

**On The Global South
(or How to Win *Six* Oscar Awards in a Row)**

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*On The Global South:
(or How to Win Six Oscar Awards in a Row)*

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Francisco López Ruiz, 2022

“Look on every exit as being an entrance somewhere else.”

Tom Stoppard. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

I suspect that the most important rupture in my life occurred when I began to remember my experiences with my grandmother as a child. She could not come to our house in Mexico City through the front door because she was an Indian. She was not allowed by my mother to talk to us in Zapotec or tell us stories about her community. My mother assumed that the best she could do for her children was to radically uproot them from their Indian ancestry. But I adored my grandmother and during holidays asked to be sent with her, to Oaxaca.

Gustavo Esteva, “Rupturas”: *Turning Points* (2004).

1. Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, there was an island—too far away from the world—and a kingdom in the island. Aboriginals were persistent and curious—and exquisite and ruthless. They liked to watch furious dogs fighting against chained bears, but they also loved rhymes and sonnets surrounded by silence and waves. One day, the islanders defied the dragons of the seas because they—brave sailors—wanted to arrive where the rainbow is born. The tiny, northern, very distant foggy island disseminated its language beyond imagination, reaching fantastic southern kingdoms—as huge as continents—: magical places populated by colossal two-legged, rabbit-like creatures that, instead of walking, jumped bringing their cubs in a bag on their bellies. Consequently, English language pervaded all dominions, mandates, protectorates, colonies and territories of the British Empire. A fourth of the population and a quarter of the planet belonged to the largest empire in history, on which the sun never sets.

In 1492, Spanish expelled Arabs from the Iberian Peninsula and arrived to a New World; in 1521—only three decades later—Spaniards conquered Mexico-Tenochtitlan: the proud city that ruled dozens of vassal states and millions of people. The Mexica were sophisticated and elegant, with a preference for poetry, flowers and incense. They also pulled human-living hearts as an offering to Huitzilopochtli, *Left-Handed Hummingbird*, god of war, sun and human sacrifice. Besides, Ehécatl-Quetzalcóatl, *Quetzal-Feathered Serpent*, god of wind, wisdom and learning, had promised to return from the Eastern shores bringing a new order. That prophecy—and horses and gunpowder and famine and smallpox and rivalry of dozens of vassal states and hatred of millions of people—did the rest. Spaniards won control of Mexico-Tenochtitlan with a final naval battle. In a lifetime, Spanish—that was just another regional language—became an imperial lingua franca.

English and Spanish languages—and their cultural connotations—epitomize the profound, unprecedented changes European empires triggered in a world that used to

move very slowly before the arise of humanism.¹ For half a millennium, a complex and unpredictable series of events shaped unparalleled geopolitical and socioeconomic circumstances.

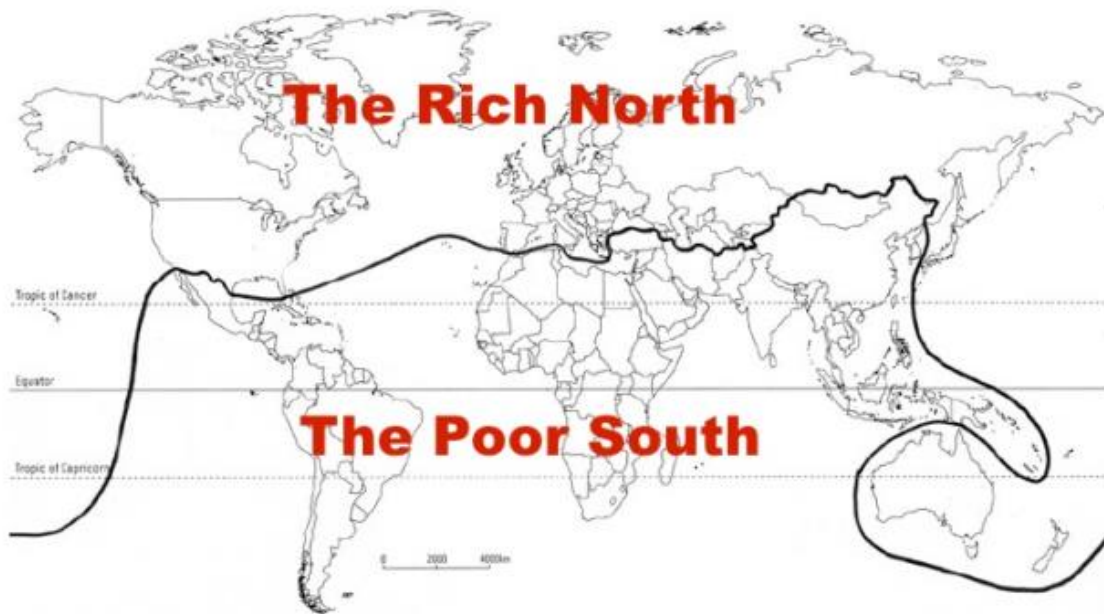
European rationalist empires began in 1492, but World War II switched the geopolitical system. From that moment, European monarchies would persist, but their empires wouldn't. The United Kingdom—in the north—and Spain—in the south of the north—ultimately would become welfare states, nevertheless the territories beyond the Atlantic would inherit not only languages, but also their steam and power. The English-speaking United States emerged as *the* global leading force; Mexico, the Spanish-speaking southern neighbor, was destined to belong to the Global South. Mexican activist Gustavo Esteva notes:

