

The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

‘Identifying Features’ Review: Lost in Migration

In this confident drama, a mother searches for her son who went missing while trying to migrate from Mexico to the United States.



By **Teo Bugbee**

Jan. 21, 2021

Identifying Features  NYT Critic's Pick | Directed by Fernanda Valadez | Drama | 1h 35m

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The drama “Identifying Features” begins with a figure approaching from across a field, his appearance obscured by a heavy fog: perhaps he’s a soldier, maybe a farmer. It becomes clear

only when he's a few feet away that the man in the mist is really just a boy. As his face emerges, with smooth cheeks and cold eyes, the beauty, elusiveness and surprise of the film around him surfaces, too.

With calm conviction, this teenager, Jesús (Juan Jesús Varelá), announces his plans to cross the border from Mexico to Arizona. Jesús's mother, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), explains in a voice-over that this is one of her last memories of Jesús before he went missing on his journey to reach the United States.



The movie follows Magdalena as she attempts to follow her lost son's trail, and her quest soon spills over into the plains near where Jesús was last seen. There, she meets Miguel (David Illescas), a young man returning to his family after being deported from the United States. As they hunt together for their missing relatives, each acts as the other's surrogate family, a makeshift son for a makeshift mother.

Though it is a somber story, the film is enlivened and energized by striking, purposeful images. The writer-director Fernanda Valadez builds depth within her frames by staging action in the background and making liberal use of offscreen sound. Traffic glows from border highways, villains loom from the shadows. There always seems to be movement happening just outside of the characters' field of vision, events that develop without their understanding. It's a confident debut feature, and a sophisticated acknowledgment of the powerlessness that migrants face.

Identifying Features

Not rated. In Spanish, Zapotec and English, with subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 35 minutes. In theaters and on [Kino Marquee](#). Please consult [the guidelines](#) outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention before watching movies inside theaters.

Identifying Features NYT Critic's Pick

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Director Fernanda Valadez

Writers Astrid Rondero, Fernanda Valadez

Stars Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez, Armando García

Running Time 1h 35m

Genre Drama



Movie data powered by [IMDb.com](#)

Los Angeles Times

MOVIES

Review: A Mexican mother's haunted search drives bone-deep chills of 'Identifying Features'



By ROBERT ABELE

JAN. 22, 2021 4:30 AM PT

Hypnotic and heartbreaking, “Identifying Features” is a feature debut to marvel at, but only once you’re able to shake off the bone-deep chills emanating from Mexican filmmaker Fernanda Valadez’s disorienting tale of a mother’s search for her missing son. Equal parts odyssey, investigation and descent, this eerily shattering dispatch from the heart of a grief-beset country — a [double winner at Sundance](#) last year that’s been racking up festival awards ever since — has the power to expand our notions of what a border story is.

It’s also the kind of first feature whose visual strengths and storytelling heft should put us all on watch for whatever Valadez, who wrote the screenplay with producer Astrid Rondero, wants to show us going forward. Because what she does here in exploring every mother’s — every migrant’s — worst nightmare feels like something simultaneously new and classically mythic, and the effect is dizzying.

“Why did he have to leave?” a stricken Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) wonders aloud about her teenage son, Jesús, who left their Guanajuato home two months earlier on a bus headed north, and who hasn’t been heard from since. Her abiding last memory — which is the dreamlike scene Valadez opens her movie with — is of young Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela) coming into focus from what looks like a field of morning haze, the crackle of fire and the sound of masa being slapped and shaped nearby, the words on his lips about leaving immediately with a friend for Arizona. “What did he have to gain?” Magdalena wants to know, assuming the worst.

Rebuffed by local law enforcement who have no crime to point to — just gruesome photos of those who didn’t survive the gantlet of cartel violence — Magdalena treks to the border to see if an answer is there. A scene of lingering families and body bags awaits, and more authorities, this time with found items and clothes to show worried relatives. She briefly commiserates with a fellow mother (Ana Laura Rodriguez), herself in an emotional limbo regarding a possibly disappeared son, and who offers sage advice to Magdalena about the pressure from officials to sign proof-of-death papers. Who is that closure really for? The families, or those who want to stop looking?

As Magdalena’s quest continues — including crossing paths with a deportee named Miguel (David Illescas) on a sort of reverse journey, to find a remote home he hasn’t been to in years — the movie starts to take on the aura of something sadder and darker, something we also see play over Hernández’s face in her gripping portrait of fortitude and pain. And that human impulse to keep searching — when the landscape becomes increasingly unrecognizable and the moment of discovery might be anywhere between heaven and hell — is what helps fuel Valadez’s finely wrought melding of maternal drama and atmospheric thriller.

This approach is made especially resonant in cinematographer Claudia Becerril’s artful depth-of-field work, marked by a claustrophobic indistinctness around Magdalena as she navigates strangers’ deflections and cryptic clues. Outside scenes that might seem naturalistically harmless, meanwhile — hills, roads, unpeopled terrain, busy skies, the play of sunlight, what cuts through the night — have an ability to turn imperceptibly (and sometimes noticeably) ominous. There’s a thickness to the quiet in “Identifying Features” that starts to feel like a vise, and it’s aided by the unforced but churning pace of the editing (credited to Valadez, Rondero and Susan Korda), and [Clarice Jensen’s](#) woozy, sparsely utilized score.

Perhaps most striking about how Valadez brings all these artistic elements together — including some phantasmagoric touches — is that it’s stealthily commanding, as if you weren’t only watching a wonderful new talent, but a new genre being forged. It poignantly honors the weight of the unease and sorrow felt by countless Mexican families, and yet its heart-stopping conclusion reveals the punch of a confident storyteller, someone familiar with how everyone’s

fate involves boundaries visible and invisible. With its heavy heart and percolating cinematic intelligence, “Identifying Features” makes good on that crackling sound heard in the opening scene. This movie burns.

'Identifying Features'

In Spanish with English subtitles

Not rated

Running time: 1 hour, 34 minutes

Playing: Available Jan. 22, [Laemmle Virtual Cinema](#), [Kino Marquee](#) and other virtual cinemas

Los Angeles Times

For these Mexican filmmakers, all art is political. ‘Identifying Features’ makes it personal



By [CARLOS AGUILAR](#)

JAN. 23, 2021

Outspoken filmmaking duo Fernanda Valadez and Astrid Rondero don't believe Mexican storytellers have the luxury of creating apolitically. Not at a moment in history when thousands disappear or are murdered as a consequence of drug-related violence and the widespread state complicity that enables it. Neither of them set out to make movies with a social justice angle, but coming of age as artists in this environment urged them to confront the appalling national trauma.

“It’s inevitable to have a political stance because our reality is so harsh,” Rondero said. “It pushes you to want to defend yourself, and to want to talk about the issues the country is going through.”.

“What cinema does is to establish a conversation with reality, and that’s what makes it critical and nonconformist by nature, even if the themes are personal,” Valadez added.

An unshakable drama tinged with thriller elements, Valadez’s directorial debut, [“Identifying Features”](#) (Sin señas particulares), recently collected the inaugural Gotham Award for international feature and is now available via Kino Marquee and virtual cinemas. The film — which Rondero co-wrote, co-edited, and produced — wrestles with the very real atrocities from the sorrowful perspective of a middle-aged woman on a quest to find her missing son, dead or alive. The situation has become so precarious that even finding a body to bury seems far-fetched for many in search of a loved one.

Mother turned amateur investigator Magdalena (played by Mercedes Hernández) leaves her native Guanajuato for the menacing border with a mission. She is following the tracks of her only child, Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela), who left home in hopes of finding work in the U.S. But after months without as much as a phone call, only a bag and the corpse of his friend and travel companion Rigo (Armando García) has been recovered. Magdalena must find out what happened.

“We needed to tell this story through her journey,” Valdez explained, “because it’s only through a mother’s eyes that one can barely begin to understand the horror of the failed system that exists in Mexico.”

And that perspective is reinforced in every aspect down to the film’s title. “The title communicates how this violence makes us anonymous,” Valadez added, “and that it is only the love of people close to us that allows our stories to have a face, to no longer be just a number or a statistic.”

The highly sensorial film takes Magdalena on series of encounters that slowly guide toward the truth. Of those fortuitous meetings, one with Miguel (David Illescas), a recently deported young man on his way back to his own mother, proves the most poignant.

“At some point Magdalena says, ‘My son might be dead, but I need to know,’” the actress said. “That suspense without end is the greatest pain. I’ve heard many mothers say that in order to get closure they need to know for certain that their children are dead because not knowing is an eternal suffering.”

The director’s impetus to tell a story set at the intersection of migration and forced disappearances first manifested as a short film titled “400 Bags” (400 maletas). This smaller-scale iteration, which received a Student Academy Award nomination in 2015, was triggered by several gruesome events in the early 2010s, in particular the [San Fernando Massacre](#). In March 2011, the Los Zetas cartel savagely killed at least 193 civilians who were [kidnapped from hijacked buses](#) in the state of Tamaulipas.

Such inconceivable brutality signaled a terrifying transformation in the way violence was perpetrated, not only quantitative but qualitative. Within a few years, the drug war that exploded during Felipe Calderón's administration changed Mexico from a country where drug-traffickers (narcos) had been part of society in a veiled manner to one fighting a problem of alarming proportions.

At the time, El Blog del Narco, an anonymous site dedicated to covering cartel-related news too dangerous to run on mainstream outlets, gained prominence. Reliable sources regarding the waves of armed confrontations became even more elusive when Enrique Peña Nieto took office. By preventing mass media from divulging information, his government imposed a false sense of calm without any measurable signs of improvement.



The collective desire to move forward — even if neither the root causes nor the bloody symptoms of the matter had been addressed — was such that when Valadez and Rondero completed the short and submitted it for consideration at domestic festivals, responses suggested it was time to depart from stories about violence and to make movies about other topics. They were aghast.

That artificial spell broke when two tragic events reminded Mexicans that they were still under a reign of terror. First came the still unsolved case of 43 abducted Ayotzinapa students in September 2014, followed by the July 2015 massacre in Tlatlaya in which soldiers were ordered to execute alleged criminals.

In the wake of these dark episodes, the filmmakers became convinced the phenomenon hadn't diminished but was growing exponentially. "That's when we realized that it's important for directors and all of us who make movies to create things that have an impact beyond mere entertainment," Rondero said.

"I made the decision to start the screenplay again from scratch," Valadez added. "I felt that the short, because of its scope of 20 minutes, wasn't able to express with depth the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis."

The feature-length film presented an opportunity to further explore the similarities between Magdalena's boy, who embarked on a treacherous journey with the hope of a different life, and the slightly older Miguel, forced to return to his desolate homeland. The co-writers also introduced another heartbroken mother from a more economically privileged background to point out that the issue goes beyond migrants who come from an adverse social class.

Once production kicked off, the pair relied on the skills learned on Rondero's first feature, "The Darkest Days of Us" (Los días más oscuros de nosotras), a film about gender violence centered on two women fighting against a chauvinist society, which Valadez produced. That experience prepared them to take on a more financially challenging project. Even with the state's support, the limited budget to materialize "Identifying Features" demanded great logistic ingenuity and audacity from cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos.

Unable to move the production to multiple locations to capture the distinct landscapes seen on screen, Valadez chose to shoot segments of the story in different seasons over nine weeks spread over a whole year, all in her native state of Guanajuato. This ensured the images would give the impression that Magdalena had covered a long distance in a short span of time.

Only one trip to the U.S./Mexico border, primarily along the city of Tecate, was scheduled. From that visit they clandestinely obtained a visually powerful tracking shot of Miguel crossing from the U.S. to Mexico on foot, and a scene in which Magdalena interacts with real-life migrants at a shelter.

Practical considerations, combined with a moral responsibility to not exploit the pain of others, also influenced how the director handled the ending. On the page, the breathtaking conclusion was ghastly, but ultimately Valadez focused on a more abstract depiction of evil, creating silhouettes and textures that would work with their small and relatively low-definition camera.

"The graphic violence of those crimes is a terrible secret kept between the victim and the victimizer. The only ones that can speak in detail about it [are] the person that experiences that violence and the one who executes it," Rondero said. The same reasoning applied the other aspects of the storytelling process, such as Valadez asking Hernandez not to talk to actual mothers of missing people and instead read journalistic accounts.

After a long career playing supporting characters, Hernández, reprises her role as Magdalena from the original short film. It marks her first feature film lead. She fondly recalls never having to audition, since Valadez had her in mind for the project from the early days. With the more fleshed-out take in "Identifying Features," she acquired greater understanding of the character as a symbolic figure.

"We all have the experience being a mother or having a mother, so seeing Magdalena in these circumstances resonates with an audience and generates empathy," Hernández said. "Because of what

I've seen over these years with so much tragedy in Mexico, I've also realized a mother represents strength. Mothers are tireless."

A kindred spirit to Valadez and Rondero and a vocal critic of injustice, Hernández deeply appreciated the filmmakers' decision to work with a below-the-line team almost entirely composed of women. For the creative duo, feminism fuels their stories and is reflected in how they are brought to life. Their words and their work reaffirm their commitment to resistance.

"Being with them made me feel even more of a feminist," Hernández said, "and reminded me that we can carry the equipment and do the hard work without men around. It also resulted in a beautiful sorority between us all."

With that in mind, Rondero points out that, no matter how talented, Mexican women working in film are rarely in high demand in comparison to their male counterparts. That systemic disadvantage worked in the movie's favor because the crew was able to commit to work longer on "Identifying Features" but shows how ingrained misogyny is the industry.

"Sometimes limitations come as blessings in disguise," Valdez explained. "If we'd had a more ample budget we would have probably had a much more conventional method of working, perhaps a larger crew with a more different dynamic."

More recently, Rondero and Valadez have raised their voice via social media regarding current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador's major blows to the arts, especially film, with the disappearance of funds like Fidecine and Foprocine. These subsidies have been key in the professionalization of the filmmaking crafts in Mexico, giving many emerging talents their start. The battle for the future of one of the country's most important cultural exports remains ongoing.

"If they continue to bet on giving filmmakers less money, hoping that more limitations will result in better movies, in about five years Mexican cinema will come down crashing," said Rondero, refuting the notion some hold that resourcefulness, not out of choice but necessity, has made Mexican directors stand out.

Complications notwithstanding, the global success of "Identifying Features" is undeniable. The film began its long-running streak of awards victories at the [2020 Sundance Film Festival](#), where it earned a jury award for screenplay, and more unexpectedly, considering the difficult subject it centers, the audience award.

"That's what has moved us the most and has taught us a lesson," Rondero said. "We were the kind of filmmakers who would say, 'Audience awards always go to comedies or lighter fare.' But we learned that's not true, because sometimes the audience also feels empathy for a movie with these characteristics."

A 'failed system,' a harrowing tale

The filmmakers of 'Identifying Features' feel they must address Mexico's traumas.

By Carlos Aguilar

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LEONARDO MARQUEE FOR QUINCY MAGAZINE

A MISSING SON is the core of Astrid Rondero, left, and Fernanda Valdez's film. Mercedes Hernández, below, portrays the mother who's searching.



KINO LEBRON

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DEADLY INTERSECTION

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IMPERILED ARTS

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MOVIES

Indie Focus: On the rise in ‘The White Tiger’

By MARK OLSEN | STAFF WRITER

JAN. 22, 2021 12:51 PM PT

Hello! I’m [Mark Olsen](#). Welcome to another edition of your regular field guide to a world of Only Good Movies.

‘Identifying Features’

Directed by Fernanda Valadez, who co-wrote the screenplay with Astrid Rondero, [“Identifying Features”](#) won two prizes when it premiered last year at Sundance. The story follows a mother (Mercedes Hernández) who leaves her town in Mexico to head north in search of her son, who has gone missing and is believed dead after setting out months earlier for the United States. Released by Kino Lorber, the movie is available now via virtual cinemas.

Carlos Aguilar spoke to Valadez and Rondero about the perspective of the film for an article that will be publishing soon. “It’s inevitable to have a political stance because our reality is so harsh. It pushes you to want to defend yourself and to want to talk about the issues the country is going through,” Rondero told him.

“What cinema does is to establish a conversation with reality, and that’s what makes it critical and non-conformist by nature, even if the themes are personal,” added Valadez.

In a review for [The Times](#), [Robert Abele](#) wrote, “Hypnotic and heartbreaking, ‘Identifying Features’ is a feature debut to marvel at, but only once you’re able to shake off the bone-deep chills emanating from Mexican filmmaker Fernanda Valadez’s disorienting tale of a mother’s search for her missing son. Equal parts odyssey, investigation and descent, this eerily shattering dispatch from the heart of a grief-beset country — a double-winner at Sundance last year that’s been racking up festival awards ever since — has the power to expand our notions of what a border story is.”

For [the New York Times](#), [Teo Bugbee](#) wrote, “Though it is a somber story, the film is enlivened and energized by striking, purposeful images ... There always seems to be movement happening just outside of the characters’ field of vision, events that develop without their understanding. It’s a confident debut feature, and a sophisticated acknowledgment of the powerlessness that migrants face.”

For [the Hollywood Reporter](#), [Beandrea July](#) wrote, “A movie about the border situation that explicitly avoids the ‘Sicario’ or ‘Narcos’ route of the unrelentingly violent drug-war epic indeed is a welcome change. Valadez signals her arrival as a young filmmaker, unapologetically both Mexican and female, with well-earned confidence in her artistic voice.”



Los Angeles Times

ENTRETENIMIENTO

CRÍTICAS. Inmigraciones compartidas, apuestas por el Oscar y más estrenos en salas, autocinemas y 'streaming'



By SERGIO BURSTEIN | WRITER

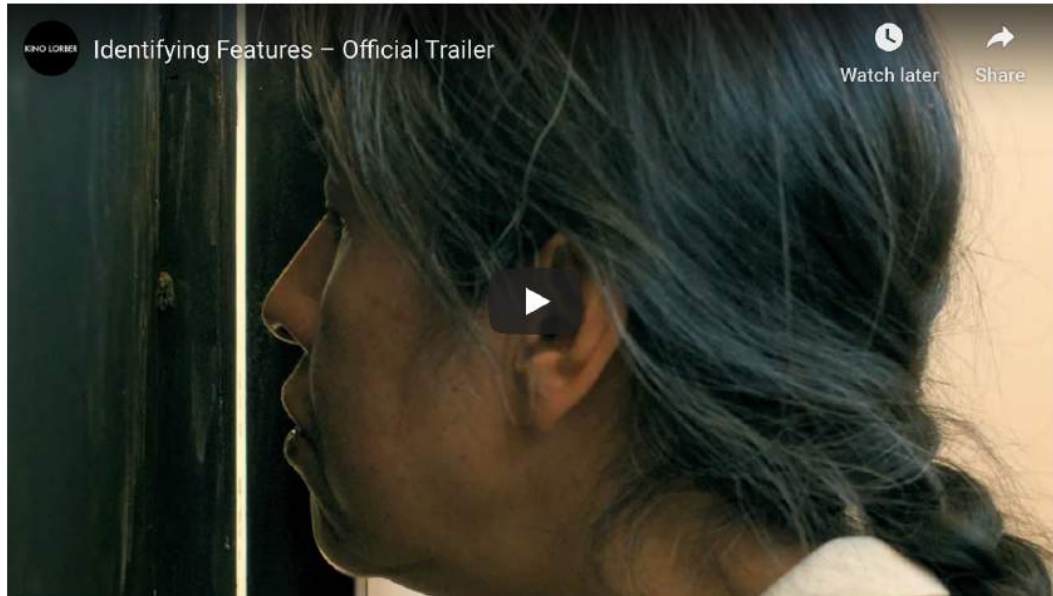
ENERO 22, 2021 11:17 AM PT

Las salas de cine siguen no solo mayormente cerradas en el Sur de California, sino que el incremento de casos de Covid-19 ha hecho que las que permanecían abiertas tras la reapertura de hace unos meses se hayan visto obligadas a bajar nuevamente el telón en ciudades como San Diego.

Y aunque la llegada de las vacunas y el inicio del proceso de inoculación parecen asegurar que el drama que estamos viviendo tiene los días contados, es probable que falte todavía mucho para que la situación se sienta realmente segura y la población se anime a regresar de manera masiva a los grandes recintos interiores.

