exchange that are always vulnerable to their weakest links; and, without recourse to the law, participants will always have to enforce business contracts with violence. This is the recipe that simultaneously creates wealth and destroys life-worlds, anywhere. *Birds of Passage* offers a richly indigenous manifestation of this universal truth.