At the end of World War II, the United States was a formidable and unstoppable productive machine, an unprecedented one in the history of humankind. The US was without hesitation the center of the world. It was the master. Every institution acknowledged this fact: even the Charter of the United Nations echoed the North American Constitution. Still, North Americans wanted something else. They needed to declare without any doubts their new role on Earth. And they wanted to consolidate their hegemony to last permanently. For that purpose, they conceived a global political campaign. They even designed a specific emblem to identify that campaign. And they carefully scheduled the right moment to launch both the campaign and the emblem: January 20, 1949. That day—the day in which President [Harry S.] Truman inaugurated his [second] term—a new era was dawning for the world: the era of development. [... Development started] that very day: in an instant, two billion people became underdeveloped [...]; they were no longer valuable and diverse people, and they were turned into the mirror-inverted reality of others: a mirror that despises them and sends them to the end of the line; a mirror that lacerates the definition of their own identity—the identity of an heterogeneous majority, reduced in terms of a small and homogenizing minority.²

¹ Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari explains two essential characteristics of empires: 1) they have flexible frontiers—because empires are hungry entities, always in search of new territories to incorporate—and 2) imperial decisions give political structure to culturally diverse territories. According to Harari, in the 16th Century Europe was only a weak appendix of the world, but English, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Dutch empires were very different from any other precedent form in history, due to the invention of Western science—avid of knowledge and technology—and the ascend of capitalism and its insatiable economic appetite. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. London: Harving Secker, 2014.

² «A finales de la segunda guerra mundial, Estados Unidos era una máquina productiva formidable e incesante, sin precedente en toda la historia. Constituía sin disputa el centro del mundo. Eran el amo. Todas las instituciones creadas en esos años reconocieron ese hecho: hasta en la Carta de las Naciones Unidas se escuchó el eco de la Constitución norteamericana. Pero los norteamericanos querían algo

Three decades later, in 1980, Willy Brandt—former Chancellor of West Germany—wrote an international economic report. In accordance with this document, an imaginary line—the “Brandt Line”—depicted a harsh division of the world, with wealthy in the north and poverty-stricken in the south [fig. 1].



1. *The Brandt Line*. Geography Blog. WordPress.com.

más. Necesitaban hacer enteramente explícita su nueva posición en el mundo. Y querían consolidar su hegemonía y hacerla permanente. Para esos fines, concibieron una campaña política a escala global que portara claramente su sello. Concibieron incluso un emblema apropiado para identificar la campaña. Y eligieron cuidadosamente la oportunidad de lanzar uno y otra —el 20 de enero del 1949—. Ese día, el día en que el presidente Truman tomó posesión, se abrió una era para el mundo: la era del desarrollo. [... El subdesarrollo comenzó] ese día, dos mil millones de personas se volvieron subdesarrolladas [...] dejaron de ser lo que eran, en toda su diversidad, y se convirtieron en un espejo invertido de la realidad de otros: un espejo que los desprecia y los envía al final de la cola, un espejo que reduce la definición de su identidad, la de una mayoría heterogénea y diversa, a los términos de una minoría pequeña y homogeneizante». Gustavo Esteva in Leïla Oulhaj, Boris Marañón Pimentel y Dania López Córdova. “Desarrollo y buen vivir: ¿propuestas complementarias?” en *Economía social y solidaria, migración y género: hacia la búsqueda de alternativas de “desarrollo”*. Una reflexión interdisciplinaria desde México. Leïla Oulhaj, Ximena Gallegos (coords.) México: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2017, pp. 90-91. All translations are mine.

The Brandt Line is hardly as sharp as in the US border with Mexico. Both countries are direct recipients of the British empire and Spanish rule. Mexico and the US inherited European contradictions and possibilities. At present, the United States has 265 million inhabitants while the UK's population is 64 million; the US territory is 40 times bigger than British soil. Mexico has 125 million-inhabitants and there are 47 million Spaniards; Mexico fourfold the Spanish Iberian Peninsula. The Old World mutated into the New World, exceeding it. And yet, north-south divide has designed new maps and challenges.

In 1984, British journalist Alan Riding felt compelled to write a beautiful book, *Distant Neighbors: an instruction manual to understand the indecipherable, paradoxical, and inconvenient Mexicans that live south of the 2,000-mile edge*.³ Jeffrey Davidow—former US ambassador to Mexico—exemplifies the unavoidable relation between both countries looking through allegories: these parables are not kind to the United States, but they are worse for Mexico. A tiny porcupine—distrustful, introverted and oversensitive—screches with the behavior of the immense, distracted, careless bear with which he shares a destiny, but who is too busy leading the world.⁴

Mexican economist José Antonio Aguilar argues that for a century US citizens have believed that their country is culturally diverse, when in fact it is significantly homogenous. In contrast, Mexicans have forced the consolidation of a supposedly uniform nation, when Mexico is a highly multicultural country.⁵ Mexico harbors an impressive and unique amount of animal and vegetal species—a responsibility for the rest of the world and for future generations—. This biological richness has inspired incredibly diverse cultural environments. Languages are worlds: ways to conceive the universe—and explain it. Mexico has 364 Indigenous languages—persuasive and moving; still latent, still alive. This cultural richness implies another kind of responsibility.

³ Alan Riding. *Distant Neighbors. A Portrait of the Mexicans*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

⁴ Jeffrey Davidow. *El oso y el puercoespín. Testimonio de un embajador de Estados Unidos en México*. México: Mondadori, 2004.

⁵ José Antonio Aguilar Rivera. *El sonido y la furia. La persuasión multicultural en México y Estados Unidos*. México: Taurus, 2004.

Furthermore, Spanish is the second biggest language in the world by number of native speakers—just behind Mandarin. By total speakers, Spanish is at number four—behind Chinese, English and Hindustani. Spanish is the official language of over 22 countries and it is used by over 530 million people. And yet, the United States has more Spanish speakers than Spain—only Mexico has more. But that will last only three decades: the US Census Office forecasts that the United States will have 138 million Spanish speakers by 2050, making it the biggest Spanish-speaking nation on Earth, with Spanish as the *mother tongue* of a *third* of US citizens. In a lifetime, what was regarded as the language of labor workers and cleaning personnel—an index from the Global South—will become a dynamic worldwide force.