Por fortuna, la cartelera virtual de este fin de semana, que se encuentra parcialmente disponible en cines tradicionales y ‘drive-ins’, ofrece una diversidad de títulos que, pese a esquivar el aspecto comercial de las producciones de semanas anteriores, llega acompañada por un nivel de calidad refrendado por la participación de tres de sus propuestas en la competencia del Oscar y por la presencia de dos obras directamente conectadas con la comunidad latina.

SIN SEÑAS PARTICULARES (IDENTIFYING FEATURES)



Directora: Fernanda Valadez

Reparto: Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela

Género: Drama

El drama de la inmigración indocumentada tiene varias aristas, y aunque la más atendida en el mundo del cine ha sido la del temerario cruce de fronteras, seguida por la de las dificultades vinculadas al hecho de vivir en un país sin los documentos legales necesarios, existe otro aspecto del fenómeno que resulta igualmente complejo: el de las personas que desaparecen en el trayecto sin haber salido siquiera de su país de origen.

Ese es justamente el tema que se encuentra al centro de “Sin señas particulares”, una cinta mexicana disponible ya en la modalidad de Virtual Cinemas (a través de [Kino Marquee](#)) que

maneja muchos elementos propios del documental y que puede tardar en despegar pero que recurre siempre a un estilo eminentemente cinematográficas y nos conduce finalmente hacia un desenlace increíblemente impactante.

Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) es una mujer de escasos recursos que decide dejar su Guanajuato de origen para dar con el paradero de su joven hijo, quien partió con rumbo hacia “el gabacho” hace varios meses y del que no sabe nada desde entonces. Sus investigaciones, llevadas a cabo sin experiencia alguna en el asunto, pero con una enorme pasión de madre, la llevan poco a poco a descubrir verdades aterradoras que muchos preferirían mantener ocultas, así como a entrar posteriormente en contacto con Miguel (David Illescas), un muchacho que acaba de ser deportado de los Estados Unidos.

Pese a que no intenta esquivar tópicos que pueden haberse convertido en clichés del cine latinoamericano (como la corrupción arraigada en nuestros países y el papel nefasto de las bandas criminales), la cinta maneja sus ideas con honestidad y mantiene la violencia fuera de cámara, apoyada por una actuación memorable de Hernández y un impecable esfuerzo de realización liderado por mujeres, tanto en el área creativa como en la técnica.

Los Angeles Times

ENTRETENIMIENTO

Estas son las mujeres que le dieron vida a la impresionante cinta mexicana ‘Sin señas particulares’



By SERGIO BURSTEIN | WRITER

ENERO 22, 2021 8:43 PM PT

La colaboración que Fernanda Valadez y Astrid Rondero iniciaron cuando empezaron a hacer cortometrajes ha alcanzado una madurez sorprendente en “Sin señas particulares” (“Identifying Features”), una impactante cinta que, luego de llevarse el Premio de la Audiencia al Mejor Drama Internacional y el Premio del Jurado al Mejor Guion de Drama Internacional en el Festival de Sundance del año pasado, llegó este fin de semana a Estados Unidos a través de la modalidad de [Virtual Cinemas](#), que le permite a sus usuarios apoyar a una sala de cine perteneciente a una ciudad determinada.

Claro que, en realidad, el filme, que cuenta la historia de una mujer de origen humilde que emprende un peligroso y largo viaje a solas para tratar de encontrar el paradero de su joven hijo -perdido en el trayecto hacia las tierras del Tío Sam-, se hizo tras la realización de otro largometraje, “Los días más oscuros de nosotras”, que fue dirigido por Rondero y que acaba de estrenarse en las salas de México que se mantienen abiertas.

Por su parte, “Sin señas particulares” fue dirigida por Valadez, pero coescrita y coproducida por Rondero, y no tiene todavía fecha definitiva de estreno en los cines aztecas, aunque se ha presentado en el Festival de Morelia. En todo caso, quienes la han podido ver ya han quedado profundamente impresionados con la contundencia de una cinta que tiene una perspectiva femenina muy intensa y que se sale del parámetro habitual de historias sobre inmigración indocumentada al plantear un drama que se desarrolla al interior de México.

Presencia femenina

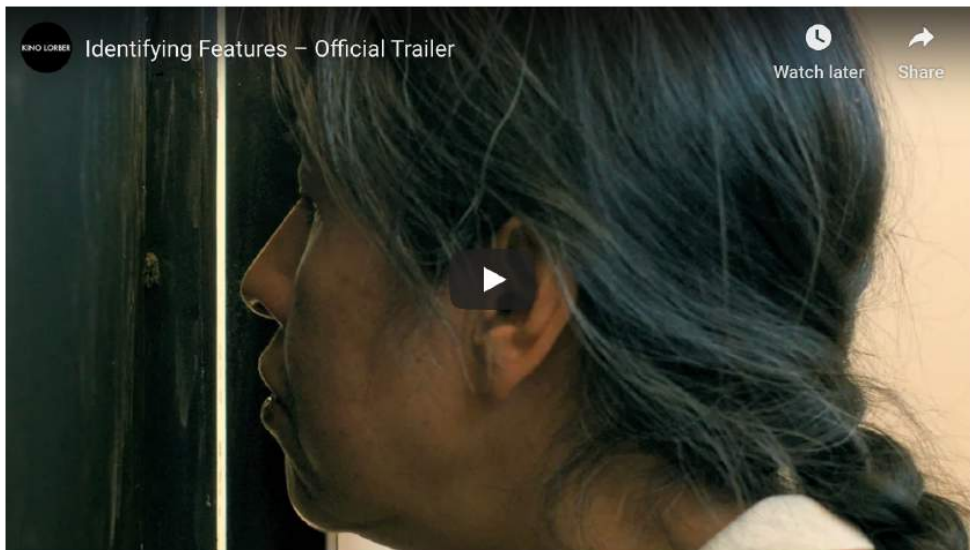
“No estábamos tratando de encontrar un giro distinto; lo que nos había impactado mucho es la ola de violencia en nuestro país, que no se ha detenido, y que tiene las dimensiones de una crisis humanitaria en la que el camino de los migrantes es uno de los eslabones más frágiles”, nos dijo Valadez mediante una conexión telefónica con el DF.

“Paralelamente a estas circunstancias tan duras, empezaron a tomar relevancia las experiencias de los familiares de quienes estaban desapareciendo, sobre todo en lo que respecta a las madres, porque en este entorno tan adverso y tan complicado, lo que se encuentra son historias de muchísima resistencia, de mantener en primer plano ese amor que hace que se embarquen en verdaderas travesías a pesar de todos los riesgos que corren”, prosiguió la realizadora.

La participación de mujeres en el aspecto creativo del filme no se limita a Valadez y Rondero, sino que se extiende a la mayor parte del personal técnico, que incluye a la directora de fotografía Claudia Becerril, a la editora Susan Korda, a la compositora musical Clarice Jensen y a la directora de arte Dalia Reyes.

“El hecho de que Fernanda y yo estemos trabajando juntas nos ha dado una libertad que nos permite elegir a la gente con la que nos sentimos seguras”, nos dijo por su lado Rondero.

“Además, tenemos un compromiso con nuestras compañeras cineastas, que realmente se encuentran sobrecalificadas en México, lo que hace que obtengas equipos muy robustos de profesionales del cine y resultaba esencial en una película tan chiquita como esta”.



Sorprendentemente, en lugar de aumentar los riesgos al momento de filmar, tener esencialmente a mujeres en el rodaje resultó positivo en términos de seguridad. “Es curioso, porque se han dado casos muy desafortunados por aquí, como el de unos estudiantes de Guadalajara que fueron secuestrados, asesinados y disueltos en ácido debido a una confusión en un barrio en el que pensaron que ellos formaban parte de un cartel contrario que llegaba para invadir territorio”, retomó Valadez.

“Por ser mujeres, no estuvimos expuestas a una confusión así, justamente por esta separación de géneros en la que las mujeres no serían las encargadas de invadir un territorio de otro cartel”, prosiguió. “Nunca sabes exactamente en qué lugar te estás metiendo, pero nos acercamos a las autoridades e hicimos un trabajo muy fuerte de compenetración con la comunidad a lo largo de varios meses”, complementó Rondero.

Paisaje del miedo

Es importante destacar que la película se filmó casi completamente en Guanajuato, estado en el que nació Valadez, pese a que el relato que muestra se desarrolla entre Guanajuato y Tamaulipas, en rumbo a Texas, lo que implica en la realidad una extensión de 581 kilómetros.

“Debido a cuestiones de presupuesto, no podíamos estar moviéndonos de municipio en municipio, como lo hubiéramos hecho de contar con los recursos necesarios, por lo que optamos por trabajar en un área muy reducida, pero filmando a lo largo de varias estaciones del año para que cambiara el paisaje y pretender de ese modo que los personajes estaban haciendo un viaje muy extenso”, detalló la directora.

Más allá de sus virtudes narrativas, “Sin señas particulares” impresiona por una estética visual que la lleva a veces a adoptar una aproximación muy propia del documental (como sucede durante las escenas de reconocimiento de restos humanos) y a acercarse en otros momentos al simbolismo más artístico (sobre todo a medida que nos vamos acercando a un desenlace que no revelaremos, pero que involucra un insólito acto de crueldad).



“Queríamos hacer una película que, aunque tiene una temática de orientación muy social, contara más la experiencia emocional de los personajes, lo que nos llevó a iniciar todo con un espíritu naturalista y, a medida que la protagonista iba avanzando, hacer que todo se fuera tornando cada vez más expresivo, de la mano de los cambios de paisaje”, describió Valadez. “Eso nos permitió privilegiar los elementos metafóricos en lugar de ser tan descriptivas”.

“Durante el proceso de escritura, Fer se atoró mucho con las escenas de violencia, porque además de todos los casos reales que habíamos investigado, existe ya una especie de tradición muy gráfica en lo que respecta a la representación de estos actos brutales”, comentó Rondero. “Finalmente, nos dimos cuenta de que mientras más nos acercáramos a lo gráfico, más nos alejaríamos de lo humano, y decidimos que esto fuera como un secreto que no puedes conocer si no eres una víctima o un victimario”.

En busca de esperanza

La cruda realidad de lo que sucede en la nación vecina no fue la única referencia que se tuvo para la creación de esta película, marcada también de manera directa por cintas bélicas rusas de la categoría de “The Ascent” (1977), de Larisa Shepitko, y “Come and See” (1985), de Elem

Klimov, y de manera menos evidente por “Walkabout” (1971), de Nicolas Roeg, y “Wake in Fright” (1971), de Ted Kotcheff, como lo comentó Valadez.

“Nos interesaba en realidad revisar periodos de la Historia mundial donde se han producido crisis humanitarias; leímos muchos testimonios del Holocausto y textos sobre el genocidio de Ruanda”, precisó la cineasta. “Astrid y yo estábamos tratando de entender esta maldad que está suelta y que va más allá del fenómeno migratorio”.

En ese sentido, valía la pena terminar la conversación con una interrogante relacionada al rol que podría jugar esta cinta en la resolución del desolador conflicto. “Estoy convencida de que el cine y otras formas del arte pueden insertarse en esta conversación que estamos teniendo en México para saber lo que tenemos que hacer para que estas cosas cambien”, afirmó Valadez. “Por supuesto, hay grupos que están tomando acciones muy fuertes, como los mismos familiares de los desaparecidos, quienes se han convertido en verdaderos activistas y están promoviendo cambios legislativos y en el sistema judicial”.

“Creo que la reflexión que está debajo de la película es que la línea que hay entre víctimas y victimarios es muy porosa, y depende de las circunstancias de inequidad social, de injusticia y de marginación que se viven en nuestro país”, concluyó la realizadora.

'Identifying Features' Review: An Artful New Perspective on the Mexican Migrant Crisis

Fernanda Veladez's feature debut is a beautifully made heartbreaker that chronicles a mother's painful search for justice.



Kate Erbland

Jan 21, 2021 5:00 pm

@katerbland



A week after Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela) announces his immigration dreams to his mother Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) — a simple plan, consisting of alighting to Arizona with his best friend Rigo (Armando García), getting a job, and not much else — the young Mexican teenager is gone. Months later, the boys have yet to announce their arrival in the United States, nor have they returned to the landlocked state of Guanajuato. They, like so many before and likely after them, have simply gone missing, and in a country where such a tragedy is all too

common, it falls on the people they've left behind to figure out what has happened to their beloved boys.

Fernanda Valadez's feature directorial debut "[Identifying Features](#)" takes that seemingly tear-jerking concept — one beset by knotty bureaucratic issues, painful language barriers, and the sense of further danger around every bend — and turns it into an artfully made and unflinching rumination of life on the margins. Valadez's story (co-written with the film's editor Astrid Rondero) could easily have inspired a familiar tale of shattered lives against the backdrop of immigration issues and Mexican cartel violence. Instead, "Identifying Features" eschews the usual tropes. The result is a drama rooted in liminal explorations and unanswerable questions, as confounding as it is satisfying.

Magdalena's quest to find Jesús takes on added urgency once Rigo's mother Chuya (Laura Elena Ibarra) learns that her own son has been killed, care of a tense sequence in which she visits local authorities who can do nothing but offer her a binder filled with pictures of dead migrants, all in hopes that their loved ones might be able to identify their mangled bodies. Despite the inherent drama of such a sequence, Valadez resists cheap emotion at every turn, instead building a sensory experience that has more staying power than the kind of overwrought scenes a less assured filmmaker might fold in. The moment isn't about horrifying revelations and large proclamations, but the steady flipping of pages filled with untold horror stories, until Chuya lands on the one that will change her life forever.

Terrified at what might have happened to Jesús, Magdalena embarks on a desperate search to track him down. But Chuya's experience lingers, and as Magdalena's quest unfolds, it brings her into contact with a number of people who are shouldering similar traumas. Somewhat awkwardly laced into the film's first act is the story of another mother: Olivia (Ana Laura Rodríguez), who has been searching for her son for years. Olivia is, in many ways, a glimpse of Magdalena's future, and it's a lonely one indeed. "They keep finding shallow graves everywhere," a health care worker blithely tells Magdalena as she offers up fluid samples for testing against the myriad dead bodies found every day; minutes later, Olivia is brought into a massive room filled with body bags to look at a corpse that might belong to her son.

While the trauma of a missing child makes for the film's heart, its spine is something much more difficult to effectively put on film: the horrible waiting, the in-between times, the stretched moments when no news — good or bad — is available. Valadez and cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos ably telegraph such concepts through a series of long takes, wide shots that place their characters in the center of great, searching frames, wholly adrift. Even in these open shots, danger is never far off, and Valadez keeps up the tension while rarely resorting to cheap gags. If her characters are afraid, it is for good reason, and her filmmaking only bolsters that with its craft.

Elsewhere, "Identifying Features" locks on to a character experiencing the other side of Magdalena's trauma: young Miguel (a riveting David Illescas), who has recently been deported

from the states back to his native Mexico, and is forced to undergo his own serpentine journey back to a life he was so eager to leave behind. An extended take in which Miguel reenters Mexico, walking his way through corridors and passageways, cramped turnstiles and wide-open waiting rooms, is a stirring introduction to both Miguel and the filmmaking obsessions that drive Valadez. It's immersive, tense, and wholly authentic, a body in beautiful, painful motion.

Eventually, Magdalena and Miguel cross paths, and the somewhat obvious nature of their budding bond — she's trying to find her son, he's hoping to reunite with his mother — is about as conventional as “Identifying Features” dares to get. Their twinned struggles result in further traumas, but it's a testament to Valadez's filmmaking and her stars' careful performances that even bigger swings in the film's final act — the possible appearance of a literal demon and a reunion that seems pulled out a less realistic screenplay — still feel earned and compelling. Magdalena is a woman driven by her need for answers, and while “Identifying Features” doesn't provide all of them, it offers a rich window into the search for the truth.

Grade: B+

Kino Lorber will release “Identifying Features” in virtual cinemas, including its own Kino Marquee, on Friday, January 22.

The Boston Globe

MOVIE REVIEW

Matters of life and death beyond mere borders

By **Ty Burr** Globe Staff, Updated January 20, 2021, 6:52 p.m.



An austere, gorgeously shot parable of chaos and loss in modern Mexico, “Identifying Features” is an assured directorial debut from Fernanda Valadez, an audience award winner at Sundance 2020, and a tour of hell on earth. It’s playing as a virtual screening via the Brattle Theatre.

Two teenage boys, Rigo (Armando García) and Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela), leave their homes in Guanajuato for promised jobs in Arizona; they never arrive. Their mothers, Chuya (Laura Elena Ibarra) and Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), go to the police but are told there is little to do but search the photographs of people recently killed by drug cartels and gangs. Jesús is identified as one of the corpses retrieved from a shallow grave, but Rigo is not. Magdalena heads out on a search that crisscrosses the country and widens into a spare portrait of a dying civilization.

At the same time, “Identifying Features” follows Miguel (David Illescas), who’s being deported to Mexico after five years working in the United States as an undocumented immigrant. The film slowly brings these two, shell-shocked young man and weary Mother Courage, together across a landscape emptied of comfort. Magdalena hears of an old man (Manual Campos) who may have

been on the bus with the two boys and sets out toward an area controlled by a criminal army; Miguel joins her to find his own mother.

Where another filmmaker — perhaps a male one — might emphasize violence, action, and macho nihilism (I'm thinking of you, "Sicario"), Valadez takes the opposite approach. "Identifying Features" is hushed to a fault, following Magdalena and Miguel on their dovetailing odysseys with long takes and eerie ambient chords on the soundtrack. The film's Mexico is a depopulated one, its people dead or chased off and the perpetrators doing ugly business elsewhere. We are invited to share the viewpoint and metabolism of people who endure catastrophe because they must, year after year, century after century. Valadez and her co-writer, Astrid Rondero, are interested in locating the humanity in a society bent on stamping it out, and they find it in the face of a tired old woman who won't stop until she finds her son.

The film's quietness and its visual beauty — the cinematographer, Claudia Becerril Bulos, fills the wide screen with artfully framed images — are deceptive. "Identifying Features" leads its characters to the edge of the pit and invites them, and us, to look at the horrors within, filmed with a realism that edges into a dark and slightly clichéd surrealism. The movie ultimately seems to suggest that the evils unleashed upon Mexico come from a place beyond humankind, which seems an easy way out after all Magdalena and Miguel have been put through. That said, this remains a terrifying cinematic vision that can't be ignored, from a young filmmaker who won't be.

★★★

IDENTIFYING FEATURES

Directed by Fernanda Valadez. Written by Valadez and Astrid Rondero. Starring Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas. Virtually screening via the Brattle (www.brattlefilm.org). In Spanish, with subtitles. 99 minutes. Unrated (as R: violence).

Boston Herald

THINGS TO DO > MOVIES

‘Identifying Features’ powerful, poignant visionary work



By **JAMES VERNIERE** | james.verniere@bostonherald.com |
January 21, 2021 at 7:19 p.m.

“Identifying Features”

Not Rated. In Spanish with subtitles. At the Brattle Theater.

Grade: A minus

An almost David Lynchian exercise in anxiety, fear and dread, “Identifying Features,” a modest and yet visually striking film about a mother searching for her lost son, launches director-co-writer Fernanda Valadez, making her feature film debut, into the forefront of a new breed of film stylists. These include Chloe Zhao (“Nomadland”), Ana Lily Amirpour (“A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night”) and the directing team of Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead (“The Endless”). These visionaries paint with light, landscape and architecture. They create mood and atmosphere with discordant sound and lighting effects and music. They are artists of unease.

With relatively few words, Valadez tells the story of Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), a mother from Guanajuato who has bid farewell to her son Jesus (Juan Jesus Valera). The biblical echo in their names resounds. He's headed to "la frontera." When she doesn't hear from him, Magdalena makes inquiries and is told by the authorities that her son may be dead. In a photo, the mother of Jesus's companion recognizes her son's burned body. Magdalena sees no trace of Jesus. She travels to the border by bus. She will travel further on foot, in a boat and in a truck. The landscape is wild and in some areas tamed by roads and lights. A young man traveling near the border stops on a footbridge above a sea of hellish red taillights. In one scene, two occupants of truck are bathed in pink and blue lights. Are they shades of regret? Director Valadez, who shoots in widescreen, has a painter's eye, and she makes a reference to one of cinema's most disturbing images when she shows us actual eye surgery in one scene.

