



**[¡Viva! Opening Gala, Cornerhouse](#)**

**Reviewed by [Ian Betts](#) March 2012**

Why do we need foreign language film festivals? Should we even group films by the language they are produced in? There is an argument that movies should be judged on equal terms and not ghettoised by notions of national identity, or ignored because they carry subtitles.

Yet in Britain, we seem to marginalise foreign-language films by referring to them all as [World Cinema](#) and confining them to arthouse screens and the corners of DVD shops. Such is the prevalence of productions in English and the dominance of Hollywood that many have let this form of cultural imperialism go unchallenged.

You could argue that the award-winning lustre bestowed on **The Artist** suggests a shift away from mainstream cinema, and that it has serious international credentials as a French production. However, we must also recognise that it is a celebration of silent film and the institution of Hollywood itself. Perhaps it's been so successful

*because*

no-one speaks French in it. In most cases, foreign language films are only acknowledged in separate categories at our awards ceremonies, and rarely held in equal esteem.

Hopefully, the recent popularity of *L'Artiste* (as we should call it) would suggest that modern audiences have an appetite for diversity, nostalgia and for re-appraising movements in culture that we have previously ignored or forgotten. It is such hunger that feeds the

[¡Viva! Spanish & Latin American Film Festival](#)

at the Cornerhouse this month. Running in its 18th year, the festival is showcasing 19 films from 10 different regions - certainly a sufficient variety to satisfy cinemagoers who are tired of Hollywood's global dominance.

The heady fortnight of screenings and events is a praiseworthy effort to champion foreign-language cinema, but programming a festival of films linked by language is no easy act. There are many tensions and pitfalls to consider, suggests festival organiser Rachel Hayward while we share a drink in the bar. "Spanish and Latin American cinema is so vast," she explains, "that I wouldn't dare to say in the few films we are offering, we have somehow captured the essence of the varied national cinemas and film industries that the festival features. There's no way we can establish an oeuvre with just 19 films, so the focus shifts to showcasing great movies."

While it may be difficult and possibly redundant to recognise unifying themes within the programme of films, Hayward suggests that there is an engaging diversity of works on offer. "Some, like [Paper Birds](#), have as broad an appeal as something like *The King's Speech*, while

many of the films are deeply serious, political and delving into topics such as trauma, civil war, conspiracy and obsession.”

This may sound grave, but it is typical and reassuring of the Cornerhouse to screen progressive and challenging cinema, and such is the revelry in the bar on the opening night that you are unlikely to go home depressed. The regular crowd are an odd demographic to define; an interesting throng of enthusiasts occasionally characterised by scarves and moustaches, they seem united by a passion for film and imported beer, and also evident is their pride as members of one of Manchester’s most important cultural institutions. During ¡Viva! their numbers swell further, Latin voices join the excited chatter and a romantic fervour seems to take over the whole building. “It changes,” says Rachel, because “we couch everything with that sense of fiesta.”

Indeed, there is a wide-eyed wonder among those who venture upstairs, complementary bottle of Spanish beer in hand, to view the artistic showcase of Minerva Cuevas’ [Landings](#) in Gallery 1. The first two works are giant discs of colour, one a multi-pointed compass, the other a lurid target with a pesticide pump pointing to its centre; Cuevas has politicised these household symbols and tainted them with militaristic violence, a feeling which is amplified by warnings of ‘a global environmental holocaust’ in another malevolent image showing the silhouette of a bird’s skeleton. The eponymous installation film is a looped projection of printed illustrations depicting various experimental military aircraft that would look at home on the covers of comic books and teenage fiction from the 1950s.