Mexico is now the third largest remittance receiving country in the world—after China and India—overwhelmingly from migrant workers in the United States. In addition, Mexico is the United States’ second-largest export market—after Canada—and third-largest trading partner—after Canada and China. 1.5 million US citizens live in Mexico, and Mexico is the top foreign destination for US travelers. Mexico is a strong promoter of free trade, maintaining free trade agreements with the most countries of any nation in the world, including pacts with Japan, the European Community, and many Latin American partners. The US-Mexico border region represents a combined population of 15 million people.⁶

Moreover, Mexico is the country with the second largest number of emigrants in the world—after India. Nevertheless, India is a 1,369-million habitant nation: its 17-million emigrants represent only a small proportion of overall Indian population. Instead, there are 13-million Mexicans living abroad: it is a unique situation, with more than 11% of Mexican population as emigrants. Besides, 98% of all Mexican migrants live in the United States.⁷

⁶ *US Relations With Mexico*. Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet. Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs. April 1, 2019: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-mexico/>. Retrieved on April 7, 2020.

⁷ *Countries With the Most People Living Abroad: Emigration Rate by Country*. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-most-emigrants-living-abroad.html> Retrieved from April 8, 2020.

The increasing interconnections between Mexico and the United States represent—for many people—a warning. Mexican culture frightens because it may not consolidate a “pure” northern WASP, monolithic, exclusive, English-speaking US culture. For some, it might also become a nightmare: the fulfilled prophecy of a revenge—supposedly born when the United States took more than a half of Mexican territory after winning the 1846-1848 war.⁸

In a fascinating comparison, when Italy tried to become an empire, it failed disastrously. As a result, Italian native speakers live mostly in one single country. Italian does not even figure in the 20 most spoken languages in the world.⁹ Nevertheless, Italian is the fourth most studied language worldwide.¹⁰ Those sweet words seduce and convince: they are the vehicle of a delicious dream—the strong feeling that such a diverse territory shares a common future, from snowy Aosta to rough Calabria—. Italy has always been terribly equipped for war; instead of that, the impressive Italian contributions to western culture fulfill the heart of humanism. *L’Italia fa bene allo spirito*: Italy is good for the souls, because of the powerful narrative mobilized by its national language.

My country of origin—Mexico—is also badly armed to establish its will by force. Meanwhile, Mexico—as well as Italy—has the appeal of the *soft power* generated by its cultural contributions. The Tuscan language used by Dante was imposed to the rest of Italy

⁸ US geopolitical expert George Friedman predicts that Mexico will be a rising power by 2070. According to him, this hypothetical situation unflinchingly would place an open challenge to the US global power, implying an unescapable Mexican militarization and a full-blown confrontation. *El león cree que todos son de su condición*: “the lion believes that everyone is like him”, states a popular saying in Mexico. Friedman is wrong, mainly because his thinking is rooted in 20th Century patterns of thought. He is terrorized by ethnical and cultural transformations enhanced by Spanish language, but he is unable to accept how racist his allegations are, disguising them as moral issues. Friedman wouldn’t even predict the end of “national states”, because only war—and not cooperation—exists in the author’s mind. George Friedman. *The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century*. New York, Doubleday, 2009.

⁹ Around 60 million people are Italian mother tongue speakers in the peninsula (including San Marino, Vatican City and Ticino in Switzerland). Italian has an official minority status in regions of Croatia and Slovenia. Yet Italian is the second most widely spoken native language in the European Union. Italian language reaches 85 million speakers including Somalia and emigrant communities in the Americas and Australia.

¹⁰ After English, Spanish and French: official languages of the United Nations Organization, together with Chinese, Arabic and Russian.

to build a national state; Spanish—or more precisely, the language used in Castile—allowed Mexico to officially assemble a country. For centuries, Mexico tried to convince itself to hold only one identity. Instead of that, we now recognize that Mexico is a young collection of old nations. That multicultural heritage will increasingly enrich the world over this century.

There is a different—maybe better—way of conceiving identity on either side of the border. US writer on foreign affairs Robert A. Pastor foresees an integrated North America, a project motivated not only by commercial trades between Canada, Mexico and the United States, but also associated with culture, education, security, society, economy, transports, infrastructure, shared policy-making, entrepreneurship and innovation.¹¹

Pastor envisions a three-sovereign states community, in which every country shares responsibility for each other success, and pays a price if any of the countries fails. The only way to carry out this project might be to foresee a grand vision for a shared North American Community of Nations. In this continental view, three principles might sustain common partnership: interdependence—and not dependency—, reciprocity—and not unilateralism—, and a negotiation style based on the Community interests—and not on a measure-for-measure compensation system. For now, Canada prefers bilateralism with the US, Mexico is an audacious but discouraged partner, and the United States is a country afraid of losing its sovereignty.

North America is not Europe and it might not seek to emulate the European Union. [...] European integration was promoted by two devastating 20th Century wars, and the belief that unification could prevent a new war. North American integration was driven by market and the conviction that standards of living will improve when barriers to commerce and investment will be eliminated. [...] A North American Community *nor is* a common market in which labor moves freely. At some point, the US and Canada should be able to negotiate a workforce agreement because the gap between these two countries is not as wide as to generate significant demographic movements. Of course, this is not the case for Mexico. Even so, a freer movement of certain specific professional categories or “guest workers” should be allowed between Canada, Mexico and the US.