A bus company employee secretly reveals to Magdalena that buses go missing, passengers are hijacked and kidnapped. One is reminded of "Missing," Costa-Gavras' realistic kidnapping tale in which an American father searches for his journalist son in 1970s Chile. We hear about shallow graves, and see a montage of lost articles of clothing. Magdalena meets Miguel (David Illescas) on the road. He is trying to return to his mother in country where armed men terrorize the impoverished inhabitants. Is that really the devil beside a bonfire in a scene of rape and slaughter? "Identifying Features" is replete with mirror images, distraught mothers, a devil and a diabolical, flame-lit scene of murder and rape. Shot with a largely female crew, "Identifying Features" grew out of a 2014 short film by Valadez also with Hernandez as the mother and is meant to make us think about U.S. policies regarding immigrants from the Mexican border. In her debut as a film composer, Clarice Jensen conducts a symphony of torment and despair. "Identifying Features" is the immigrant "I Saw the Devil."

("Identifying Features" contains gun violence and rape)

BROOKLYN RAIL

Film | In Conversation

FERNANDA VALADEZ and ASTRID RONDERO with Caitlin Quinlan

Filmmaking partners Valadez and Rondero's *Identifying Features* empathetically depicts the effects of border disappearances on Mexico's inner and outer landscapes.



There is an innate creative understanding shared between Mexican filmmakers Fernanda Valadez and Astrid Rondero. Ideas and meanings overlap both in our Zoom discussion and in their filmmaking process, to the extent, they say, that they “cannot even remember who started which ideas.” Theirs is a mutually open and invested working partnership, one that allows for collaboration across roles on each other’s work whether producing, editing, or writing.

Identifying Features, which had its initial premiere at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, is Valadez’s first feature as a writer and director, co-written by Rondero (whose own directorial debut, *The Darkest Days of Us*, premiered in 2017). An expansion on Valadez’s earlier short film, *400 Maletas* (2014), *Identifying Features* depicts a mother’s search for her son who disappears, like many young people in Mexico have, during an attempt to cross the US border. (In December 2020, [Al Día reported](#) that nearly 79,000 people have gone missing in the country since 2006 amid drug wars and the proliferation of organized crime.)

With its warm, neutral palette, palpable perceptivity to landscape and environment, and bold foray into the mythical, *Identifying Features* is a film that feels tonally and thematically akin to another lauded recent debut, Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019). Both Diop and Valadez explore the plight of young men in the countries they know so well through the eyes of the women left behind to mourn them. Mothers and sons, brothers and sisters, lovers; pairs moving through life in tandem, searching for one another, and longing for each other's safety.

Caitlin Quinlan (Rail): To start, why did you decide to further develop the short film *400 Maletas* into this feature?

Fernanda Valadez: When we finished the short, I had this feeling that I didn't quite tackle the issue that I wanted to express, in several ways. First, that the humanitarian crisis that we've been living through in Mexico is broader and more complicated than what you can tell in a short film. And also in terms of the characters and the cinematic language I really wanted to redo it and do it properly, in a way that I think the themes and the situations that inspired this film deserve.

Astrid Rondero: It's a great short film, and we discussed it because I told her that I felt like we had already done that story. Because the core of the story, the story of this woman looking for her missing son, and these guys returning back, that core was basically the same. But she really was adamant about the idea of this short film not being able to tackle the broader picture of what's happening in Mexico. And now I see it, and that's how Fernanda's vision was important. Because it was right, it was important to do it all again.

Rail: To write the script, were you speaking with real people in Mexico experiencing these situations? Did you work from any testimonies?

Valadez: The script is basically based in documentary investigation. I approached an organization that gives legal and general support to families of missing people. And the moment I did that, and I began talking to those activists, I felt like I didn't want those people to feel used, because in the end, this was fiction. And I wouldn't be able to take the specifics of their cases and try to give them visibility, because what we were trying to do was to give a general picture and design characters that could express a diversity of situations. So we decided, in the end, to speak to journalistic sources in Mexico. There are amazing journalists that really put their lives at risk in researching what's happening. And—

Rondero: Sometimes they disappear.

Valadez: Sometimes they are killed. I mean, Mexico is the most dangerous country for journalists, for a country that is not officially at war. So we took those testimonies, and when we were scouting for locations and talking to people about their experiences, that was the moment when we did talk with real people, particularly with migrants, with people working for the shelters, and with young people that have the dream and the aspiration to migrate to the United States.

Rail: And people from the community came into the film as non-professional actors?

Valadez: Yes, and that's something that was kind of a moral decision that made us realize how delicate it is to work with non-actors. Because those young people, particularly the adolescents, the teenagers, that we work with, they have real life experiences about migrations. One of them is already in the United States after the film. As a minor, he managed to cross the border and he is now living there. And when we were interviewing him, he told us an incredible—I don't even have words about his experience of trying to cross the border—

Rondero: That first time—

Valadez: That first time when he was 14, 15 years old, and they got lost, they almost got killed. He, at that very early age, had an experience of facing death and facing all these forces of adversity for young people in Mexico. So working with them made us realize that we have to offer them something. We didn't want them to feel like we were exploiting them, so we really tried to offer them the film as an experience of something that was also available for them; as something that could be constructive and enriching in their lives.

Rail: The film has quite a strong focus on motherhood, was that the clear theme for you from the beginning?

Rondero: I believe that that was the seed that Fernanda had from the very beginning and I think that's why these stories, for me, are really enduring, because she's looking at this tragedy through the eyes of motherhood, of this pure feeling that a mother has for her son. And that's something that I think accompanied the whole journey of this film. I think also that it's really important to talk about this tragedy that we're living in Mexico, that women are turning into private investigators, they're turning into police officers, they're turning into—

Valadez: Activists.

Rondero: —activists at the end, because they're the ones who are really tracing the steps of their families that are disappearing. So the image of women in Mexico now is really, really powerful. And I think it's absolutely about the fact that we don't have a good system in Mexico, a working system.

Valadez: It's an act of solidarity, that at the same time I'm trying to bring justice to their cases, and not only to their own. Now they have these organizations, where they're really helping other people's cases. And I think this feeling of loving someone so much then becomes empathy to other people.

Rail: You also had a predominantly female crew on this film. Is that becoming more common in Mexican cinema in your eyes?

Valadez: Fortunately, it's becoming more common, and that's also because public funds have made filmmakers from our generation realize that we can claim those funds, work a lot, and make the films ourselves. And we also have the previous experience of Astrid's first film, as a company and as a creative team, a film that talks about gender disparity and violence. And with that film, I think we both realized that we also had to reflect and had to redesign ourselves in order to be fully capable of doing our films with freedom. And one of the answers was that we needed to work with more and more women.

Rondero: We're really lucky that we have great filmmakers, women filmmakers in Mexico. So when you decide to work in an all-female team, you're taking the best of the best.

Rail: Was that female presence helpful when thinking about the themes of the film as well?

Valadez: Absolutely. For example, with the cinematographer, Claudia Becerril, she was so sensitive to the theme that we never really had the discussion that you usually have with your Director of Photography who often wants photography to be more important than the scene. So it was very harmonious, I think, that everything fell into place. Because everyone, we all fell for the project, and there was no competition of egos. And I think that was possible, also, because we were working with the female filmmakers.

Rail: This film feels very grounded in the Mexican landscape; the colors of the sky, granular details of the earth, crops, other plants.

Valadez: Yes, I think I wanted to really make the environment become a character and become expressive. And something we discussed is that there is kind of an expectation, particularly in Europe, for Latin American films to be very naturalistic. We wanted to be very free and to use all the tools of the cinematic language that we thought were good for this project. So I think deep down what we wanted to do is design and shoot a film that was more expressive than naturalistic. So we thought about the light and the landscape and the earth and the sky in those terms. And we had to rewrite, of course, when we went to locations and things were a little different than we expected, even though we already knew those locations. But I think that was kind of the idea behind that, to not let the physicality of the landscape dictate what we were doing, but to incorporate that into the inner journey of the characters.

Rail: You make a conscious decision not to explicitly name the threat at hand through character dialogue or contextual visual clues, and one scene is left unsubtitled. What was the process behind that decision?

Rondero: That was something that we discussed a lot before going into principal photography. It's natural, because we were worried that perhaps outside Mexico, people wouldn't understand what was happening in the story. But we decided to stick with the perspective of the victim, of the mother. And that's how they start the journey. They don't know what's happening around them. In fact, in real terms, for instance, we were shooting in an area, that was—we later on understood—a very dangerous area, because they were trafficking oil at that point. And we

didn't know that. That's something that happens in Mexico, there are so many types of violence and criminal activity, that we really don't know how it works. And when you are an everyday person, you basically are unaware of what's happening. We wanted that feeling so the audience will feel the same, the same way this woman is, contending with the unknown. And I think that we try to privilege this feeling above anything else.

Valadez: And that worked like a cascade. When we made that decision, then we decided when we were editing not to translate from a Mexican Native language, Zapotec, into Spanish, and not to subtitle that into English. And that's also why we decided not to subtitle all of the dialogue, because it's more like the noise and the phenomenon that is happening around the character. But she's not really aware of that because she's paying attention to very specific things. We've encountered different audiences; some people get really frustrated because the film doesn't tell them what's really happening, and some others let themselves be pulled into emotions and into the characters.

Rail: Have you shown the film in Mexico yet?

Rondero: Yeah, it was great. We just screened it at the Morelia International Film Festival. And we had a very good reception. For us it was, like [sighs]. We felt very—

Valadez: Relieved.

Rondero: Big relief, because we were worried that perhaps—this is a very difficult topic to talk about in Mexico because we feel like we're exploiting it at some point. When you watch these stories and films, you're always afraid that they will feel like an exploitation of these stories. But I think that *Identifying Features* really comes from a place of—

Valadez: Empathy.

Rondero: Empathy, exactly, and through the eyes of victims. And I think that was the thing that really connects with the audience. You can get this feeling of a woman jumping into a completely unknown journey, where she will find very different kinds of people that sometimes will help her try to get to the next level. And I also think, in terms of something more hopeful, we also show these nets of support. Because these people helping this woman look for her missing son, they're also in great danger. So I think that it was great to watch that in Mexico. They received the story with a lot of love.

Valadez: Yeah, I think that's what surprised us the most and made us really happy. When we were shooting this film, we really didn't have expectations. And we really didn't know who was going to watch it, in Mexico or outside Mexico. And I think for us, it has been a lesson of talking from a place of freedom and empathy. It's like throwing a bottle into the sea, that someone might take and find and make a human connection. And I think that's what's been so wonderful about this film, that it has been able to connect emotionally with people from different cultures.



Identifying Features

2021, NR, 95 min. Directed by Fernanda Valadez. Starring Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Ana Laura Rodríguez, Juan Jesús Varela, Armando García, Laura Elena Ibarra.

REVIEWED BY JOSH KUPECKI, FRI., JAN. 22, 2021

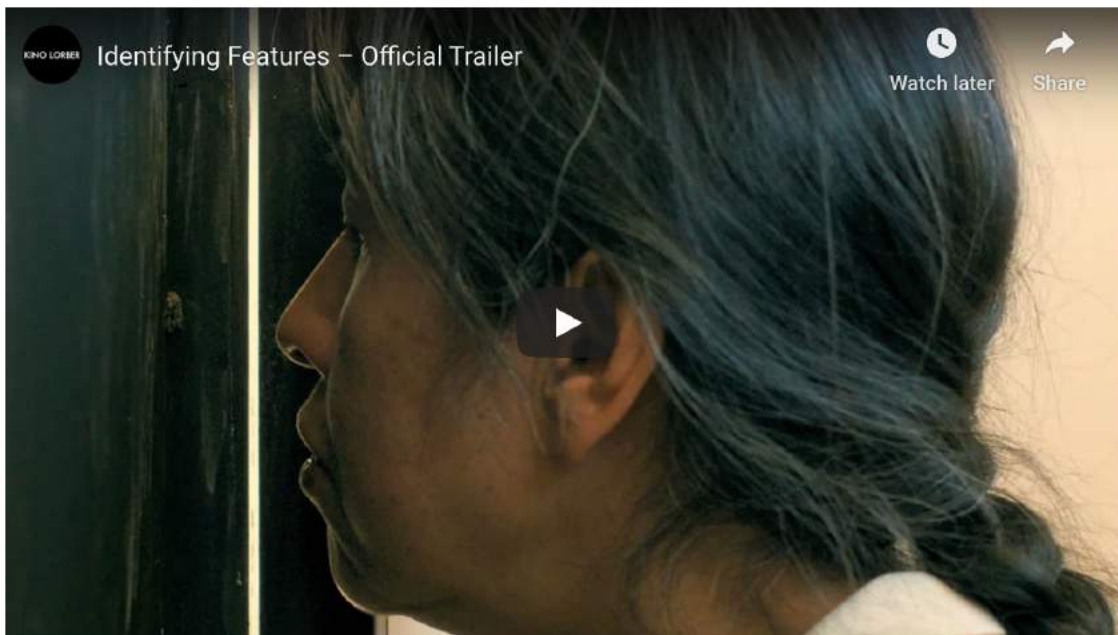
Numbers have a way of slicing through to the heart of things. And while they can often be manipulated by treacherous agendas, examining certain statistics has a particular way of jolting one out of (or into) the current weltschmerz. Well it jolts, anyway. I will always feel a profound anxiety reflecting that 74 million people thought reelecting Trump was a good idea, and utterly dismayed that the COVID-19 death rate in the States is projected at half a million by the end of February, a grim one year mark. Another number, smaller but no less troubling, is this: 73,000 people are currently missing in Mexico, almost half of them reported since 2018. For some perspective, imagine the entirety of students and faculty of UT-Austin simply vanishing. Fernanda Valadez's startling debut, *Identifying Features*, breathes a handful of those numbers to life, examining the horror, frustrations, and ultimate toll of this crisis of "the disappeared."

Jesús (Varela) tells his mother, Magdalena (Hernández) he is leaving their home in Guanajuato. With his friend Rigo (García), the two teens begin the journey north, to Arizona, wading away in the mist and tall feather grass. Two months go by with no word, so Magdalena and Rigo's mother Chuya (Ibarra) venture from their village, seeking help from local authorities. Told indifferently that there is "no crime to pursue," they are nevertheless handed one of many binders filled with photos of unidentified bodies: bound, tortured, burned, life reduced to viscera. Rigo is among them, but not Jesús, and Magdalena latches on to this barest seedling of hope to search for her son. Clues lead her to conclude that the boys were on a bus to Juárez, when it

was stopped by bandits, with only a few survivors. Seeking out one of those survivors in Ocampo, Magdalena meets up with Miguel (Illescas), who, deported from the U.S., is returning to his home there. Their odyssey takes them through an existential landscape of ghosts, living and dead, to an end that is surprising and inevitable.

Valadez, with co-writer Astrid Rondero, have made a beautifully stark meditation on grief. Early on, Magdalena meets Olivia (Rodríguez), a doctor who was called in to identify her son. Olivia refuses to positively identify the body, partly because it is burned, but more importantly, because if she does, she will have abandoned that strand of belief. Magdalena staves off grieving for her own by clinging to a familiar duffel bag seen here, a rumor heard in a shelter there. *Identifying Features* has a minimalist aesthetic that works fluidly with the material. Magdalena is often shot framed by windows, looking in, looking out, looking. Her recurring dream of Jesús returning to their home, through the mist and the feather grass, becomes ever more opaque. An unsettling feeling hums through the film, and remains well after. Less of a jolt, then; call it a sustained current.

Available now as a virtual cinema release.





REVIEWS • MOVIE REVIEW

Identifying Features is among the greatest, most devastating films about Mexico's drug war



Carlos Aguilar

1/20/21 3:30PM

Some movies wound us so profoundly that once darkness has consumed their final frame we are incapable of shaking off the heartache. That's the power of *Identifying Features*, which is as painfully intimate as it is unsparing in its indictment of a country ravaged by a corrosive, entrenched evil. Making her feature debut, Mexican writer-director Fernanda Valadez finds a personal tragedy within a national one—the murder or disappearance of thousands of people, the mass collateral damage of the ongoing drug war. She's made a humanitarian lament by way of a slow-burn thriller.

Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), from Guanajuato, travels north to the border in search of her underage son, Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela). Two months earlier, he agreed to migrate to the U.S. with his best friend, Rigo (Armando García), in hopes of overcoming their adverse economic circumstances. In that time, no news of the boys' whereabouts has arrived. In a sobering

opening scene that sets the tone of what's to come, Rigo's mother recognizes her child, who sports a pronounced facial birthmark, in a photo of the dead. But there are still no answers for Magdalena. If they were together, where is Jesús? Lacking unique identifying features, in the eyes of the authorities, he's just another nameless dream-seeker the earth swallowed.

Industrious despite her small frame and meek presence, Magdalena walks on, every step leading her closer to closure—or so she expects. She is a private investigator in an arid landscape of mass graves, burnt bodies, and missing buses, where a recovered bag becomes her child's only tangible remains. *Identifying Features* doesn't intellectualize the cross she bears. The script, cowritten by Astrid Rondero, never forces her to vocalize her excruciating worry, the guilt she may harbor for agreeing to let him leave (even as she consoles the parents of the other boy, relinquishing them of their culpability), or the rage at the magnitude of the devastation that's become the Mexican normality. "My son might be dead, but I have to know," is about all she says. Perhaps only a mother could ever conjure such tireless strength amid crippling despair; she wants only peace of mind. Hernández, in her first lead role, conveys largely through gestures the soul of a woman on the verge of collapse, preserving her energy for the inhospitable excursion.

Fear is a great equalizer in this setting, infecting every aspect of civil life. Along the way, Magdalena crosses paths with others on their own pursuits, each pointed encounter touching upon multiple factors of migration or how the pervasive violence also affects people in higher socioeconomic strata than hers, such as a surgeon searching for her own son. Of those she meets, the most significant might be Miguel (David Illescas), a young man trekking back to his rural home after being deported from the States; we first see him in an alluring tracking shot, crossing the bridge that divides the two countries, a tiny speck framed by a sea of endless break lights. From behind, he could be anyone. The road will eventually bring Miguel and Magdalena together, providing her with the glimmer of a possible future and perhaps the prospect of a surrogate family—feelings inspired, no doubt, by the parallels between him and her lost son, whose different situations represent the consequences of the conditions that drive people to desperately leave or reluctantly return.

Claudia Becerril Bulos, the intrepid director of photography, supplies a fittingly oppressive melancholia, in a film that makes pointed choices about what to hide and what to highlight. Her camera often seems as terrified as the characters, hiding as it does behind windows and other partitions, and she surveys many scenes from a distance, visually representing the tense secrecy that surrounds the atrocities everyone knows about but few dare to speak of. Throughout, Magdalena's face is often lit with the incandescent red of a fire, as if she's staring directly into the man-made hell her homeland has become. The film's command of symbolism is most stunning during an encounter with a survivor, recounting the traumatic events he witnessed in an indigenous language that Valadez translates purely through imagery.



Implying more than it shows, *Identifying Features* is visceral without ever succumbing to the exploitative shock value of cartel stories of the big and small screen alike. It's one of the best films to ever address this crisis, on par with documentary counterparts like Everardo Gonzalez's *Devil's Freedom* or Tatiana Huezo's *Tempestad*. Valadez bypasses politics to get closer to an emotional truth about Mexico's drug war, contemplating its horror as an all-affecting affair rather than pointing fingers. Eventually, the filmmaker heads in a more allegorical direction, with a nightmarish sequence of color and light. What could have been a facile equivalence, drawing a connection between the sadistic perpetrators and the devil himself (a figure important to a country as vastly Catholic as Mexico), is elevated by the overwhelming sensory experience of these climactic moments, all ghostly visions and otherworldly music. This is the rare movie with the power to leave one physically rattled.

Gasping for a breath of hope that never comes, an almost indescribable grief sharply sets in. This movie hurts, and it *should* hurt because of the bloodstained reality of the conclusion, which surpasses in sheer abhorrence any fictional abyss. Magdalena has seen the burning blaze of wickedness, and she's been given a choice between the earthly death of the one she loved most and the ravaging of her spirit. If only her tears could extinguish the flames. There among the moral rubble, putting together the implications of Magdalena's final decision, *Identifying Features* leaves its last bruise, making searing poetry out of suffering so brutal to the soul that it can scarcely be put into words.

SCREENS & POP

Film review: 'Identifying Features' takes us into Mexico's cartel territory

Women play the biggest roles in bringing the tale to screen



By **Charles Ealy** - January 21, 2021



Once again, a Mexican director is giving us one of the best films of the year. And this time the director isn't a man. Her name is Fernanda Valadez, and she has teamed up with a crew made up predominantly of women to bring us "Identifying Features."

Valadez also co-wrote the screenplay with Astrid Rondero. And the cinematography is by Claudia Becerril; art direction by Daila Reyes; editing by Valadez, Rondero and Susan Korda; and original music by Clarice Jensen.

The story focuses on a mother named Magdalena, played by Mercedes Hernandez, who lets her son leave their home in Guanajuato, Mexico, for the U.S. border, where he hopes to find work. He and a friend from town take a bus north, and both of them go missing. After weeks of waiting, the two families go to federal authorities to see whether they can help. The authorities basically say no, but bring the families a book of photos of recently discovered bodies. One of the bodies was the friend who was accompanying Magdalena's son.

After seeing the photos of the body, Magdalena is determined to find out whether her son is still alive. She is told secretly, by one of the law enforcement officials, that a bus on which her son had been riding might have been hijacked by cartel members. And she's told that an old man who survived the hijacking might know what happened to her son. The only problem: The man lives in a faraway town, one that will take Magdalena through dangerous territory controlled by gangs.

The script has a dual storyline. And the other follows Miguel (David Illescas), who has been arrested after spending several years in the United States and is deported back to Mexico. He is lost and has no place to go but home to his mother — and his home in dangerous territory, too.

You can sort of see where this story is going, or at least you think you do. Magdalena is looking for her son. Miguel is looking for his mother. They seem destined to meet in a town under siege.

But what happens after that meeting takes a wild turn that's not predictable at all. Valadez weaves the tales beautifully, with a bit of magical realism and a lot of empathy.

"Identifying Features" is the directorial debut from Valadez. And its success means that she may be joining the ranks of such Mexican directors as Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu.

It is streaming at the Austin Film Society's website, [afsathome.org](https://www.afsathome.org). It's in Spanish with English subtitles.

And by the way, "Identifying Features" won the best foreign-language film award at the recent IFP Gotham Awards. It's that good.



Reviews

Identifying Features



Monica Castillo January 22, 2021

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One journey, full of hope, turns into the start of an aching search for answers in [Fernanda Valadez](#)'s "Identifying Features." This artful Mexican drama begins when Jesús ([Juan Jesús Varela](#)) tells his mother Magdalena ([Mercedes Hernández](#)) that he is going north to the United States with a friend for a job opportunity. But months pass, and there's still no word from him. Finally, Magdalena ventures out on her own journey to find out what happened to her son.

In many movies about immigration, the story often follows those on that journey towards a hopefully better place. The friends or family left behind may have some screen time at the beginning but they soon fade into the background as our hero or heroes move on. In "Identifying Features," we see the concern and worry of a mother left behind, one forced to leave the comforts and familiarity of home in Guanajuato in search of her son. This was not her journey to make, but it is one she pursues out of love, despite the odds facing her. Did her boy die in the desert? Did one of the drug cartels get to him? Is the government pushing Magdalena to accept her son is dead, sight unseen, as a sign of a cover-up, or are they an overwhelmed bureaucracy tired of carrying so many unclaimed bodies? Although the film feels subdued—there are no

scenes of emotional outbursts and there's only a brief chase sequence that ends almost as quickly as it begins—the movie propels itself forward through Magdalena's search. "Identifying Features" has a subtle frantic quality, a kind of restraint in bearing witness to the unspeakable horrors facing countless others who must stay silent.

Valadez, who co-wrote the script with [Astrid Rondero](#), balances this dramatic tension by dabbling with magical realism and otherworldly images. Some scenes look slightly distorted or doctored to make the viewer feel the mother's unease in a visceral way. For instance, there are scenes set by a fire that look oversaturated in red, an intensity burning through the screen just as one character turns to violence for survival. In another scene, when Magdalena consults an indigenous elder to find out what happened to her son, we see what they see: visions of a horned silhouette, a devilish tail backlit by flames burning backwards. It is not a good omen. One morning, Magdalena relives the moment her son came to her to tell her he was leaving. Half of the color is faded out by dirty windows, but he is shown in sharp detail. She is haunted by a moment that now seems to be fading around the edges, but at its center, her son stands frozen in time and memory.

Like in Issa López's "[Tigers Are Not Afraid](#)," the cartel violence that has plagued Mexico in recent years is transformed into a fantastical force of evil. People are afraid to acknowledge it or even speak its crimes aloud. Everyone is taught to accept its forced presence in their lives. There's a scene at a bus station where Magdalena is trying to get answers when a kind stranger tells her what may have happened to her son through the door of a bathroom stall. It's as if the ladies' room was the only safe space away from men and their violence. This force feels almost supernaturally powerful when the woman says the bus company has lost entire buses and passengers, only their luggage arriving at the station. Often, Magdalena is helped by whispers and warnings, guiding her impossible search.

This trail of breadcrumb-like hints also layers in a texture of hushed fear to the film. In her travels, she meets Miguel ([David Illescas](#)), a recent deportee from the United States who reminds her of her son. On his journey back south, he crosses the militarized border in what feels like an entrancing Emmanuel Lubezki-esque one-take. The camera follows Miguel's back as he and others walk towards Mexico through a cold concrete tunnel. After some tight bottlenecks and slight crowding, he looks to be on his own path walking in the dark night air. Then, he looks over his right shoulder at the blurry sea of red taillights lined up to cross the border back to Mexico. It's a visual reminder that the personal tragedies of Magdalena, and now Miguel, are just one of countless others. In this moment, Miguel is alone, physically separated from the rest and isolated by his situation.

Growing up as the child of immigrants, I was taught that coming to the States was always a good thing, even if it was tough. It wasn't until I was older that I fully started to realize the emotional and mental toll it took on a lot of families, and that was if those who left home made it to the other side at all. I noticed the scars between families that were separated by borders, the haunting detachment from everyone you ever loved and everything you ever knew. It is a pain that does not go away easily, if it ever goes away at all. In the hands of Valadez, cinematographer [Claudia Becerril Bulos](#), and the film's sound team and composer [Clarice Jensen](#), "Identifying

Features” peels back that feel-good façade of the “coming to America” narrative for a much more painful reality, one that feels freshly steeped in tears, heartache, and headlines. It is a striking movie that boldly confronts both uncaring governments on either side of the border and the cartels that have warped these areas into the stuff of nightmares, while also mourning the human cost of losing a loved one to uncertainty and the ones who will never make it home again.

Now playing in virtual cinemas.



MOVIE REVIEWS

‘Identifying Features’ review: Beautiful movie with a gripping and topical story

Beautiful and eye opening.

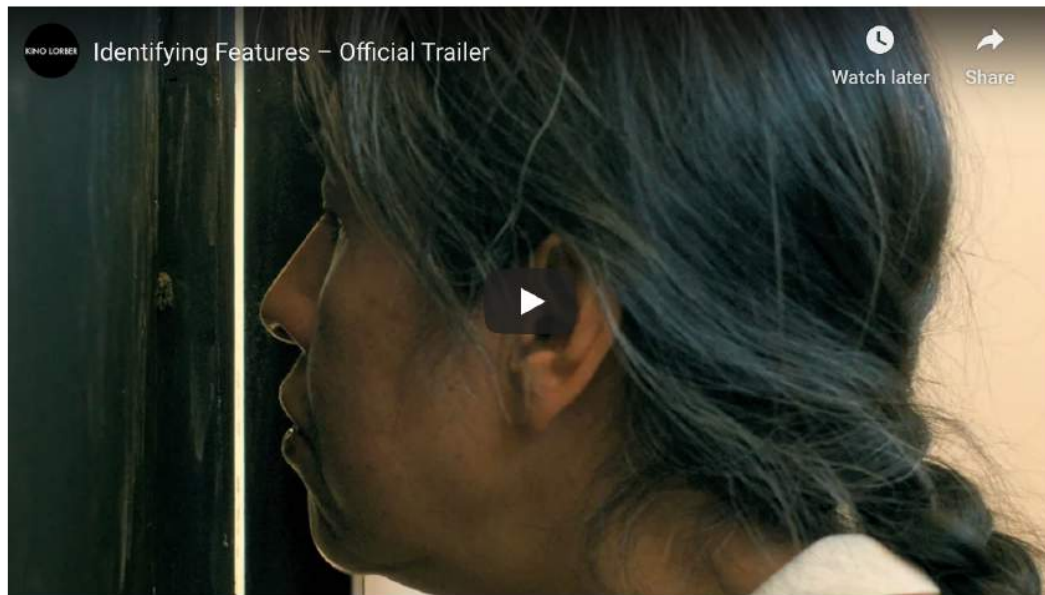


By **Nathaniel Muir** on January 20, 2021

Identifying Features deals with immigration in a different way. It does not follow the lives of those trying to adjust to living in America or even go deeply into why they risk their lives to come to the country. Instead, the compelling film is about those who go missing while trying to enter. The story is about Magdalena, a woman who has lost contact with her son who was coming to America looking for work. On her search to find her son she meets Miguel who has been deported to Mexico.

First time director Fernanda Valadez's debut is a beautiful one. The movie is light on dialogue and allows the natural beauty of *Identifying Features* to take center stage. There are also many close ups to draw the audience deeper into the story. Even more impressive is how vulnerable the camera can make the characters feel. The camera adds to the overall feel of the movie.

Identifying Features deals with a part of immigration that few are willing to discuss out loud. There is always talk about what illegal aliens will do when they get to America or what horrors they are running away from, but the actual journey is rarely touched on. It is a hard topic, so it is unsurprising the movie takes it on with mixed results.



Shedding light on the subject is commendable. One of the reasons the film is so emotional is that it deals with something few people are aware of. *Identifying Features* shows the pain of dislocation, but just as importantly, it also highlights the suffering of not knowing. The movie makes it clear that Magdalena is not an outlier.

On the flip side, the narrative is surprisingly sparse. The mystery will keep audiences engrossed and the characters are gripping, but the plot is also content to remain cryptic. This is more frustrating than anything else. The script also assumes that people watching will understand the levels of corruption in Mexico. This is surprising considering how cognizant the feel is in conveying emotion.

Immigration is a hot button issue that most are passionate about. *Identifying Features* is a riveting film that covers a different side of the topical subject. The film looks stunning and while the story can be little light it, will keep audiences absorbed. This audience favorite from the 2020 Sundance Film Festival is a worthwhile watch. **Identifying Features opens on Kino Marquee and virtual cinemas nationwide January 22**



‘White Tiger’ takes in-depth look at India’s caste system

‘Identifying Features’ depicts human effects of Mexico’s drug wars

[ANITA KATZ](#) / Jan. 21, 2021 1:30 a.m. / [ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT](#) / [NEWSLETTER](#)



“Identifying Features” calls attention to the terror occurring in northern Mexico, through a quietly compelling story about a mother searching for her missing son on terrain made deadly by the drug wars.

Unlike big-studio border-wars action dramas, this feature debut of writer-director Fernanda Valadez — a road tale and thriller with horror and surrealism — features an intimate story and an unassuming heroine. She is Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), a middle-aged Mexican mother whose son, Jesus, a border-bound migrant whose face looks so young you want to cry, is missing.

Magdalena visits the police to report his disappearance, accompanied by the mother of the friend with whom Jesus was traveling, who also is missing. In a scene illustrating the brutality of the region, the cops hand the women an album of grisly corpse photos.

While Jesus' friend is among the dead, Jesus' fate is unknown, and, having little faith in the authorities, Magdalena sets off on a dangerous quest through a landscape containing militia destroyed homes and mass graves to seek answers.

Her journey includes several destinations, and, for a spell, Magdalena travels with, and, movingly, develops familial feelings for, Miguel (David Illescas), a young man deported from the United States who is trying to find his mother.

While at times, Valadez's visual approaches, especially the use of blurry focus, can be distracting, the filmmaker's skillful tone-blending storytelling and gritty and poetic imagery powerfully depict the human effects of Mexico's unsuccessful drug wars.

Hernandez's subtle, nuanced lead performance, meanwhile, gives the movie a quiet but commanding protagonist who represents so many mothers who have lost children to violence.

"Identifying Features" opens on Kino Marquee and in virtual cinemas on Friday.

REVIEW

Identifying Features

★★★

Starring: Mercedes Hernandez, David Illescas

Directed by: Fernanda Valadez

Written by: Fernanda Valadez, Astrid Rondero

Not rated

Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes

Movies / Culture

Identifying Features is exquisitely shot, but there's even more than meets the eye

Debut feature tells the story of a mother searching the Mexican border for her son

Chris Knight

Jan 21, 2021 • January 21, 2021 • 1 minute read



Truth be told, when I started watching this low-budget festival favourite – it won the Sundance audience prize for world dramatic cinema last year, as well as the best screenplay award – I thought it was going to be all pretty images and no plot. But there's more to *Identifying Features* than meets the eye.

The story follows Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), a woman whose teenaged son leaves to illegally cross the border from Mexico into the United States. When she fails to hear from him, she follows, trying to find out what became of him.

Magdalena finds herself butting up against a system where so many migrants go missing or end up dead that people have stopped caring. A recovered bag and a burnt body would seem to close the case on the boy, but she's not convinced, and goes looking for a mysterious bus passenger who may have seen him. Along the way she runs into another young man, recently deported from the U.S. after several years there and making his way home.

Identifying Features is a first feature from Mexican writer/director Fernanda Valadez, and it tells a story of human tragedy with images so striking it reminded me why the big-screen experience is something we desperately need to get back. There's a long tracking shot over water, so close you can't tell the skim of the surface from the sheen of the sky. Another scene features a still figure backlit by a bonfire, the shot made weirdly alien by the fact that it's running backward, so the flames go down, not up. It's brilliant cinematography in the service of a deeply felt, all-too-common story.

Identifying Features is available Jan. 22 through TIFF Bell Digital Lightbox, at digital.tiff.net.

3.5 stars out of 5

REVIEW

January 21, 2021

Posted by Matthew Sorrento

Two Tales of the Border: *Identifying Features* and *No Man's Land*



By **Gary M. Kramer.**

“ The austere approach of *Identifying Features* contributes to the film’s haunting quality,,,,, (while) *No Man’s Land*’s bluntness is why it is ineffective.”

Two films that deal with characters crossing the U.S.-Mexican border are being released January 22. *Identifying Features* is a potent drama, but *No Man’s Land* is a preachy morality play.

At the start of director/cowriter Fernanda Valadez’s superb debut, *Identifying Features*, Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela) is seen in a doorway of his modest family home in Guanajuato. His mother, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) recounts in voiceover that he and his friend Rigo (Armando García) were going to Arizona. Two months have passed, and Magdalena has not heard from her son. She and her Rigo’s mother, Chuya (Laura Elena Ibarra) call on the authorities, who explain there is “no crime to pursue.” When they show Chuya victim photographs, she learns

that Rigo is dead. Magdalena, however, lives in hope that Jesús is still alive, and is determined to find her son.

Valadez crosscuts her story with two other searches. Olivia (Ana Laura Rodriguez) is a doctor who gets a call about her son, Diego, who went missing four years ago. Likewise, Miguel (David Illescas) is being deported, and a stunning tracking shot follows him returning to Mexico.

Magdalena encounters Olivia on her journey, and *Identifying Features* shows the kindness of strangers like her, or a woman at a bus company who guides Magdalena to seek out Regis (Bertha Denton Casillas, voiced by Carmen Ramos) at a migrant shelter who may have useful information.

Eventually, Magdalena meets Miguel. What transpires between this young man returning to his mother, and this mother who is desperately searching for her son, is both incredibly powerful and quite chilling. Valadez reveals some horrific and perhaps hidden truths about the perils of border crossing. And yet, her film has a fable-like quality to it. (A difficult but critical sequence is recounted in a dialect without subtitles and features “El Diablo”). Much of *Identifying Features* is shot starkly, beautifully, like an American Western. And the town where Magdalena meets Miguel is abandoned for good reason.

This austere approach contributes to the film’s haunting quality, as does Hernández’s quiet, dignified performance. The actress is heartbreaking, especially when she is making an impassioned plea for help.

What Magdalena ultimately discovers is shocking. That it is steeped in a painful reality makes *Identifying Features* all the more devastating.

Director Conor Allyn’s well-meaning drama, *No Man’s Land*, takes its title from the gap between the U.S. and Mexican borders. Jackson Greer (Jake Allyn, who co-wrote the film with David Barraza) is a pitcher who preparing for a tryout with the Yankees. Yet he is reluctant to pursue baseball; Jackson is more interested in staying on the family ranch with his parents, Monica (Andie MacDowell) and Bill (Frank Grillo), and his brother Luke (Alex MacNicoll), breaking horses not throwing fastballs.

When Mexican immigrants break through the fence on the Greer’s property, and some of their steers get loose, Bill and Luke head off to recover the cattle. They also encounter a group of Mexicans crossing into the U.S. and a skirmish occurs. Jackson arrives, gun in hand, and kills Fernando (Alessio Valentini), the son of Gustavo (Jorge A. Jimenez), a coyote. When Ramirez (George Lopez) a Texas Ranger arrives, Bill confesses to killing Fernando in self-defense to protect his son’s future prospects.

However, Jackson is wracked with guilt. He returns to the scene of the crime and finds Fernando's wallet. When Ramirez arrives, Jackson flees, and heads to Mexico. It eventually becomes clear that he wants to return Fernando's wallet and make peace with Gustavo.

No Man's Land wants to be a noble story of understanding, and yet much of it is slow and clunky. Director Conor Allyn depicts some of Gustavo's grief, and the film is sympathetic towards his character, who seeks revenge for his son's untimely death.

But mostly the filmmaker focuses on Jackson's experiences south of the border. The American's observation, "Mexico is not like I thought," encapsulates attitudes and stereotypes. Many of the Mexicans Jackson meets act kindly towards him. He is picked up by Hector (Juan Carlos Remolina) and works on his farm, charming his daughter Victoria (Esméralda Pimentel). He takes a bus ride and befriends a mother and her son, bonding over *Huck Finn* (an obvious metaphor). He also is treated well by Martín and Rosa (Julieta Ortiz), a couple he encounters. The only trouble he has—other than being on the run from Ramirez—is his run in with Luis (Andrés Delgado), a violent coyote that Gustavo eventually teams up with in an effort to catch Jackson himself.

The film's chase narrative is hardly gripping. An action set piece where Luis shoots at Jackson, who uses his pitching arm to throw a rock and injure his enemy, lacks tension. Even as Ramirez tracks Jackson down to bring him home and mete out justice features a contrived scene where Jackson causes a distraction to escape from a sticky situation.

"No Man's Land" briefly address the politics of the border as Monica and Bill talk about the situation "in our backyard," and how they once used to leave water, blankets, and food out for the immigrants but stopped because there were soon so many of them. Their self-reflexive moment is more revealing than anything Jackson experiences. This may be because Jake Allyn delivers most of his performance with his grimy clothes. His dirty shirt and injured body convey more emotion than the actor's blank facial expressions or line delivery. Jackson's curiosity about Mexican culture seems to extend to him wanting to know what Spanish insults some of Victoria's friends call him. Jake Allyn never makes Jackson endearing. Even when his character tries to do something right, he acts stupidly or selfishly.

As the film lumbers to its operatic finale, Allyn cudgels viewers with messages of grief, guilt, and forgiveness. Scenes of Jackson having visions of Fernando are especially heavy-handed. *No Man's Land's* bluntness is why it is ineffective. This ambitious film imagines itself as a tragedy of sons' lives being lost, and how families are ripped apart by border politics, immigration policies, racism, and violence. But mostly it shows how compassionate the Mexicans are towards a white man who murdered an immigrant child.