¹¹ Robert Alan Pastor. *The North American Idea. A Vision of a Continental Future*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Nevertheless, a common market cannot be planned if important differences in income levels persist.¹²

(As I write this paragraph, the European Union is facing unprecedented challenges that could threaten its future. A TV journalist recently presented this situation with Italian humor.¹³ As in a 1970's football match, Holland goes on the attack, but Italian ironclad defense remains untouched. After a 90-minute savage game, extra time is about to begin. However, decisive actions will take place in an empty stadium, because of distance securing. Italians urge the EU to use funds for fighting the effects of the pandemic—Italian journalists have even invented specific terms for referring to those emergency investments: *Coronabonds* and *fondi salvastati*, “statesalvers funding”. According to Italian national television network Rai, Dutch and German officials have blamed Italy, Spain and France for acting irresponsibly: “we are not going to pay your debts”. Thus, Mediterranean states appear as “the Global South” of the rich, prudent, sparing, highly organized Teutonic European Union.)

For me, culture is an irreplaceable mean for promoting changes and improvements. Cultural affinities are compelling and moving: they are symptoms of new possible, engaging scenarios. The 2026 FIFA World Cup men's tournament will be staged in Canada, Mexico and the United States.¹⁴ Only Japan and South Korea—in 2002—had

¹² «América del Norte no es Europa y no busca emular a la Unión Europea. [...] La integración europea fue impulsada por dos guerras devastadoras en el siglo xx y por una creencia de que la unificación podría prevenir una nueva guerra. La integración norteamericana fue impulsada por el mercado y la creencia de que el estándar de vida de los pueblos mejoraría si las barreras al comercio e inversión fueran eliminadas. [...] Una Comunidad de América del Norte *tampoco* es un mercado común donde la mano de obra se puede mover libremente. En algún momento, los Estados Unidos y Canadá podrán negociar un acuerdo que permitirá un movimiento más libre de la mano de obra entre los dos países porque la brecha entre el nivel de vida no es lo suficientemente amplia para generar un movimiento poblacional significativo. Claro, este no es el caso con México y mientras se debe permitir un movimiento más libre de ciertas categorías individuales de profesionistas o “trabajadores huéspedes” entre los países, un mercado común no se puede contemplar hasta que no se reduzca la diferencia en los niveles de ingresos entre los tres países». Robert A. Pastor. *La idea de América del Norte. La visión de un futuro como continente*. México: ITAM — Miguel Ángel Porrúa, pp. 204-205.

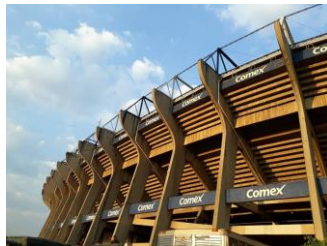
¹³ *La diretta di Rainews24*: <https://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/live/ContentItem-3156f2f2-dc70-4953-8e2f-70d7489d4ce9.html>. Retrieved from April 9, 2020.

¹⁴ Mexico will be the first country organizing for the third time a World Cup men's tournament. The US will be the sixth country staging twice this competition. Canada will be the fifth nation hosting both women's and men's World Cups.

offered a joint international organization. Mexico City’s Aztec Stadium, with seating for 91,000 spectators, will be the only stadium hosting three World Cups [figs. 2-3]. The 2026 tournament will be an unparalleled football event, jointly orchestrated by 16 cities in three North American countries [figs. 4-5]. Qatar 2022 will manage 64 matches played by 32 countries; the 2026 World Cup will expand to 48 national teams and 80 matches.



2. Aztec Stadium
 Imagotype of LRT station
 Image: Servicio de Transportes Eléctricos



3. Aztec Stadium
 Arch. Pedro Ramírez Vázquez &
 Arch. Rafael Mijares Alcérreca
 Mexico City, 1962-1966
 Photo: Francisco López-Ruiz



4. First draft of host cities
FIFA World Cup 2026
 Photo: Mundial 2026-Guadalajara



2026
FIFA WORLD CUP
 UNITED STATES | CANADA | MÉXICO
5. Logotype
FIFA World Cup 2026
 skyscrapercity.com

Another outstanding syndrome caused by a new cultural horizon of North American possibilities is founded on Mexican “kidnapping” of Oscar Awards—a highly symbolic US institution. Mexican directors Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Guillermo Del Toro have been nominated for Best Director in five occasions—almost consecutively. They were favorites to win the Academy Awards in all occasions—and they did. Their stories are furiously rooted on US culture—except for *Rome*:

Gravity 2014 | NASA astronauts Dr Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock) and Lt Matt Kowalski (George Clooney) are stranded in space after the destruction of their shuttle, and attempt to return to Earth (mid-orbit space, present time).

Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) 2015 | Riggan Thomson (Michael Keaton), a faded Hollywood actor best known for playing the superhero Birdman, struggles to mount a Broadway adaptation of a short story written by renowned US poet Raymond Carver (New York City, present time).

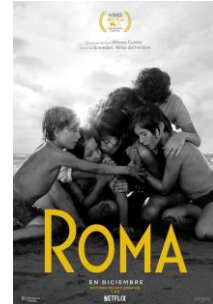
***The Revenant* 2016** | Frontiersman Hugh Glass (Leonardo di Caprio) survives the attack of a bear and later tracks down John Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy), the former confidant who betrayed and abandoned him (territory of the present day Dakotas, 1823).

***The Shape of Water* 2018** | Elisa Esposito, a mute cleaner (Sally Hawkins) working in a Cold War-era lab facility, bonds with an Amphibian Creature (Doug Jones) kept there against his will, and exploited as a possible secret weapon (Baltimore, 1962).

***Roma* 2019** | Cleo Gutiérrez (Yalitza Aparicio), a Mixtec Indigenous live-in housekeeper, works for a middle-class family. Sofía (Marina de Tavira), the mother of the family, interlaces her emotional responses to Cleo's as both women face similar relationship conflicts. (Colonia Roma neighborhood of Mexico City, 1970 and 1971).