Identifying Features

By GUILLERMO LOPEZ MEZA January 21, 2021



Stories set on the border between the United States and Mexico usually center on desperate migrants risking everything for a better life, even if it's a dangerous choice that may lead to instant deportation, incarceration, or death. For director Fernanda Valadez, the starting point and focus of her feature-length debut *Identifying Features* couldn't be more different: What happens with the ones who stay behind and wait to learn of their beloved's fate? If the crossing is successful, confirmation takes time. If not, reports about dead or missing persons are hardly reliable and timely. Valadez centers her film on mothers like Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), who isn't able to obtain a clear answer about the whereabouts of her teenage son, Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela).

When a backpack is found, Magdalena confirms to the authorities that it belonged to her son. The body of the cousin who departed with Jesús has also been found, a likely victim of gangs or drug cartels that attack and kill would-be immigrants. While there is no corpse for her to identify, officers provide Magdalena a form to sign to acknowledge that he is dead. Olivia (Ana Laura Rodríguez)—an upper-middle-class mother called to identify her son who was kidnapped years earlier—reads and

explains the document to Magdalena, who can't read. Olivia also tells of her grief, how she stopped waiting for news of her son and instead comforted herself by accepting his death only recently. However, she has just discovered that he died just two weeks ago. Olivia advises Magdalena not to surrender as she did, no matter what others say, in one of the best scenes of a movie full of powerful moments.

The first half offers a detailed, moderately paced depiction of the frustrating legal process to discover if a missing person has died or remains missing. When Magdalena understands that the system won't help her beyond a certain point, she continues the search by unorthodox alternatives. This is the moment when the film changes radically in tone and pace, becoming a disturbing and suspenseful story and an unpredictable adventure. Almost a different movie begins, equally impressive. Her road trip will encounter the same dark, life-threatening interests untouched by the law that might have cost the life of her son. Her only clue to Jesús is to find an Indigenous man, the only survivor of a massacre to confirm what really happened.

As she advances in her quest, there's the growing sense that something sinister lurks behind her. The splendid cinematography by Claudia Becerril Bulos is constantly transforming, from sharp realism to the menacing nightmarish. The more the urban world is left behind, the more nature becomes a dangerous place hiding horrible outcomes. Images acquired a chilling and almost abstract lyricism during a flashback sequence featuring the apparition of El Diablo (the Devil).

The unsettling *Identifying Features* challenges expectations. It's a vital film that uncovers a horror: some fates are worse than death.

Directed by Fernanda Valadez

Written by Astrid Rondero and Fernanda Valadez

Streaming on Kino Marquee

Spanish, English, and Zapotec with subtitles

Mexico/Spain. 95 min. Not rated

With Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez, and Armando García

SPECTRUM CULTURE



Although it exists in a world governed and defined by politics, and although its story situates itself at the heart of existing political crises, Fernanda Valadez's *Identifying Features* is, broadly, not an especially political film. The sad, pessimistic events of its narrative, ever narrowing and clarifying from abstract, enigmatic beginnings to an oppressively limited purview by its end, initially derive their potency from the sociopolitical inferences even the most politically ignorant viewer will make, though Valadez and cowriter Astrid Rondero eventually source such potency from raw emotion. Their film starts pensively, even obliquely, a solemn condemnation of governmental incompetence and indifference, then finishes with quiet yet ferocious brutality, an unyielding stare into the deepest, darkest circle of hell.

In a performance so skilled and so emotionally astute it's hard to express in words, Mercedes Hernández plays Magdalena, a mother who hasn't heard from her son since he left Guadalajara for the United States months ago. His travelling companion has shown up dead, still in Mexico, the victim of an alleged gang attack on his coach ride north; Mercedes' son's bag was also recovered, which authorities decide is sufficient proof of his own death, since many of the bodies found after the attack were burnt beyond recognition. She is convinced by a fellow mother not to capitulate to the authorities' requests, not to sign their documents confirming her son's death; she sets off to search for him herself, alone, vulnerable and running ever lower on funds.

There's not a shred of humor to be found in *Identifying Features*. Valadez varies the tone and impact of her film with the occasional sidelong stare at the grave absurdity of these ugly circumstances and with increasingly liberal flourishes of overt artistry. At first, her style is simple and somber, leavened only by Hernández's remarkable naturalism. She breathes life into a film that could otherwise have easily slid into stifling sedentariness; indeed, she's the only thing that truly seems to breathe in *Identifying Features*, mitigating its tendency toward serious theatricality with such an ease it almost feels like you're watching an impeccably filmed documentary.

Once the seriousness becomes impossible to mitigate and the stakes ratchet ever higher, Valadez and cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos make the most of the action's rural Central American locales in shot after stunning shot. The visual splendor they create borders on ostentatious but is justified in their adroit use of it for story and atmospheric purposes — shorn of its narrative diversity, *Identifying Features* must imbue the single line of inquiry it pursues toward the end, a single line with a single aim, with some degree of complexity. This is achieved through fabulous use of framing and lighting, establishing a sense of disorientation essential for conveying the protagonists' fear, peril and confusion.

As it tapers toward a seemingly unavoidable wretched end, some of the tension built up across a consistently evocative series of scenes feels like it might soon dissipate, only for *Identifying Features* to make its one and only narrative gambit. It's not so much a twist as it is a daring switch in direction. The sheer gall of it may elicit the instinctive rolling of one's eyes, yet it makes perfect sense. Valadez and Rondero's gamble may be hokey in its presentation, concealing its nature from the viewer entirely until the last possible minute, though this presentation is necessary in order to educe the kind of numbing shock it must. If the migration crises plaguing Latin America are as grim societally and, for those involved, as crushing personally as this film insists they are, some small amount of emotional manipulation can be tolerated to make that point as unambiguously as the filmmakers can.

Indeed, *Identifying Features*' pivotal last-minute swerve doesn't so much stop the film dead as it opens it out: from the theater of the screen to the theater of the mind. The devil exists, it says, the violent exploiter of the needy, the desperate and the vulnerable, the blackness in the black hole at the center of a neglected society. But the devil is thus a part of that society and is thus one among us all. Darkness does not need the light to exist, it only needs it to be perceived and it can consume a life entire as quickly as a bus driver pulls on their handbrake. And if you don't want to see it, don't go searching for it. Valadez's film doesn't have any of the answers to the political questions it skirts around — all it has is the deep, bruising sorrow of those worst affected.

ARTS



By John Seal,
Jan. 28, 2021, 12:03 p.m.

Small Screen Berkeley: ‘Identifying Features’ and ‘Mayor’

Reviewed: There’s no time for the sentimental in ‘Identifying Features,’ a good film with a great score; while ‘Mayor’ tells the story of the popular mayor of Ramallah, Musa Hadi.



If you read my ‘Favorite Films of 2020’ column late last year, you know how much I admired my number one film, *Buoyancy*. A bleak tale of 21st century slavery in Southeast Asia, the film depicted terrible events in fraught scenes that wouldn’t seem out of place in a horror film.

Though taking place half a world away, I couldn’t help but be reminded of *Buoyancy* as I watched *Sin señas particulares* (*Identifying Features*, streaming via the Virtual Roxie and Pacific Film Archive). Despite being a neo-realistic examination of 21st century life in what we still disparagingly refer to as ‘the developing world’, the film successfully adapts horror genre tropes to an otherwise grimly believable tale.

Directed by Fernanda Valadez, *Identifying Features* is set in northern Mexico, where drug lords, people smugglers, and ordinary citizens live together in uneasy, fractious and violent

circumstances. Weary of living amidst constant danger, young men Rigo and Jesus depart for the perceived safety of Arizona, never to be heard from again.

Jesus' mother Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) is bound and determined to find her son – or, more likely, what remains of him. Setting aside fears and concerns for her own safety, Magdalena follows the few meager clues her child has left behind, inevitably crossing paths with some very dangerous people as she gets closer to the border.

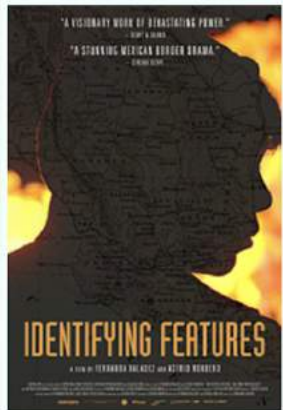
Along the way, she meets Miguel (David Illescas), who's returning home after being deported from the United States. A mother in search of a son and a son returning to his mother: while the parallels between them are obvious, Valadez doesn't allow Magdalena and Miguel's relationship to descend into weepy, redemptive sentimentalism. Indeed, there's simply no time for the sentimental in *Identifying Features*, which also benefits from Clarice Jensen's ominous score, built on amplified organ swells that expand and contract like a particularly grim Terry Riley piece. It's great music accompanying a very good film that will definitely feature on 2021's end of year favorites list.

Shadows off the beaten path

Indies, foreign, docs and shorts...

Identifying Features Sin Señas Particulares

Review by Rich Cline | ★★☆☆



With an intensely personal story set against a documentary background, this Mexican drama unfolds in an artful way that oddly limits its emotional impact. Most people never bother to see the humanity behind the news headlines about illegal immigration, but the events depicted here are frighteningly commonplace. Director Fernanda Valadez opts for a stylised but somewhat clinical approach, revealing the personal story but keeping it at arm's length.

Teen friends Jesus and Rigo (Varela and Garcia) leave their homes in central Mexico to travel into the United States, and officials think they must have perished crossing the border. While Rigo's mother Chuya (Ibarra) has proof that her son died, Jesus' mother Magdalena (Hernandez) has only conjecture, so she decides to trace his journey herself. At the border she meets the eye surgeon Olivia (Rodriguez), who has been searching for her son for for years. And she crosses paths with Miguel (Illescas), a young man who has been deported back into Mexico.

The narrative flickers rather randomly between Magdalena, Olivia and Diego. The mothers question why their sons left when they had their families and good jobs. And after several years working in the States, Diego is feeling lost, especially when he returns to his hometown, which has been decimated by criminal kingpins. Where the story goes is harrowing and often downright horrifying, as the film depicts aspects of Mexican society that are unthinkable.

In the central role, Hernandez offers a riveting, resonant performance as a woman who simply wants to know what the truth about her son. Her expressive eyes hold the attention. Magdalena's journey is difficult, with obstacles, challenges and dead-ends, and Hernandez plays her tenacity with underlying urgency. Rodriguez is particularly strong as Olivia, although her character disappears early on. As Miguel,

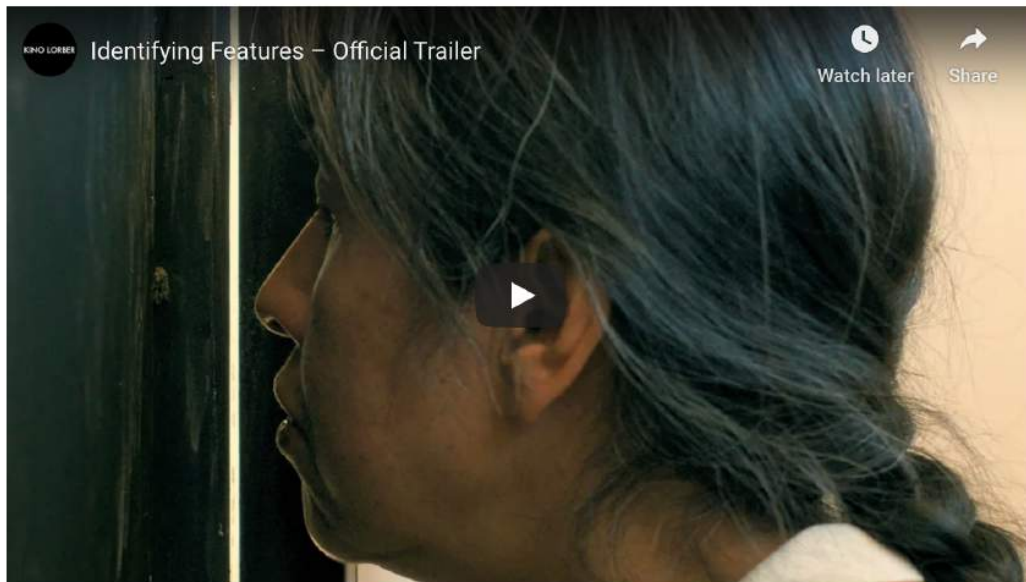
Illescas is also sympathetic, especially as he worries about what happened to his family.

The story covers issues that have huge significance for residents of Mexico, and Valadez's approach is to depict these things in rather obliquely, showing incidents without context or literally blurring them. One key moment is narrated in a local dialect without subtitles. This makes the film an impressionistic depiction of the horrors of violent men who prey on the vulnerable, whether they're quietly living their lives or trying to find a better one. It's shot with impressive artistry, but a more accessible narrative would have made it even more involving.



Review – Identifying Features

🕒 January 21, 2021 📁 FILM REVIEW 👤 Sean Burns



FILM REVIEW – IDENTIFYING FEATURES. *With Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez, Armando García. Written by Astrid Rondero and Fernanda Valadez. Directed by Fernanda Valadez. Unrated, but contains violence and profanity. 95 minutes.*

A couple of months ago, Magdalena's teenage son Jesús took off from Guanajuato to try and cross the border with his buddy Rigo, and they haven't been heard from since. Now Magdalena and Rigo's mom are looking through pictures of burnt bodies and mutilated corpses, wondering if those might be their boys. **IDENTIFYING FEATURES**, the bracing and poetic debut feature from director Fernanda Vadadez takes place in a landscape destroyed by the drug war, where such horrors are so commonplace as to have become a part of everyday life. Rigo had a birthmark on his face, so it was easy for them to identify his body. They're not so sure about Jesús. All they've got to go on is his backpack, recovered from a mass grave.

The film has little in the way of exposition, unconcerned with telling us who these masked militias are, out there hijacking buses, massacring villages and preying on vulnerable immigrants attempting to cross. So withholding as to sometimes feel obtuse, Valadez keeps our lines of sight obscured and parcels out information in small fragments. The camera is often fixed on the person listening rather than whoever's talking. In most cases this is Magdalena, played by the remarkable Mercedes Hernández in her first leading role. She's a matronly woman with sad eyes and a backbone of tempered steel, unwilling to stop looking for Jesús, undergoing a treacherous journey and asking the kind of questions people don't want to answer. But wouldn't you do the same if it were your son?

Valadez sidesteps the sort of hard-hitting "Sicario"-style one might assume for such a story in favor of something dreamier and more abstract. Sometimes it can be confusing and feel indulgent, particularly when the tale's metaphorical angles take center stage and the camerawork begins to mimic the visions of a half-blind witness in flashbacks that include the Devil himself. She's on firmer ground with more concrete scenes like the one introducing Miguel (David Illescas), a young man who becomes Magdalena's traveling companion for a time. The nearly wordless sequence in which he's deported depicts the U.S. Border and Customs offices as something like a vast people-processing plant, churning out hundreds of humans with ruthless efficiency, illuminated by constellations of brake-lights stretching for miles down the highway.

There are some images here that will sear themselves into your brain—it's yet another movie I really wish we'd been able to see in a cinema—courtesy of cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos. Everything in the film feels as forlorn as the hollowed-out ghost town Magdalena and Miguel discover where a vibrant community used to be. Without identifying features, these poor people remain missing and un-mourned, entire lives forgotten. Except a mother doesn't forget....





FILM

Review: *Identifying Features* Is a Haunting Lament for a Nation in a Holding Pattern

Identifying Features is as much about the act of seeing and observing as it is about *not* seeing.



Published 2 weeks ago on January 19, 2021
By **Steven Scaife**



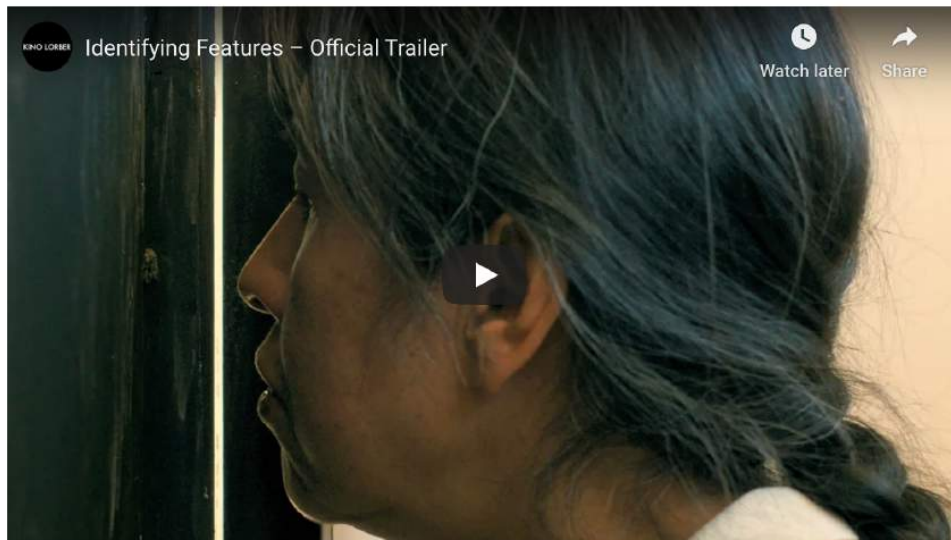
The camera withholds so much in Fernanda Valadez's *Identifying Features*, often focusing near-exclusively on faces. In an early scene, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) and her neighbor, Chuya (Laura Elena Ibarra), consult with a police officer about their sons, who haven't been heard from since they left to cross the border into the United States. We never clearly see the officer, who, after telling the women that he can't help them, is briefly glimpsed in the background of the frame before returning with a thick binder of photos—of recently discovered corpses—for them to peruse. We don't see most of the photos either, but you can tell from the women's faces and body language that what they reveal is almost too much too bear. Chuya finds

her son inside that binder, unmistakable from the white birth mark around his right eye and forehead, but Magdalena is left searching for hers.

Valadez asserts the camera's gaze as a tool for empathy throughout her feature-length directorial debut, which traces Magdalena's quest to find her son. Her journey intersects with that of Olivia (Ana Laura Rodríguez), another mother who's also looking for her missing son, and that of Miguel (David Illescas), a young man on his way home after being deported back to Mexico. As these characters converse with various officials, Valadez largely eschews traditional shot-reverse shots in favor of long takes that convey a sense of escalating devastation on the faces of her characters as they realize that any help they get will be hard won.

Valadez's aesthetics also capture the mundane horror of a faceless bureaucracy going about the grim and clinical business of cataloguing the devastation wrecked upon people by vicious gangs and institutional failure. It's a failure that's become normalized, evident in everything from the long, orderly lines that people stand in to the trucks full of bodies and the blood tests that are performed in order to link the living to the dead. But Valdez understands that the impersonal nature of this system's workers is a reaction to another problem, an outgrowth of a climate where these individuals fear for their jobs and, by extension, their lives in an area wracked by violence and disappearances. Valadez frames one woman completely off screen as she steers Magdalena, almost in a whisper, in the direction of where her son might be, channeling the woman's understanding that she must maintain a safe distance, or else.

Cast: Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez, Laura Elena Ibarra, Xicoténcatl Ulloa **Director:** Fernanda Valadez **Screenwriter:** Fernanda Valadez, Astrid Rondero **Distributor:** Kino Lorber
Running Time: 95 min **Rating:** NR **Year:** 2020



THE GOOD - A riveting emotional journey that examines determination in the face of guilt and grief. Fernanda Valadez's direction crafts an intriguing visual style, and the screenplay is layered with thematic weight. The performances are outstanding, particularly from Mercedes Hernández.

THE BAD - The pacing can sometimes slow down to the point of frustration. Some characters are shallower than others.

THE OSCAR PROSPECTS - [Best International Feature Film](#)

THE FINAL SCORE - 9/10

THE STORY - A woman tries to find her son's whereabouts after he leaves Mexico to find work in the United States.

THE CAST - Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez, Laura Elena Ibarra & Xicoténcatl Ulloa

THE TEAM - Fernanda Valadez (Director/Writer) & Astrid Rondero (Writer)

THE RUNNING TIME - 95 Minutes

Austin American-Statesman

ENTERTAINMENT

On Demand: Two impressive debuts, plus historical drama 'The Dig'

Matt Shiverdecker Special to the American-Statesman

Published 1:35 p.m. CT Jan. 25, 2021



Here are some new releases available for rental through digital services and virtual cinemas as well as some titles available for streaming.

"Identifying Features": Winner of two awards at last year's Sundance Film Festival, this harrowing drama is also a debut feature from director Fernanda Valadez. She calls attention to the often unseen stories of immigrants who go missing or are killed while trying to cross the border between Mexico and the United States. Mercedes Hernandez delivers an unforgettable performance as Magdalena, a woman who hasn't heard from her teenage son in over two months when he left with a neighbor boy to try and find a better life. Government officials do little more than hand her books of horrific photographs of recently recovered bodies, so she heads off on a journey to follow his path by herself to try and bring her son home. The journey is filled with heartbreaking moments, and she never gives up hope that he is still alive, but that only complicates matters as she refuses to back down until finding out the truth. Behind the white noise of border wall rhetoric, Valadez offers a compassionate look at the harsh reality of these policies. (Austin Film Society virtual cinema).

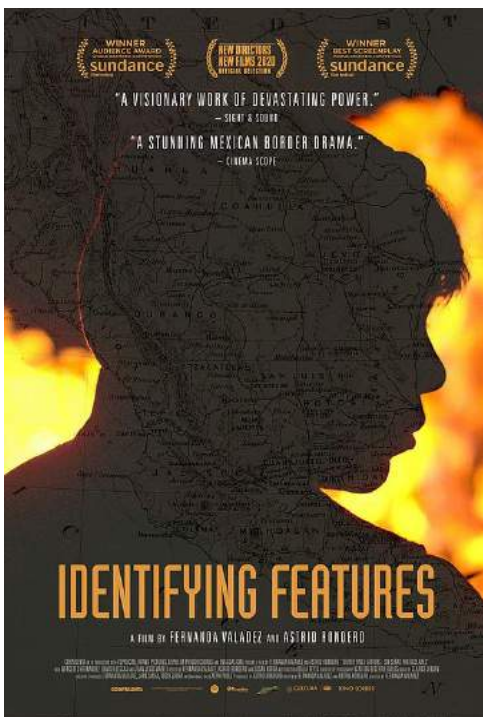
The Times Weekly.com

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“Identifying Features” Mexican thriller now at Chicago’s Gene Siskel Film Center Virtual Cinema and Film at Lincoln Center, NYC

All-female writer-director team wins Sundance acclaim

Dwight Casimere | 1/21/2021, 12:44 p.m.



Although you may already have a sense of the tragic outcome of Mexican director Fernanda Valadez and her writing partner Astrid Rondero's new thriller, *Identifying Features*, you can't take your eyes off of it. Beautifully filmed against the barren rural Mexican landscape by Claudia Becerril Bulo (Nada Personal-TV series, 45 Days in Havar-documentary), with a haunting score by Clarice Jensen, this all-female team effort keeps your attention riveted throughout its 95 minutes.

Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) is a middle-aged working-class woman desperately trying to track down the whereabouts of her son, who took off with a friend from their tiny town of Guanajuato to find work across the border in the U.S.

The film brings into sharp relief the inherent troubles and entanglements of the fractured relationship with our neighbor south of the border. In many ways, the

foreboding undercurrents of the film are symbolic of this mournful state of affairs.

With little help from the authorities, who discourage her inquiries at every step, Magdalena sets out on foot to find her son, whom she instinctively knows is still alive, in spite of reports of kidnappings and murders of other young men who had gone missing.

She crosses paths with Miguel (David Illescas-Here on Earth-2018, Sr. Pig-2016), who was deported after illegally crossing the border to the U.S. They create a sense of mutual protection and emotional refuge in the midst of their harrowing circumstance and its ever-present danger.

The gravity of her mission weighs her every step as director Valadez masterfully unwinds this tautly constructed film. Layered with symbolism, *Identifying Features* is steeped in the mysticism of Mexican culture. Yet, the film presciently warns of the coming dangers that lie in the impending future. In Spanish, with English subtitles, the deep emotion inherent in this film can be felt even without the benefit of translation. Winner of the World Cinema Dramatic Audience and Screenplay Awards at Sundance, it is not to be missed. Visit siskelfilmcenter.org or filmlinc.org for virtual screening details.

JAN
22

I WILL FOLLOW // A FILM REVIEW OF "IDENTIFYING FEATURES (SIN SEÑAS PARTICULARES)"

📅 FRIDAY, JANUARY 22, 2021 AT 3:34AM | TAGGED 🍷 [ANA LAURA RODRÍGUEZ](#), 🍷 [ASTRID RONDERO](#), 🍷 [DAVID ILLESCAS](#), 🍷

[FERNANDA VALADEZ](#), 🍷 [IDENTIFYING FEATURES](#), 🍷 [JUAN JESÚS VARELA](#), 🍷 [MERCEDES HERNÁNDEZ](#), 🍷 [SIN SEÑAS PARTICULARES](#) |

IN 🍷 [DIGITAL CINEMA REVIEW](#), 🍷 [FILM REVIEWS](#), 🍷 [REVIEWS BY MATEO MORENO](#)



First time director Fernanda Valenzdez brings an achingly powerful and dynamic view into the border/migration crisis in the new film ***IDENTIFYING FEATURES (SIN SEÑAS PARTICULARES)***. Having wowed audiences at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival (where it won two awards), *IDENTIFYING FEATURES* can now be seen by a larger audience. Our window in is through Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), a Mexican woman who is desperately trying to find her son Jesús after he leaves for America with his friend Rigo. He disappears crossing the border from Guanajuato to America and now she wants to find him and bring him home. She refuses to believe he may be gone, even after the Police identify Rigo's body. Since there is no sign of Jesús, she latches onto hope.

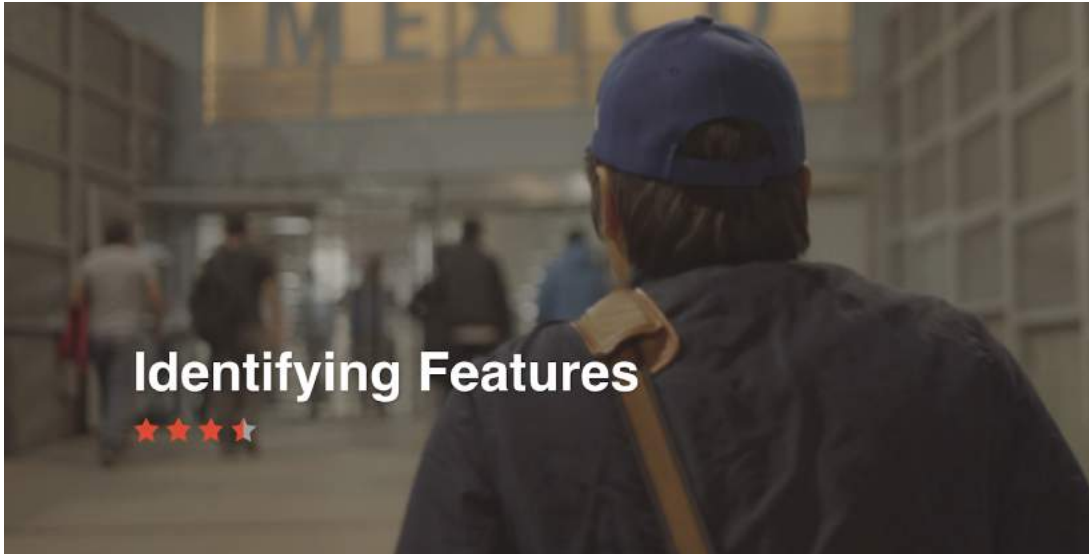
She follows his path as a detective would, picking up clues along her way. From the Police station to a migrant shelter and a shady bus station she eventually meets Miguel (David Illescas), a man who has been deported and is now coming back to Mexico. They come

together by luck but their common goal of finding their families keep them together. Acting as a surrogate to each other, they cling to the hope that they will find answers, one way or another.

Valandez has crafted a meditative and somber film, one that will keep you talking about it long after the final credits have rolled. She often uses little dialogue and her shots are filled with noises from the outside world surrounding her characters, insisting on being heard and demanding to be seen. Mercedes Hernández is wonderful, bringing an aching pain to her performance. Her "stop at nothing attitude" is evident with every single step she takes and she showcases Magdalena emotions, both heartbreak and power, remarkably. David Illescas also turns in a wonderfully understated performance and they both help make ***IDENTIFYING FEATURES (SIN SEÑAS PARTICULARES)*** a triumphant film, one that speaks volumes about one of the most incredibly important topics happening today. I, for one, am thrilled to see what Fernanda Valandez will bring to life next and am thankful that this film can add to the much needed conversation of the migration crisis.

GRADE: A

WRITTEN BY Astrid Rondero, Fernanda Valadez **DIRECTED BY** Fernanda Valandez
STARRING Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez.
NOW PLAYING IN SELECT THEATRES AND ON THE [KINO LORBER DIGITAL CINEMA PLATFORM](#). Click [HERE](#) for more info and showtimes.



It takes a special sort of confidence to make a quiet movie, and that's exactly what director Fernanda Valadez displays in her debut feature, *Identifying Features*.

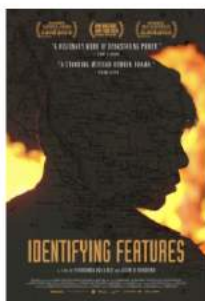
Written by Valadez and Astrid Rondero, the movie follows Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), a mother from a small village in Mexico, as she travels toward the United States border to track down her teenage son, who disappeared while trying to get to Arizona. She encounters a series of obstructions along the way—both bureaucratic and criminal—as well as a twentysomething man named Miguel (David Illescas), who has recently been deported from the U.S. and is trying to reunite with his own family.

As director, Valadez lets patient observation and careful framing do most of the talking (there's little dialogue and hardly any music). At a law-enforcement facility early on, Magdalena dutifully sits in a line outside while body bags holding corpses of other missing persons are carried back and forth in the background. When she does get to talk to officials or others who might help her, the camera rarely reveals their faces, resting on Magdalena's increasingly defeated visage. In its careful observation of a surprisingly persistent woman making her unlikely way through menacing societal systems, the movie recalls both Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone* and Eliza Hittman's *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*.

And yet, despite its hushed demeanor, *Identifying Features* does have a few crucial flourishes that distinguish it from those films. There is an extended single take that follows Miguel from behind, Dardenne-like, as he crosses back over to Mexico, emphasizing his isolation amidst security lights and border traffic. And the movie's striking opening shot—of Magdalena's son approaching the bleary, partly open casement windows of their home—recurs later with a striking difference: this time he appears, briefly, exactly between the two panes, heartbreakingly clear.

Then there is the film's standout sequence. Having tracked down an older, indigenous man who shared a bus with her son, Magdalena finally learns the boy's fate (I won't spoil it). Valadez chooses to let the man speak in voiceover—in his own, non-Spanish language, without subtitles—as the camera turns to the events he describes. It's a jarring technique, yet of a piece with the smeary, inflamed imagery, which provides only a horrible hint of what's happening. By the time we see a flicker of a figure that appears to have horns and a tail, the previously hushed *Identifying Features* evokes the roaring, transcendental terror of another Mexican feature: Carlos Reygadas' [Post Tenebras Lux](#). For a quiet movie, this leaves you rattled and undone.

MARK REVIEWS MOVIES



IDENTIFYING FEATURES



Director: Fernanda Valadez

Cast: Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Ana Laura Rodríguez, Laura Elena Ibarra, Juan Jesús Varela, Xioténcatl Ulloa, Armando García

MPAA Rating: **NR**

Running Time: 1:35

Release Date: 1/15/21 ([virtual](#)); 1/22/21 (wider virtual)

Review by Mark Dujsik | January 21, 2021

What happened to her son? That's the only question that matters to Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), the central figure of the haunting *Identifying Features*. Is he alive, and if so, where and in what condition is he? Is he dead, and if that's the case, how and why did he die?

Magdalena's search for the answer to this question—the only thing that we know about the character until the film's film minute or so—will take her across Mexico, to places unknown, at least to the audience, and forgotten by everyone but the people who still live or once lived there. Co-writer/director Fernanda Valadez's debut feature (an expansion of her 2014 short "400 Maletas") is a fascinating, troubling, and ultimately devastating examination of modern-day Mexico, seeing the causes, complications, and consequences of immigration to the United States exclusively from the perspective of those who do migrate and, more importantly, those who are left behind.

This is primarily Magdalena's story, but the surprise of this intimate film is how generous Valadez and co-writer Astrid Rondero's screenplay is in terms of offering a wider perspective. The interludes with other characters are sometimes brief or intrinsically connected to Magdalena's journey, but every new perspective, as fleeting as it may be, makes some kind of emotional or thematic impact on this tale.

Some of that is because these stories are so closely related to Magdalena's, even if she never has connected or possesses no reason to connect to these people in any other ordinary circumstance. Some of that is simply the power of Valadez's filmmaking, which combines imagery, language, and silence in such potent ways.

Take, for example, the film's opening sequence, which begins from Magdalena's point of view, watching her teenage son Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela) approach the small shack where she and he live—his body framed and obscured by a bar in the window. The boy arrives at the front door to tell his mother that he is leaving the country with a friend, whose relative can get the two jobs in Arizona. Magdalena narrates what happened in this scene and what happened following: She hasn't seen or heard from her son in weeks.

She's actually offering testimony to the local authorities—an unseen face behind a desk. Note how often Valadez hides or completely ignores the faces of people to whom Magdalena or one of these characters is talking. The effect is twofold: We don't need to see these people, who are either unhelpful or hiding some darker secret, and our focus remains steadfastly on the people who really matter in this story—those who have suffered loss, uncertainty, or pain beyond any kind of account.

Offered a book of photos by the anonymous officer, Magdalena roughly flips through the pictures of dead bodies, found recently in a shallow grave in the middle of nowhere. Hernández's performance is especially strong in these quiet moments. Her turning of the pages suggests a heartbreaking combination of anger, frustration, and helplessness, solely by a simple physical action and the look on her face.

She does not find a photo of Jesús, but she does spot one of her son's friend, whose mother (played by Laura Elena Ibarra) has been avoiding the pictures. This mother knows what happened to her son. Magdalena is left with a different kind of void: not knowing. She makes it her mission to discover the truth, wherever the search may take her and no matter the pain that may come from learning that truth.

From this point, the film veers slightly to a few other journeys, although Magdalena remains involved in all of them. A successful eye doctor named Olivia (Ana Laura Rodríguez) was in Magdalena's position four years ago. She receives a phone call, informing her that the body of her own son, whom she assumed had been dead for years, was found. He died only two weeks ago.

Olivia, who sees Magdalena in the same facility (where discovered bodies or charred remains in bags are constantly brought in and are so plentiful that they have to be stored on shelves in a moving truck), gave up hope. She tells her new and momentary acquaintance, whom Olivia would likely never encounter because of their homes and their socioeconomic distinctions, that Magdalena cannot do that.

Meanwhile, Miguel (David Illescas) is being deported from the United States back to Mexico. He left his small village—one that looks very much like the place where Magdalena comes from, even to the small shack where he and his own mother lived—some time ago and found some kind of life. Now, he's returning home, hoping that the life he once had known is still there.

Paths cross. Magdalena learns of frequent attacks and abductions on the bus routes north, as well as a conspiracy to hide those assaults. Miguel learns that his village has been overrun by a local militia following the murder of the mayor—and each successive one. The searching mother and the deported son make a connection.

Valadez's film is entirely about connections—the one between Magdalena and Miguel, which becomes the focal point, and the ones between Magdalena and those assorted strangers, either evasive or helpful, and the ones we make with these stories, these characters' shared experiences, and these faces of ache and longing. The story, of course, plays as a mystery, with Jesús' fate serving as the narrative's driving force, and Valadez puts forth a series of visual mysteries to accompany and highlight that feeling of uncertainty.

One may be as hypnotically enigmatic as a single shot of a lake, in which we can't tell where the sky begins, where the water ends, and from what angle we're observing the scenery. Another is as eerie and frightening as the story of a survivor of one bus attack, whose account is narrated in an indigenous language without subtitles and shot from his out-of-focus perspective, which imagines one attacker as a demonic figure, engulfed but not consumed by subtly retreating flames. There's a new and different pain to his experience and survival.

Identifying Features is patient, because Magdalena must be and we must feel the weight and pressure of time on this scenario. We do feel it and deeply, too, especially when the truth, as it must and as painful as it perhaps can be, is revealed.

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ENTERTAINMENT

"Identifying Features": Cine to stream award-winning drama set in present-day Mexico

Andrew Shearer Athens Banner-Herald

Published 9:49 a.m. ET Jan. 21, 2021 | Updated 1:14 p.m. ET Jan. 21, 2021



Endurance is something we can all identify with these days. No matter who or where you are, weathering the toughest of times without giving way has become a universally shared experience, and we often look to art to reflect and inspire our lives.

Endurance is at the heart of co-writer and director Fernanda Valadez's debut narrative film, "Identifying Features," a Spanish-language drama that has won over 15 awards on the festival circuit, including Best international Feature at last week's Gotham Independent Film Awards.

“Identifying Features” is scheduled to open Jan. 22 at Athens Ciné, and will be available for streaming rental via the theater’s “virtual cinema” platform, which has helped the downtown nonprofit remain in business during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Set in modern-day Mexico, Valadez’s film stars stage veteran Mercedes Hernández as Magdalena, a small-town mother who sets out on a dangerous journey to locate her son, who left home weeks earlier to reach the United States border.

With no phone or vehicle to aid her, and knowing full well that the search may end in tragedy, Magdalena’s resolve is as unrelenting as the terrain she encounters.

Originally from Guanajuato, Valadez was compelled to tell Magdalena’s story after becoming overwhelmed by news of travelers and migrants vanishing by the day, often murdered by criminal gangs capable of single-handedly turning villages into ghost towns overnight.

“I tried to structure ‘Identifying Features’ as a road movie, more lyrical than naturalistic, looking for the sensation of a thriller,” said Valadez. “I figured this mixture of elements would help me express a human phenomenon that left me without words.”

In a time when audiences are seeking out lighter, more escapist forms of entertainment, it’s understandable that such a description might turn some away. It’s a testament to Valadez’s poetic visual style, punctuated by the sparse landscapes and unforgettable faces captured by cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos, that “Identifying Features” is impossible to turn away from once it begins.

And the most prominent of those faces belongs to leading actor Hernández, whose often wordless performance accomplishes the delicate work of communicating the urgency of a very real humanitarian crisis.

As Magdalena encounters language barriers and sleeps wherever she can find shelter, she relies on a steadfast belief in the kindness of strangers in an environment fraught with danger at every turn.

It is this optimism and strength, rather than the sometimes brutal events “Identifying Features” depicts, that makes the film some of the season’s most essential viewing.

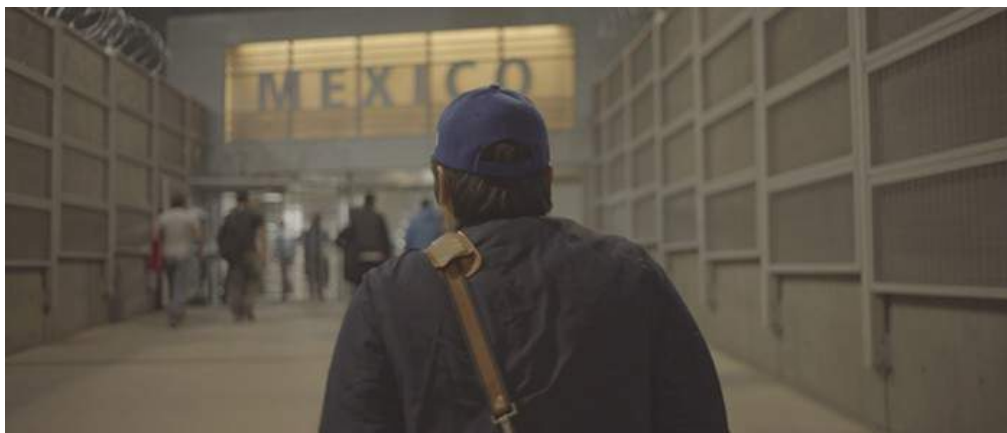
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BLOGTOWN

MOVIES & TV

Review: Fernanda Valadez's Remarkable Debut Film, *Identifying Features*

by [Chase Hutchinson](#) • Jan 21, 2021 at 2:00 pm



A haunting and beautifully realized film, *Identifying Features* (*Sin señas particulares*) is a meticulously constructed work that teeters on the edge of magical realism.