In every occasion, these productions were the most nominated films in the Academy Awards; they always contended for Best Motion Picture of the Year—*Birdman* and *The Shape of Water* won that award. *Gravity* took the Oscars for seven of the 10 categories for which it received nominations. The other four films directed by Mexicans won three or four awards each. Cuarón was the first Mexican director winning an Oscar. At present, Del Toro, Iñárritu and Cuarón are the only Latin American directors receiving an Academy Award.

Mexican directors are a gold mine for their collaborators. *Gravity* is the biggest box office hit of both Sandra Bullock's and George Clooney's careers, after *Speed* (Bullock) and *Ocean's Eleven* (Clooney)—*Gravity* also received critical acclaim and is one of the most successful sci-fi films of all time. After six nominations, Leonardo di Caprio (*The Revenant*) finally won his only Oscar working with Iñárritu. Other *ten* stars were nominated for the Academy Awards: Sandra Bullock (*Gravity*); Michael Keaton, Emma Stone and Edward Norton (*Birdman*); Tom Hardy (*The Revenant*); British actress Sally Hawkins, Olivia Spencer and Richard Jenkins (*The Shape of Water*); Mexican actress Marina De Tavira (*Roma*)—and Mexican non-professional newcomer actress Yalitza Aparicio, performing in Spanish and Mixtec languages. Mexican cinematographer Emmanuel Chivo Lubezky won three Academy Awards in a row. The five films received 52 nominations as a whole [table 1].



6. Gravity	7. Birdman	8. The Revenant	9. The Shape of Water	10. Roma
OSCAR AWARDS 2014	OSCAR AWARDS 2015	OSCAR AWARDS 2016	OSCAR AWARDS 2018	OSCAR AWARDS 2019
Directing Alfonso Cuarón	Directing Alejandro G. Iñárritu	Directing Alejandro G. Iñárritu	Directing Guillermo Del Toro	Directing Alfonso Cuarón
Best Motion Picture of the Year	Best Motion Picture of the Year	Best Motion Picture of the Year	Best Motion Picture of the Year	Best Motion Picture of the Year
				Foreign Language Film
Actress in a Leading Role Sandra Bullock			Actress in a Leading Role Sally Hawkins	Actress in a Leading Role Yalitza Aparicio
	Actor in a Leading Role Michael Keaton	Actor in a Leading Role Leonardo di Caprio		
	Actress in a Supporting Role Emma Stone		Actress in a Supporting Role Octavia Spencer	Actress in a Supporting Role Marina de Tavira
	Actor in a Supporting Role Edward Norton	Actor in a Supporting Role Tom Hardy	Actor in a Supporting Role Richard Jenkins	
Cinematography Emmanuel Lubezky	Cinematography Emmanuel Lubezky	Cinematography Emmanuel Lubezky	Cinematography Lars Laustsen	Cinematography Alfonso Cuarón
	Original Screenplay Alejandro G. Iñárritu Nicolás Giacobone Alexander Dinelaris Armando Bo		Original Screenplay Guillermo Del Toro Vanessa Taylor	Original Screenplay Alfonso Cuarón
Music (Original Score) Steven Price			Music (Original Score) Alexandre Desplat	
Production Design Andy Nicholson Rosie Goodwin Joanne Woollard		Production Design Jack Fisk Hamish Purdy	Production Design Paul D. Austebery Shane Vieau Jeffrey A. Melvin	Production Design Eugenio Caballero Bárbara Enriquez
Film Editing Alfonso Cuarón Mark Sanger		Costume Design Jacqueline West	Costume Design Luis Sequeira	
Visual Effects Tim Webber Chris Lawrence David Shrik Neil Corbould		Film Editing Stephen Mirrione	Film Editing Sidney Wolinsky	
Sound Editing Glenn Freemantle	Sound Editing Aaron Glascock Martín Hernández	Visual Effects Richard McBride Matt Shumway Jason Smith Cameron Wildbauer	Sound Editing Nathan Robitaille Nelson Ferreira	Sound Editing Sergio Díaz Skip Lievsay
Sound Mixing Skip Lievsay Niev Adiri Christopher Benstead Chris Munro	Sound Mixing Jon Taylor Frank A. Montaña Thomas Varga	Sound Editing Martín Hernández Lon Bender	Sound Mixing Christian T. Cooke Glenn Gauthier Brad Zoern	Sound Mixing Skip Lievsay Craig Henighan José Antonio García
7 Awards 10 Nominee Most Nominated Film with <i>American Hustle</i>	4 Awards 9 Nominee Most Nominated Film with <i>Grand Hotel Budapest</i>	3 Awards 12 Nominee Most Nominated Film	4 Awards 13 Nominee Most Nominated Film	3 Awards 10 Nominee Most Nominated Film with <i>The Favorite</i>

Table 1. Earned Academy Award highlighted in color.

It is possible that part of this success relies on marketing. *Roma* received the biggest promotional campaign in Netflix's history—a non-traditional film industry medium: *Roma* was, in fact, the first Netflix production allowed to run for Academy Awards. Mexican-directed movies were released in August at the Venice International Film Festival. Later, the five films were promoted in an almost-identical six-month international circuit that included Telluride, Toronto and London—among other festivals. When January arrived, the films had received critical acclaim and Mexican directors were overwhelming favorites.

Moreover, these five movies follow Hollywood theories from screenwriting, with a three-act narrative structure and a Syd Field's midpoint—and yet, the storytelling leaves the security of film genres. These cinematographic proposals are not formulaic products because they all deal with creativity and experimentation:

Gravity | *Science fiction thriller film* | Zero-g environment long shooting was a challenge. British visual effects company Framestore spent three years creating the film's visual effects, which make up over 80 of its 91 minutes. After Alfonso Cuarón and his son Jonás finished writing the script, it took four and a half years to complete the film.

Birdman | *Black comedy drama* | Storytelling generates a vertiginous rhythm, but strangely, the film is constructed from very few—and long—sequence shots. Alejandro González Iñárritu told he wanted the film appeared as a single-shot story because “we live our lives with no editing”. *Birdman* establishes ironic oppositions between “commercial” Hollywood blockbusters and “artistic” Broadway plays.

The Revenant | *Epic adventure drama film* | Emmanuel Lubezki used natural winter lighting, shooting in remote locations that spent extensive time for crew transportation. Instead of the original schedule, the film extended for more months due to location photography. *The Revenant* was shot in twelve locations in three countries: Canada, the United States, and Argentina.

The Shape of Water | *Romantic dark fantasy* | The film is an astonishing visual storytelling that recalls theatrical scenography—partially inspired by brutalist architecture (main locations are in Toronto). The film is officially set in 1960's MacCarthyism oppression, but it is reminiscent of a near dystopian and dysfunctional future—relating to, for example, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985). In this fantastic, parallel set of worlds, the aseptic, scientific environments contrast with the old, warm, highly cozy environments dwelled by Elisa and her neighbor friend Giles (Richard Jenkins), in small apartments at the top of a theater.

Roma | *Intimate family drama* | Filmed in black and white, *Roma* is set in 1970 using digital techniques for exterior shots, with absolute devotion for details—from close up shots of posters, magazines and everyday objects, until wide travelling shots as long as a street. Naturalism reaches awesome credibility—as in the birth scene in a hospital. *Roma* is the result of substantial work recreating and recuperating period elements: sounds, objects, colors, trademarks, advertising, graphics—the film was highly symbolic and nostalgic among Mexican middle-aged audiences.

Are these movies Mexican cinema? The impressive array of achievements, is not due to individual talents? Twenty years ago, it would have been a bad joke desiring that a Mexican filmmaker could be even nominated to (any) Oscar category—not to mention to win the statuette. Perhaps for some people, the Academy Awards are not the quintessence of “high culture” and “artistic merit”. And still, Los Angeles is the hub of worldwide filmmaking. Some French directors would kill for winning *one* Oscar Award... in a row!¹⁵

So, it is true: Iñárritu, Del Toro and Cuarón started their cinematographic carriers in Mexico, but they could not have reached their current success without building—for decades—a strong network of contacts in the United States. This is exactly the point: the *Three Amigos*—in addition of being extremely talented, focused and driven—cooperate in a more efficient way than other skilled professionals. As well as most contemporary visual artists and filmmakers in “the Global South”, Mexican directors are not willing to succeed being “folkloric”, “exotic” or “naïve”. On the contrary; the technical quality of their productions and the cultural puissance of their work are spectacular.¹⁶

¹⁵ French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Delicatessen*, 1991; *The City of Lost Children*, 1995; *Amélie*, 2001) claimed that *The Shape of Water* plagiarized all three films. Guillermo Del Toro and French composer Alexander Desplat demonstrated multiple and precedent sources of inspiration, as well as original creation pathways.

¹⁶ All five films directed by Mexicans were nominated to Cinematography, Sound Editing and Sound Mixing Awards on *each* occasion: cinematographers Emmanuel Lubezki and Alfonso Cuarón won *four* Oscars. Other frequent nominations were Production Design (4), Original Screenplay (3)—with directors Cuarón, Iñárritu and Del Toro also being nominated as screenwriters—, Film Editing (3), Visual Effects and Costume Designs (2). Steven Price (*Gravity*) and Alexander Desplat (*The Shape of Water*) won the Music (Original Score) Awards.

Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Guillermo Del Toro are, by their own right, citizens of the world. The way these cosmopolitan Mexicans behave—proudly accepting they are Mexicans: with no arrogance, but also without getting a complex—and the manner these three directors collaborate—between them and with others—are great added values. Other Mexican filmmakers are consolidating their careers in the US in similar ways: eventually, some of them are also working in Mexican productions as well, living between two countries.¹⁷

Most importantly, the *Three Amigos* consider that their success is genuinely based on their *Mexicanidad*. Their thrilling, engrossing, moving stories are linked in subtle ways to Mexico. Mexican jazz drummer Antonio Sánchez did an unprecedented job composing the soundtrack of *Birdman*. This storytelling fights ego and individualistic choices in a highly competitive professional context and, in the end, family redemption prevails. *Rome* is so compelling because Cuarón's autobiographic journey is plenty of solidarity, immersing into a much-missed childhood with strong Mexican family ties and shared feminine attitudes in the face of adversity.

In the 2018 Golden Globes ceremony, a Chinese journalist asked Guillermo Del Toro how might he imagine all those universes—plethoric with monsters, terror and the dark side of human nature—being Del Toro such a joyful and loving person. *El Gordo* answered: “Because I’m Mexican”, producing laughs in the audience. In *The Shape of Water* the real monster is the powerful, arrogant, violent alpha male—the US colonel Strickland, played by Michael Shannon. Guillermo Del Toro and Shannon had early

¹⁷ Diego Luna played an adaptation of Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* in the Teatro de los Insurgentes in Mexico City (2017), after performing *Star Wars: Rogue One* (2016). Other professionals born in Mexico that have increasingly participated in Hollywood films and US TV series are actress Stephanie Sigman—first Mexican Bond girl—, actress Karla Souza, actor Gael García Bernal, Mexican-Kenian actress Lupita Nyong'o, actor Demian Bichir, actress Ana de la Reguera, actor and producer Eugenio Derbez, actress Kate del Castillo, cinephotographers Rodrigo Prieto and Guillermo Navarro, screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga, and actress Salma Hayek—a pioneer— among others.

conversations about the notion that Col. Strickland would have been the hero of the film if it had been made in the 1950s, something that fascinated the actor.¹⁸

And that is true, indeed: *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (dir. Jack Arnold, 1954)—one of the many films and stories that inspired Guillermo Del Toro—ends with the killing of “the monster”. That means the extermination of The Other (alien, different and, therefore, necessarily dangerous). A pamphlet.