It tells a story of one mother's journey to find her son who has disappeared while attempting to cross the border from Guanajuato, Mexico into the United States.

Magdalena Loredó Martínez, played with resolute grace by Mercedes Hernández, must navigate a hostile and tedious world to find her son, even as no one else cares about what happened to him. It seems hopeless and likely futile for Magdalena as she retraces her son's steps from bus stations to shelters, but she remains dogged in her determination.

On her journey, she encounters strangers who show simple kindnesses. The most notable is Miguel, played with delicate tragedy by David Illescas. The two bond as he tries to make his way home to his mother after being deported. The parallels between Miguel and Magdalena's son are apparent.

It would be a disservice not to give high praises to the film's director and co-writer, Fernanda Valadez. If I hadn't known it beforehand, I would have assumed the film was Valadez's fifth or sixth feature because of its confidence. It's a remarkable debut feature that marks her vision as one to watch.

That vision takes the form of poetic and straightforward visuals. One sequence, where characters travel down a reflective water surface, is breathtaking. Valadez's lens captures the near fairytale-esque beauties of its landscapes mixed with the real-life horrors found within them.

I should note that the film's focus is not on the larger crisis of US immigration policies. The film centers on its characters; there's no explicit message about the dangers of a militarized border. Instead, Magdalena and Miguel's honest portrayals are left to speak for themselves, and they speak volumes.

There are some moments where Magdalena lingers as the only face on the screen, with no typical shot/reverse-shot conversation. It gives the entire film over to her, letting her command the screen. Her journey is the center of the film. It's a refreshing alternative to films that provide an outsider's look at those impacted by border policies. (I'm looking at you, ***Sicario: Day of the Soldado***.)

The conclusion here is still nightmarish, mixing in fantastical elements, which may or may not be real, of near horror that cross over into our real world. With a droning score and lit only with fire that is seemingly going backward, it's a brutal yet controlled conclusion. Magdalena's journey is never one that feels like it will end well, though the ending Valadez provides is a deeper twist of the knife than expected.

*You can stream Identifying Features via **the Virtual Grand Illusion Cinema** starting Friday, January 22.*

theStranger

FILM/TV

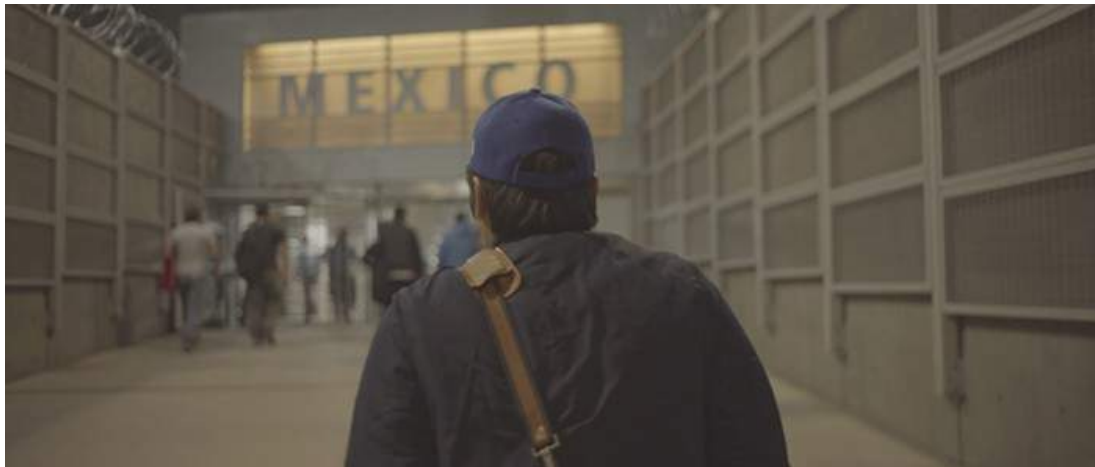
Fernanda Valadez's Remarkable Debut Film

by [Chase Hutchinson](#) • Jan 21, 2021 at 11:40 am

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Film Review: Identifying Features

Posted On : January 20, 2021 Published By : Herman Dhaliwal



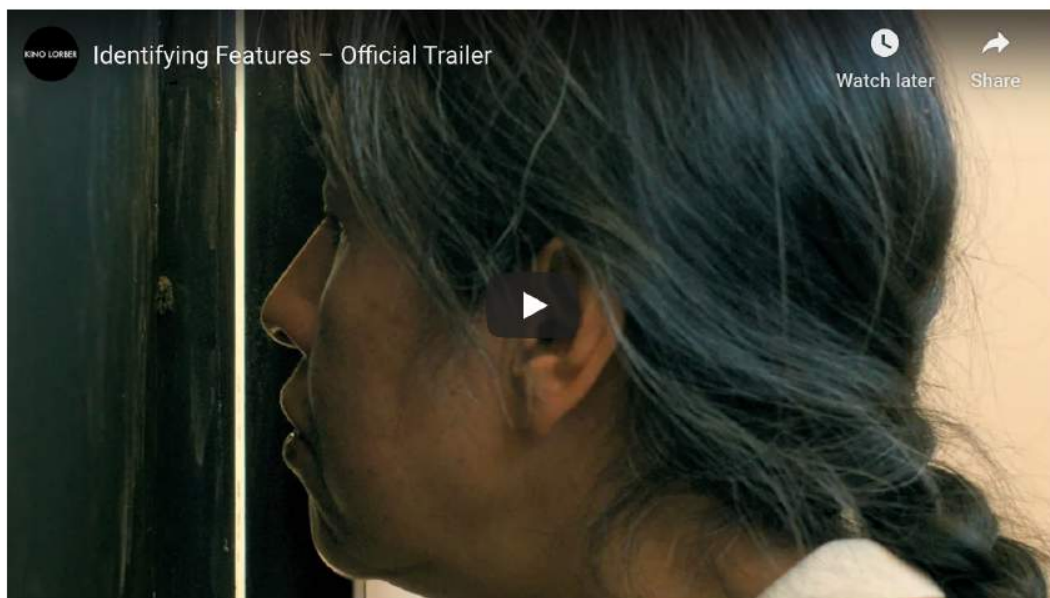
Fernanda Valadez's debut film, *Identifying Features*, is a Mexican-Spanish co-production that explores the violence, abductions, and cartel activity that often occurs near the U.S.-Mexico border. The film follows Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), a woman from Guanajuato, Mexico whose son, Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela), left some time ago with a friend, heading to America. However, a lot of time has passed since he left, and he has not been in contact with his mother. He's gone missing. So, she goes on a journey to find him, hoping he is still alive, meeting people along the way who are in similar situations.

Valadez's approach to the film is patient, lyrical, and haunting. Her script, which she co-wrote with Astrid Rondero, tends to keep dialogue to a minimum, putting greater emphasis on its visuals. The initial glimpses of Magdalena's son is shown in a very dreamlike manner, like we're

watching her memory. The cinematography from Claudia Becerril Bulos is beautiful in how it bounces between the dreamy and the grounded, perfectly capturing the emotions of the characters in a way that doesn't feel obvious or hokey. It's a deeply intimate film, and one that explores a perspective we rarely get to see in films like this.

Much of the film has Magdalena going through various offices and people, trying to find answers within the chaotic bureaucracy of border and travel offices. I love the way the film captures these moments. I think about one sequence where she is talking to this woman who doesn't have the kind of answers Magdalena's looking for, and the whole sequence is done in one shot with an over-the-shoulder shot, focusing on Magdalena's face, never once showing the worker she's talking to. And seeing these places where bodies are kept while others are also hoping to find loved ones is a haunting sight.

A little ways into the film, we also come to meet Miguel (David Illescas), a young man who has just been deported from America, and is now forced to return to a home he hasn't been in contact with for several years. Eventually, he crosses paths with Magdalena, and the two form a bond and try to help each other out, having both been in a situation where things have seemed hopeless, and not going the way either of them had hoped. It's a heartwarming element in a film that is otherwise pretty harsh and more than willing to dig into the realities of this kind of situation.

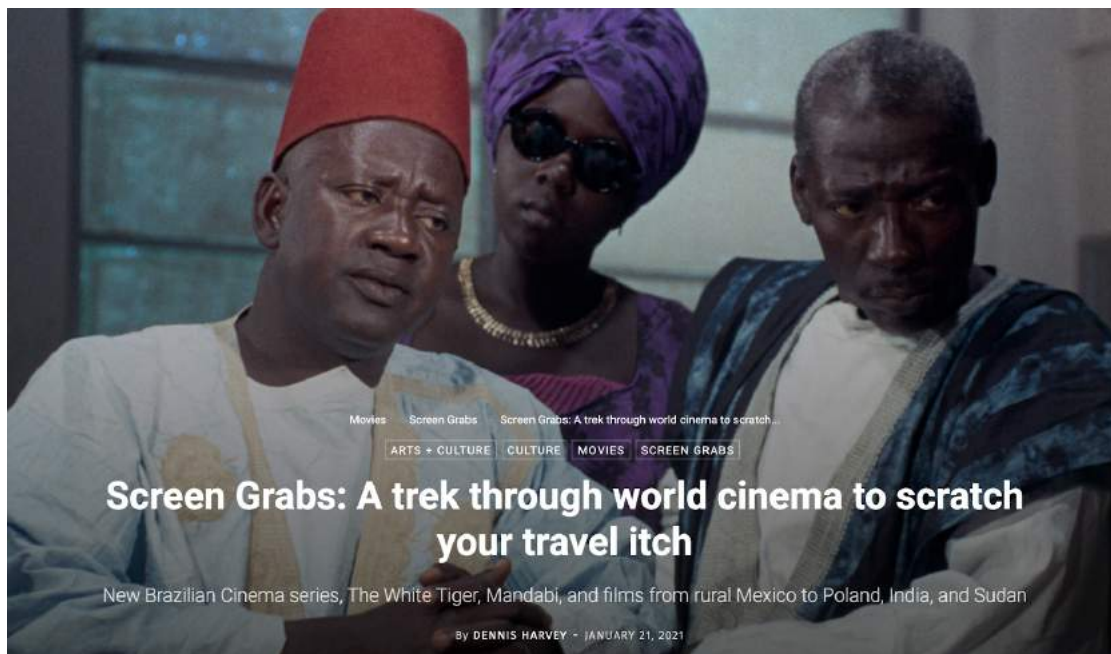


Mercedes Hernández is terrific in the film. Her soft-spoken demeanor serves as a compelling contrast with her determination and resilience. She gets so much emotion across, sometimes without even saying a word. You can't help but root for her, and hope she finds her son. David Illescas offers a more understated performance, but it is one that still really effective and moving

nonetheless. The two have a really good dynamic in their scenes together, while effortlessly carrying the sequences when they were on their own. But even actors who appear in a single scene do a great job at leaving a mark with their limited screen time. It's just well performed all around.

The quiet, methodical pacing of *Identifying Features* might not work for everybody, I myself found certain moments to drag a bit, however it ultimately comes together beautifully, in a manner of speaking. The big payoff to the journey is one that I found incredibly striking, upsetting, and one that I doubt I will be able to shake off my mind anytime soon. Any issues I may have had with how the film moved was gone because I was just so taken aback by its conclusion, and I do mean that in a good way. I am so impressed by how Fernanda Valadez put a film like this together, and with so much empathy and a striking eye for images that will leave a lasting impression. This is definitely one of those films that many will only ever want to see one time, but for that one time, despite the darkness it explores, I think it's definitely a journey worth taking.

Identifying Features will open in select theaters and virtual cinemas on January 22nd.

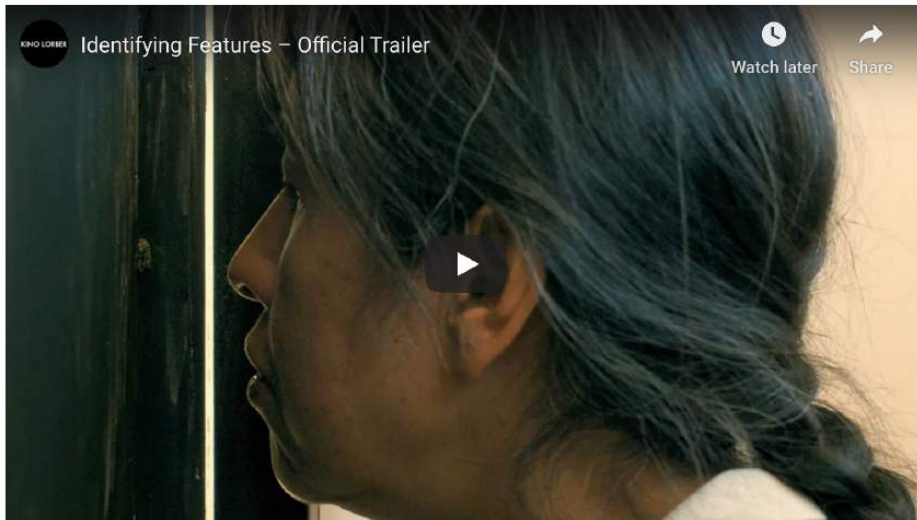


Travel still seems a thought both nostalgic and distantly hopeful for most of us, given that ending COVID may well take most if not all of 2021. Of course, there's always armchair travel, and this week brings a particularly wide geographic range of new features that roam from rural Mexico to Poland, India, and Sudan.

Identifying Features

At the opposite end of the scale in terms of flamboyance and accessibility is this first feature by Fernanda Valadez, which won two major prizes at Sundance last year. It's a stark, explication-free, sometimes near-impenetrable tale of profound loss: When her own teenage son and a neighbor's aren't heard from again after deciding they'll go north to the US for work as undocumented immigrants, middle-aged rural widow Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) fears the worst. She leaves Guanajuato to seek any information, getting rebuffed by indifferent

authorities, temporarily helped by a bourgeoisie woman (Ana Laura Rodriguez) on a similar quest, then by a young man (David Illescas) whose own sojourn up north ended in deportation.



Throughout her grueling, often fruitless odyssey, Magdalena fears she may ultimately discover her son is long dead, whether killed by predatory guides, drug cartels, or something else—as has happened to untold thousands before him. Valadez and coscenarist Astrid Rondero keep things more cryptic than necessary, particularly for foreign viewers who could've used a little intel on the deadly criminal perils that have largely driven ordinary citizens from regional swaths of northern Mexico. Still, *Identifying Features* has integrity, atmosphere, and a unique sense of purgatorial dislocation. If its near-abstract presentation feels exasperatingly mannered at times, there is still potency in the final destination here. It's playing Roxie Virtual Cinema, and other streaming platforms.



SCREEN TEST

'Identifying Features' Review: Fernanda Valadez's quietly stunning drama ventures into the emotional fallout of Mexico's ongoing humanitarian crisis

The Mexican filmmaker's new movie sifts away politics to focus on the everyday uncertainty and anxiety haunting splintered families.



Author: David Lynch (KENS 5)

Published: 8:53 PM CST January 20, 2021

Updated: 8:59 PM CST January 20, 2021

As if responding to the pair of notable December releases with surrogate father-daughter storylines – Paul Greengrass’s “[News of the World](#)” and George Clooney’s “Midnight Sky” – Mexican filmmaker Fernanda Valadez’s feature directorial debut “Identifying Features” briefly unites a woman and a young man on parallel searches for long-lost relatives. She is Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), who is beginning to believe her son may be dead. He is Miguel (David Illescas), who is hoping against hope that his own mother is not. And while they’re together for only a few heartbreaking scenes in Valadez’s striking drama about searchers who become wanderers (called “Sin Señas Particulares” in Spanish), the bond is emotionally informed to a sharper pitch than either of those two aforementioned Hollywood projects.

Part of that is because of the time we spend with Magdalena and Miguel before they cross paths, a period that sees them heading in opposite directions but unknowingly towards each other. As Miguel is deported and preparing to cross back into Mexico, the mother’s search for answers in the wake of her son’s disappearance takes her to the border, where body bags fill every inch of steel shelves as though they were casualties of war. That isn’t far from the truth—the worsening crisis of violence and kidnappings in Mexico has escalated to set new homicide records in nearly each of the past several years, with cartels often specifically targeting migrants, according to congressional research. Valadez’s movie – a pseudo-documentary in function, a simmering thriller in form – aims to put a human face to the statistics, while interrogating how desensitized we’ve become to them. It’s a painfully forthright work, revealing infuriating truths about national priorities in how it juxtaposes its most evocative images with a sense of robotic routine, as if an entire country has been robbed of its humanity.

The quietly anguished performances from Hernández and Illescas suggest as much, as does a slight disorientation that keeps the narrative’s compass point constantly quivering on either side of true north, though this makes at least partial stylistic sense for a character study about navigating violence’s aftershocks. For most of its 95-minute runtime, Valadez and fellow screenwriter Astrid Rondero aren’t concerned with depicting the earthquake; this isn’t a movie of explosive external carnage but grounded emotional tensions, represented by lines of worry etched on mothers’ faces and massive catalogues filled with photos of bodies found near the border. The image gets hazy and feathered around the edges as memories are revisited, the lack of clarity made visual as well as emotional. As Miguel prepares for the nighttime re-entering of his home country (capping an impressive display of unbroken cinematography from Claudia Becerril Bulos), he stops to gaze at an endless, intimidating sea of red brakelights ahead of him—as if the universe were telling him to be wary. Isolation and tragedy await him on the road ahead as well.

Though “Identifying Features” is an impressionistic work that magnifies its visual details, it’s the refrains of prolonged unbroken silences accompanying Magdalena’s search and Miguel’s deportation that most strongly places us in their states of mind. The less they speak (and this is a screenplay of few words), the more we understand—it’s a maddeningly effective approach. Information is conveyed with mood instead of data as the movie envelops its audience into the somber psychologies of our characters and a piercing quiet that goes from curious to tragic in

the elongated absence of long-awaited reunion. Numbing might be the right word for the dazed filmmaking Valadez employs here, though we come to feel something different as we watch Magdalena continue to push through obstacle after obstacle—an admiration for those who greet uncertainty with an iron-forged will to endure. “Identifying Features” is a story of national tragedy, but also unquestionably of an unassuming kind of heroism that arises from it. The isolation of her search is placed front and center in one of the movie’s most startling images: a God’s-eye shot centering on a tiny boat carrying her across a lake that may as well be an ocean.

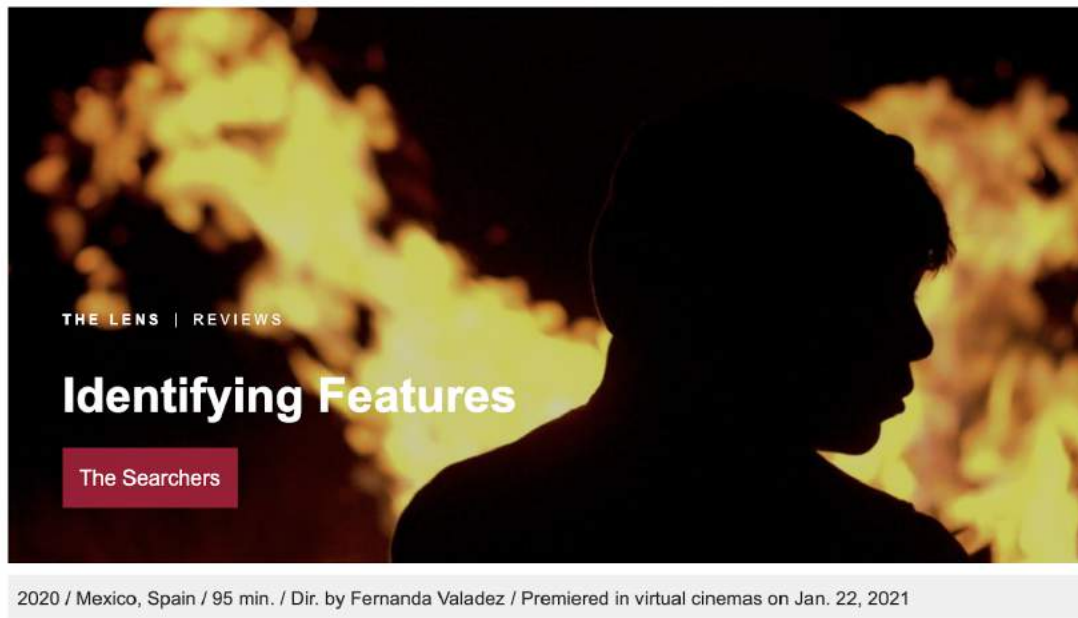
At times “Identifying Features” is a difficult watch for the wrong reasons – moments when the lack of clarity threatens to tip into looser investment on our part – until it pivots down the stretch for Magdalena to come face to face with the horror that she spends most of the film following in the footsteps of. Questions are answered, hopes set ablaze in a fiery sequence of moral skin-shedding as Valadez culminates her film with a haunting metamorphosis. It’s ironic that “Identifying Features” begins and ends with images that have us squinting our eyes to make out figures slowly approaching from a distance, because the young director’s boldly asserted intentions are as clear as a sun-spotted day, or otherwise as a flame licking up to make sense of the surrounding night.