You have to be conscious not to tell the wrong story. In most versions of *The Beauty and the Beast*, there’s a Stockholm syndrome moment, in which the beauty is kidnapped by this figure [the monster] and develops a relationship with him, and then the beast has to transform himself into the most boring prince to have the relationship. *The Shape of Water* avoids both things: the female character is the gear of change of every single thing that happens in the film, and the beast remains the beast. I don’t think love is about changing the person, but understanding the person. [...]

A visual vocabulary is the same as a spoken vocabulary. If your culture offers you painting, sculpture, architecture, pop culture, illustration, comics, you have a breath of language that you can articulate when designing, instead of repeating what others did. [...]

The Shape of Water is told in a legitimate, beautiful, powerful cinematic way. This is very important for me, as it is for anybody who lives now as “the Other” in a society.¹⁹

In *The Shape of Water*, magic happens thanks to “insignificant” characters—smashed and rejected, broken and scorned by “society”: the humble, mute, tender female protagonist (Elisa-Sally Hawkins); a black, frustrated cleaner unhappily married (Zelda-Olivia Spencer), the homosexual former-alcoholic artist (Giles-Richard Jenkins) and, of course, the Amphibian Man (Doug Jones) referred to as *the asset* by both Soviet and US secret services.

The Shape of Water is a fantasy [science fiction?] film, narrated from a Mexican sensibility: the feeling from a southern inclusive, cooperative culture that suffers—and rejects—asymmetry of power. Solidarity, collaboration and friendship ties are important in the film—as well as they are also worthy in Mexican societies. And as it frequently

¹⁸ Interview by Julie Miller (December 5, 2017). "For Michael Shannon, the Clothes Made the Man in *The Shape of Water*". *Vanity Fair*. June 10, 2018.

¹⁹ The full 9-minute Guillermo Del Toro’s 2018 Golden Globes Speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5-B8FCPV8E>. Retrieved from April 18, 2020.

happens, the mysterious and strange “Monster”—in real life—is also a magical creature, who compensates others for their kindness in unimaginable ways. In the Golden Globes Awards ceremony, Guillermo Del Toro answered: “I’m Mexican, and no one is more conscious than us about inevitability of death and preciousness of life”.



11. *Coco*. Miguel and his great-grandmother, Mamá Coco. <https://www.pixar.com/feature-films/coco>

The 2017-most influential cultural event for Mexico’s image abroad was not planned by the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs.²⁰ It was instead Pixar’s 3D computer-animated fantasy film *Coco*. Miguel, a 12-years-old boy who lives in Santa Cecilia town, struggles against his family’s generations-old ban on music. So Miguel enters the Land of the Dead to find his great-great-grandfather—a legendary singer—in search for help.

Coco offers a complex visuality—with an exceptional depth of field—but its core stands at Mexican culture, love for family, and ancient Indigenous-centered answers toward death. The film was released in Mexico the weekend before *Día de Muertos*. *Coco* opened in the US during the Thanksgiving weekend, and three weeks after *Día de Muertos*. Surprisingly, the film was a blockbuster not only in Mexico, but also in countries

²⁰ I have published an article about the importance of changing governmental approaches to culture in order to reach new seductive cultural strategies for Mexico abroad. Francisco López-Ruiz. “Los museos del futuro en la configuración de la imagen postmexicana global” en “Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior”. México: Instituto Matías Romero / SRE, pp. 105-125.

<https://revistadigital.sre.gob.mx/images/stories/numeros/n111/lopezruiz.pdf>

as China and Japan. The fact that the film depicted "a real culture" caused anxiety for co-director Lee Unkrich, who felt an enormous responsibility to do it right:

As soon as we decided that we wanted to tell a story that takes place in Mexico, we immediately booked our first research trip. Over the course of three years, we visited museums, markets, plazas, workshops, churches, haciendas and cemeteries throughout Mexico. Families welcomed us into their homes and taught us about the foods they enjoy, the music they listen to, their livelihoods and their traditions. Most importantly, we witnessed the importance they place on family. We really wanted to explore the family bonds that tie us to the generations that came before us. This story is about celebrating our past—even as we look to the future.²¹

Pixar Animation Studios worked on this project for six years. The cast was all Mexican (with performers living in Los Angeles and south of the border).

Mexico had never been as celebrated as in the 2018 Academy Awards ceremony. Child actor Antony González shouted *¡Viva México!* when received the Best Animated Feature Award for *Coco*. Later, *Recuérdame* won the Best Original Song Award: Mexican artist Natalia Lafourcade sang it in Spanish. Guillermo Del Toro received the Best Director Award for *The Shape of Water*. He said: "I am an immigrant, as Alejandro [González Iñárritu] and Alfonso [Cuarón] and many of you. [...] The best thing our industry does is to help erase the lines in the sand when the world tries to make them deeper." If you cried in *Coco*, is likely that you are able to feel that the guy who is doing your garden isn't The Other—an alien enemy—but just another person who would prefer being at home with his family. It is no small deed, especially in a moment when the imaginary Brandt Line is becoming a real, solid Great Wall. Storytelling is a powerful vehicle to change minds but—above all—for transforming hearts.

²¹ <https://www.pixar.com/feature-films/coco>. Retrieved on April 13, 2020.

2. The Global South

As for hand grenades—or police spoken portraits—the Global South concept might be handled with care. Of course “The Global South” is a much better idea than the hierarchical terms of “developed” or “underdeveloped nations”, with their Darwinian flow of ideas towards “Western-Northern civilization”. The Global South theories are even better than the “Third World” construct, with its peripheral, subordinate and degrading implications for most of the people on planet Earth.

The Global South is a valuable concept, but it is not a finished or a fixed one. It demands nuance and complexity. In recent years, globalization, technology, migration and superdiversity have added sophistication and volatility to a longstanding topic. In a way, the Global South will increasingly live inside the wealthy north and—to a certain extent—it might transform present realities.²² Post-development theorists also have explored new perspectives, treasuring local, cultural and historical contexts for promoting pluralism in ideas about development.²³

Moreover, “underdevelopment” also lives in the heart of the almighty north, and it is hurting it so bad. Princeton professor Anne Case demonstrates that in the US it takes a long time to die a death of suffering and despair, punctuated by overdose, alcoholism and suicide.²⁴ The coronavirus pandemic has evidenced profound structural inequalities—also in “the Global North”. US bioethicist Zeke Emanuel notes that it is difficult to understand the extent of Covid19 crisis: «This is going to be a different kind of recession, at least in two important ways. First, we are going to be separated from each other by this physical distancing. We still have no idea what that will wreak for human beings, as social species.

²² Sydney—for example—is among one of the world’s most superdiverse cities, with 40 percent of its population born overseas, and immigrants from 140 countries. Only a third of Sydney’s population has both parents born in Australia: it has become a “majority-minority city”.

²³ Mexican author Gustavo Esteva, Croatian-Austrian philosopher and priest Ivan Illich, Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar, Iranian diplomat Majid Rahnema, French economist Serge Latouche, German sociologist Wolfgang Sachs, and US anthropologist James Ferguson, among others.

²⁴ Anne Case & Angus Deaton. *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

Second, this recession is wiping out huge swaths of types of employment».²⁵ In turn, US Protestant minister William J. Barber states:

The United States has a whole lot of wounds from decades of racist policies and the criminalization of the poor. In 2011, Columbia did a study that we've updated: At least 250,000 people die every year from poverty in America. Now, in a pandemic, that's an open fissure [...] I struggle with the history, in this country, of deaths not counting equally. Of saying it doesn't really count the same if First Nations people die off. Or poor people. Or black people. [...] Now I'm hearing numbers that 40 percent of those dying in Michigan are African Americans even though they represent 14 percent of the state population, and that in Louisiana, 70 percent who have died are African Americans even though they are one third of the state. Much of that traces back to the structural inequalities that make people more susceptible to this sickness—the lack of health care and a living wage.²⁶

(Right now, it seems that anything could happen in the coming months and years. But perhaps—later—we will be able to tell stories like this: “Once upon a time, there was The Illness: a terrible hazardous condition that spent too many precious lives. Some people believed that we were at war, but we weren't: there was plenty of food, hot water, Netflix, broadband, silence and health. I was lucky because I was Nonessential—an oxymoron, because Essentials were, in fact, Expendables. I stayed at home while others fought—it seemed like The Illness would last forever. But when I walked again on the street, I realized that the rhythmical, hypnotic, striking Salsa Ladystyle teacher—she was gone: her ever-fairy smile was Nonessential. The charming, bearded, intensely kind cellist who always told us witty jokes about obsessive musicians... he wasn't there anymore: his introverted gaze was Nonessential. And so I was too: my whole life and my entire job were so full of Nonessentialism—plenty of nothing. We all lived The Lost Decade. Painfully—very slowly—everything went normal again. Sneezing stopped being a crime. We ceased talking about Lockdowns, Outbreaks, Supply Shortages, Testing Rates, N95s or Immunity Passports. And usual words finally returned. So did vaccines, cruise liners,

²⁵ Zeke Emanuel. “Restarting America Means People Will Die. So When Do We Do It? Five Thinkers Weigh Moral Choices in a Crisis”. “The New York Times Magazine”. April 10, 2020: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/magazine/coronavirus-economy-debate.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20200412&instance_id=17585&nl=morning-briefing®i_id=114862758&segment_id=24861&te=1&user_id=688d857ebbdeeb9ad42be929b53170cc. Retrieved from April 10, 2020.

²⁶ Rev Dr William J. Barber. “Restarting America...”. Retrieved on April 10, 2020.

Superbowl and Champions League, incredibly cheap flight options, Tinder, the red carpet in the Academy Awards, the laws of supply and demand, stock markets and risk capitals, and two-digits unemployment rates—reaching historical records! Economic forces catastrophically prevailed—as always do. And so did Dystopia and The Global South”.

But maybe you can't just flip a switch and restart the whole set of global economies. Maybe we are witnessing a slow-motion agony of the old system: a sci-fi film that no one told us about, because it was directed by Chekhov instead of Spielberg.

Maybe some unexpected wonderful things are happening right now. In Prague art students are working on sewing machines: in only three days, 10-million Czechs are given handmade masks—and therefore, some days ago, miraculous Mask Trees were invented. Habitants of Milan are operating flying baskets for delivering food to people they haven't met before. Rooftops in Amman and squares in São Paulo are becoming the new sites of free concerts.

Maybe we will find out that Old Normal was a waste. Maybe we won't fight anymore imminent collapse.

Maybe we are so tired of hiding a dagger in our socks...

Maybe we wake up with a higher, shared sense of purpose—and we discover we were sent into battle with a carnation between our teeth.

Maybe we are ready for cooperation and solidarity.

And maybe—just maybe—we embrace the best version of ourselves.

One beating hope—just a possibility—as fragile as this parenthesis).