"Identifying Features" is not rated. It's available to watch from Kino Lorber [via virtual cinemas](#), starting Friday.

Starring: Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez

Directed by Fernanda Valadez

2021



by **Andrew Wyatt** on Jan 26, 2021

Writer-director Fernanda Valadez's outstanding debut feature, the slow-motion missing-persons thriller *Identifying Features*, opens with a hell of a shot. Through a smudged farmhouse window, the camera watches as the teenage Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela) slowly emerges from a pall of dense mist. He trudges across a dry, fallow field, approaching the tiny building. Initially, the gap in the slightly ajar window perfectly frames him, but as he grows closer and larger, he drifts off-center, the grime on the glass rendering him hazy. The viewpoint is that of his middle-age mother, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), who watches his approach through the window with trepidation. It's as if she senses what's coming. The camera pans left to match his arrival at the farmhouse's open doorway. He stops there, doffs his ballcap, and sighs in resignation before declaring, "I'm leaving with Rigo. His uncle will find us a job in Arizona." He's made his decision, but he can't look his mother in the eye when he announces it.

This extraordinary opening shot is, it turns out, a flashback. Magdalena has not heard from Jesús for two months. He boarded a northbound bus in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato with his friend Rigo (Armando García) and vanished. She doesn't even know if he made it across the U.S. border. Rigo's mother identifies her son's remains from a photo in a local government office – one image plucked from binders spilling with dead fathers, mothers, and

children, all of them presumed victims of drug-cartel violence. Jesús is not among them, however. At her son's memorial, Rigo's mother gives Magdalena a roll of cash and urges her to go north to ascertain Jesús' fate: "You would do the same for me."

Valadez employs a steady, deliberate approach in *Identifying Features* that at times evokes Lav Diaz and Lucretia Martel: long takes, sparse words, shots intended to lodge a key detail in the viewer's mind. In the screenplay Valadez co-wrote with Astrid Rondero, the characters speak with care, never saying more than is necessary. This reserve is more than a stylistic affectation, however. Magdalena and other residents of cartel country have survived by keeping their eyes open and not drawing attention to themselves. When Rigo's father, Pedro (Xicoténcatl Ulloa), gives Magdalena a lift northward, his truck is briefly menaced on the nocturnal highway by an SUV full of shadowy, whooping figures. Are they kidnappers or just rowdy kids? Pedro barely acknowledges the other vehicle, looking straight ahead, saying nothing, and maintaining speed. "Let's wait till morning comes," Magdalena sagely suggests after the immediate threat has passed.

Later, at another government office, Magdalena has a brief but crucial encounter with a fellow mother, a doctor whose son has been missing for four years. The woman has come to this waystation to identify the remains of a newly slain man, dead only two or three weeks – which, to her horror, means that she erred years ago when she resigned herself to her child's probable fate and stopped looking for him. She urges Magdalena not to sign any document that acknowledges her son's death: "No matter what they tell you, don't make the same mistake."

Freshly determined, Magdalena asks around at the bus station where Jesús and Rigo originally departed, looking for a driver who may recall her son. No one wants to talk – there are rumors of whole buses full of passengers vanishing *en route* to their destination – but one anonymous soul has mercy on Magdalena, whispering a lead through the stall door in the ladies' room. Magdalena follows a thread of dubious clues to a migrant shelter, and then to a village named Ocampo, all with the hope of locating and speaking to an elderly Indigenous man who somehow survived the roadside cartel massacre that took Rigo's life. Perhaps, Magdalena dares to hope, Jesús is also alive?

Magdalena's story is eventually entwined with that of Miguel (David Illescas), a young man who has been captured by the U.S. Border Patrol. When Miguel enters the film, he is at the end of an aborted journey, being processed by law enforcement and forcibly returned to Mexico. Valadez and cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos capture Miguel's reentry in long, majestic takes, emphasizing both the bureaucratic banality and vaguely surreal quality of his defeated trek through the endless chambers, corridors, and checkpoints of the border infrastructure. In one eerie shot, a sea of red-gold taillights reveals the thousands of Mexican vehicles idling at the crossing, waiting to be waved through one by one. Miguel has nowhere to go but home, so he catches a ride to Ocampo, where his mother still lives on a tiny sheep ranch – or, at least, she did when he left five years ago.

When Miguel and Magdalena eventually encounter one another – meeting as their paths intersect in the damp, overgrown fields near Ocampo – they speak at a distance, with Miguel hastily attesting to his benign intentions before the older woman can turn heel and run. This is

the way of cartel country, where trust is doled out sparingly and every speck on the horizon could be an approaching emissary of death. After all, anyone might be a *sicario* – or a cartel informant. When Magdalena observes warmly, “From behind, you look like my son,” Miguel responds, “From behind, we all look alike,” underlining not only the commonality of their experiences, but also how difficult it is to distinguish the harmless from the deadly. This is the world that the drug war has birthed: a veritable post-apocalyptic landscape dotted with ghost towns and crawling with body snatchers.

Valadez’s splendid widescreen compositions often recall those of David Lean and Sergio Leone, highlighting both the spectacular beauty and blasted harshness of the rural countryside – as well as the characters’ insignificance and vulnerability in that environment. In terms of its story and motifs, however, *Identifying Features* resembles nothing so much as the contemporary, slow-cinema version of a classical Hollywood Western. The markers are all there: remote homesteads underneath yawning skies, dogged searches for the missing and the dead, ruthless bandits holding whole territories in the grip of mortal terror. It is a film of spectacular parsimony and often aching loveliness – there is not a wasted shot or line of dialogue in the whole thing.

Many American films about the Mexican drug war focus on the grotesque criminal acts it emboldens, the intractable challenges faced by law enforcement, and the ostensible horror-show lawlessness of life in border country. *Identifying Features* offers not only a valuable Mexican perspective but also a crucial shift in focus to the survivors left behind, who have only photos of tattered shirts and dirt-encrusted shoes in lieu of their loved ones’ remains. There is nary a mention of narcotics in Valadez’s film, which is much more concerned with depicting the perverse, everyday upheavals that the cartels have wreaked on Mexican life: children buried before their parents, people disappeared into the night, weed-choked outlines where towns once stood. Combined with the film’s arresting style, this makes for an acutely bleak and mournful experience that nevertheless refrains from slipping into exploitation.

The devastating potency of *Identifying Features*’ final twist depends on suspension of disbelief, perhaps at a level that some viewers may not be willing to entertain. In a feature that is otherwise so dependent on a strong, gritty sense of plausibility, this sort of swerve comes as a bit of a jolt. Likewise, the film’s late-game shift into a more horror-tinged tone is accompanied by bold stylistic choices, including the use of literally diabolical imagery that is either dazzling or hokey, depending on one’s taste. (This writer still hasn’t decided where they fall.) In general, however, the risks Valadez and her collaborators take with the film pay haunting dividends. In a pivotal, ingeniously rendered flashback scene – narrated without subtitles in an unspecified Native language – the film slowly slithers from hazy impressionism to phantasmagoric nightmare. Whether this mega-dose of heightened Catholic terror harmonizes seamlessly with the feature’s humane, dirty-fingernail realism might be questionable, but the effect is nonetheless heady and terrifying. With this gesture, Valadez emphatically dissolves the borders between everyday cruelty and everlasting evil, setting up the grimmest shock of all: When the Devil comes, he will look just like us.

Rating: A-

Identifying Features is **now available** to rent via virtual cinemas from Kino Marquee.



CULTURE CINEMA SHOWS, ON DEMAND & HOME VIDEO

Identifying Features



SEAN GALLEN



22 JANUARY 2021

There are few more highly politicised borderlands in the world than the US-Mexico frontier. It is the most frequently crossed border in the world: yearly, there are approximately 350 million people who make the journey from all over Central and South America to attempt to cross in search of a better life. Very few make it to the other side without compromise. Writer-director Fernanda Valadez plunges the audience headfirst into the tumultuous experience of border-crossing and surfaces with a remarkable and poignant tale of loss without redemption.

The film opens on a dark figure crossing a barren terrain. Jesùs (Juan Jesús Varela), barely 13 years old, announces that he will go to Arizona with his friend. This is the last time his mother Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) sees him before the two boys are reported missing. This indefatigable mother treks to the border where there are dozens of bodies stored, but she can't find her son among the dead. She continues into Badlands where the gangs ravage and pillage without mercy to find out more. Here, she joins forces Miguel (David Illescas), a young man who was recently deported from the US and who is also looking for his lost family.

Identifying Features is an emotional pilgrimage that begins in the chilling reality of death at the border and ends in a fantastical allegory for the tragic cycle of violence. The bewildering ending depicts a devastating subversion of innocence that is worse than death. In the first act, Magdalena tries to find her son in the morgue. The non-plussed, matter-of-fact demeanour of the bureaucrats painfully underlines how normalised the violence and suffering are.

The locations are sparse border towns and desolate landscapes and the cinematography deftly frames the lost characters, dwarfed by their surroundings. The use of atmospheric sound and off-camera noise beautifully enhance the protagonist's bewilderment. *Identifying Features* is a confident blend of heart-wrenching realism and poetic tragedy.



Identifying Features is released digitally on demand on 22nd January 2021.



'IDENTIFYING FEATURES' CRAFTS A HARROWING MASTERPIECE OF SURREAL CINEMA (FILM REVIEW)

🕒 January 22, 2021 👤 by [James Roberts](#) 📁 in [Film & TV](#), [Film Reviews](#), [Reviews](#) 💬 [No Comments](#)



RATING: A-

Drawing intensely from the Latin American literary tradition of magical realism, *Identifying Features* is a wild, slow burning tale of hope and hopelessness that unspools its secrets methodically and precisely over the course of its 90-minute run time. Ostensibly a simple tale, co-writer/director Fernanda Valadez has created a stunning debut feature that firmly establishes her as an important voice in Mexican cinema.

The surreal atmosphere begins almost immediately, though the effect is initially subtle. Set in the deserts outside of Guanajuato, the ethereal, dreamlike atmosphere is well established

before the film's plot even rightly begins. Valadez, utilizing a mostly handheld cinematography, creates a world of dizzying absurdity and makes it difficult to find ones footing. The result is a film that's as captivating as it is beautiful, and as beautiful as it is gut wrenching,

Identifying Features is never a difficult film to watch, and perhaps even more difficult to understand, but its central beauty is undeniable. The heartbreaking story deals with everything from migrants seeking better lives in America, the violence and tyranny of the cartels, the dizzying bureaucracy, the meaning of truth, and hope that can be found in despair. It is a stunning and powerful film that's more than worthy of consideration.

The film follows Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), whose son has gone missing in his attempt to cross the border into Arizona. After several months of no contact, she attempts to contact the authorities for any information. When told that he might be dead, she journeys to a border town in the hopes of finding out what might have happened to him. Soon, however, Magdalena is thrust into the labyrinthine world of bureaucrats and criminals while truth remains always just out of reach.

The dreamlike atmosphere of *Identifying Features* feels, at first, like a simple choice of style, thrusting us into a world of uncertainty and doubt. However, the longer the film continues, the deeper Valadez takes into the surreal reality of Magdalena, a mother who just wants to know if her son is alive or dead. As dreams often do, it quickly morphs into a nightmare as Magdalena meets one uncaring bureaucrat after another, none of whom can (or will) give her answers.

Hernandez gives a heartbreaking performance as Magdalena, fully embodying a mother's heartbreak and allowing the audience to feel her pain and confusion at the situation. She wears the weathered look of life and motherhood in every line on her face, even as she has to steel herself against the powerful forces that oppose her.

Essentially a journey film, Valadez has no intentions of making this a simple A to B tale; rather, she uses Magdalena as a way to take us inside the tribulations of migrant workers and their families, showing us the dangers they face on their treks to betterment. *Identifying Features* is a harrowing, emotional tale that humanizes an issue more complex than pundits would have us believe. While slow to start, the story that unfolds is pure cinema, awash with poetic imagery and powerful feeling that you won't soon forget.

Identifying Features is now playing in select virtual theaters



Review: 'Identifying Features' humanizes turmoil at the border

1/19/2021

[0 Comments](#)



Review: 'Identifying Features' humanizes turmoil at the border

1/19/2021

"Identifying Features" was just named the Best International Feature by the Gotham Independent Film Awards, and it's available this Friday, January 22nd, 2021, as part of **The Film Lab's Virtual Cinema** locally.

Grade: B

From Mexico comes a bold, personal and tragic story of what people face at the southern U.S. border. "Identifying Features" is about a mother, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), whose son, Jesus (Juan Jesus Varela) sets off for a better life in America with his neighbor. But word never comes back from Jesus that he made it, and when the neighbor boy is identified as deceased after a bus hijacking, Magdalena sets out to discover the fate of her lost son.

Crossing her path is the young Miguel (David Illescas), a boy not unlike Jesus, who made it to America but has now been deported. Miguel is not able to find his mother back in Mexico, and so he and Magdalena have a lot to offer each other in their grief, and in their search for answers.

It's a powerful narrative directed with brash confidence by first-time director Fernanda Valadez, but a linear, straight-forward telling doesn't seem to be of interest to her. Much of "Identifying Features" feels like a fever-dream, with sequences that feel lifted from a Terrence Malick film. That's high-praise depending on what you think of Malick, or it could be seen as a slight if Malick's dreamy cinematic style happens to frustrate you more than it inspires you.

This leaves "Identifying Features" in the realm of "critical darling" as opposed to a potential mainstream hit...a film that cinephiles might love but one that might be inaccessible to many. Which, in some ways, is a shame given the timely subject matter and the public's need for more understanding as to what is happening at the U.S./Mexico border. The story is a powerful one, but it might be too cerebral, too meta, for the average movie-goer.

Its recent Gotham Awards win has definitely raised the profile of this little film, beautifully and authentically shot in the rural village of Guanajuato, Mexico, and there is a lot to admire about "Identifying Features." It humanizes what has become a polarizing political issue, and highlights the risks and fears associated with dreaming of a better life.

Grade: B

Genre: Drama.

Run Time: 1 hour 35 minutes.

Not Rated.

Starring: Mercedes Hernandez, David Illescas, Juan Jesus Varela.

Co-Written and Directed by Fernanda Valadez (feature-film debut).

*"Identifying Features" is available locally on **Virtual Cinema at The Film Lab** on Friday, January 22nd, 2021.*

Movie Nation

Movie Review: A son with few “Identifying Features” goes missing in the Borderlands in this haunting odyssey

Posted on [January 21, 2021](#) by [Roger Moore](#)



Three movies set in “the troubles” along the Border have come out in same week. “[The Marksman](#)” is a generic [Liam Neeson action picture](#) without the nerve to be either a racist redemption tale or a meaningful look at a political hot button issue. “[No Man’s Land](#)” has better intentions but a much muddier and patronizing story.

“**Identifying Features**,” by Fernanda Valadez is far and away the best of the lot. Lyrical and understated with a cruel beauty and story laced with allegory and a hint of magical realism, it lets us see the rippling trauma of this place and this time through the eyes of mothers.

And it’s totally a Mexican tale, from its point of origin — coincidentally, the same town that is the final destination in “No Man’s Land” — to its finish line, a story told entirely from the Mexican point of view.

This is the horror of Northern Mexico as seen through the eyes of those living through it, families disrupted by the desperation of trying to flee to Los Estados Unidos and the murderous gang gauntlet those undertaking this journey must pass through to just reach the border.

Two teens from outside of Guanajuato make plans to leave. We don't hear the name "Jesús" (**Juan Jesús Varela**) when he tells his mother he's going with Rigo. We don't see who his mother is.

That's the first way Valadez, who co-wrote the script, makes us reach out for the film. Nothing in this story drops in our lap.

Chuya (**Laura Elena Ibarra**) and Magdalena (**Mercedes Hernández**) fret over not hearing from their boys for months and go to the police. The cops shrug them off with a "if you gave consent (for them to leave) there's no crime to report."

But then they're handed the book— a big fat photo file of bodies that have turned up in the north just in the past two months. One mother will get an awful moment of closure, the other will have to go north herself to try and track her son.

Olivia (**Ana Laura Rodríguez**) is also headed north. But as we've seen her performing eye surgery, she's going by plane. She too has a missing son. Being affluent, he didn't try to cross the border, so far as she knows. He disappeared on a drive back from Monterrey.

Miguel (**David Ilescas**) we meet in a U.S. immigration court as he's being summarily deported. He's an "IA," an illegal alien. He has money and he was heading home anyway. Now he's on the books as an "illegal" and on foot, trying to get back to his village near Ocampo.

The story weaves these lives together through the odyssey Magdalena embarks on to find her son or get closure about his fate.

Valadez, who co-wrote the script, shows us a sample of the terrors people face on the trail. Take a bus, run the risk of it being hijacked with all the passengers robbed, raped and ransomed or murdered. Road block "checkpoints" are run by gangs with, it's implied, police assistance.

The confused, half-blind old man (never seen) who narrates in an untranslated dialect the story of the bus he was on says "El Diablo" committed the crimes that followed. And through his eyes we see the horns and pointy tail of a murderer outlined against a bonfire's light.

We don't need his words translated. We can see the horror, in silhouette, for ourselves.

Valadez lets her actor's faces do most of the talking here. It's a music-free film of long, tense silences and splashes of fraught shakedowns and terror. Legions of innocents can only avert

their eyes when the Men (or boy soldiers) with Guns show up to search, harass and menace everyone with impunity.

She captures the harsh beauty of the region and the ugliness that is emptying it out and filling mass graves.

But the most haunting images of all are still shots — Polaroids of the dead, their clothing and baggage, their “Identifying Features” — which the police show to Chuya and Magdalena. It’s the cinematic equivalent of that rail car filled with rotting shoes of the doomed at the Holocaust Museum in Washington — heart-breaking and horrifying at a primal level.

And it brings home the ugly truth to the parents of the dead and the governments complicit in this cross-border disaster. There’s no closing your eyes or blocking it out with a wall. And it won’t stop until we all have the guts to stare at it and take the first serious steps to do something about it.



MPA Rating: unrated, violence

Cast: Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez

Credits: Directed by Fernanda Valadez, script Astrid Rondero, Fernanda Valadez. A Kino Lorber release.

Running time: 1:37



Identifying Features

JANUARY 21, 2021 IN BILLY RUSSELL, REVIEWS

Directed by Fernanda Valadez

Written by Fernanda Valadez and Astrid Rondero

Starring Mercedes Hernández

Running time: 1 hour and 35 minutes

by Billy Russell, Staff Writer

Three migrant boys venture to the United States and all three go missing. Two ventured up to Arizona together on a bus, looking for work, to start their own lives. One had come to the States four years ago, never to be heard from since. All three are presumed dead.

Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) and her friend, whose son also went missing, go to the authorities. Because the boys left with permission, there is no crime to report, the authorities tell them. They then hand the mothers a book to look through: a crudely thrown-together three-ring

binder with photos of recently discovered dead bodies up near the border. Magdalena's friend gasps and sobs. Her son has been murdered.

The mother who knows the fate of her child, according to *Identifying Features* is the lucky one. The mother whose child has been missing for years, the authorities keep trying to call her down to identify corpses with faceless features, or have been so badly burned beyond recognition, it would be impossible to identify. The bureaucratic task force assigned to identifying dead bodies to missing people are hoping for desperate, depressed families to simply sign a form so that they have one less thing to worry about. She tells Magdalena to never sign that form, because they want permission to stop looking. Magdalena travels north toward the border town where her son and his friend were last seen. These scenes with her following in her son's footsteps, retracing where he's been, asking the locals if what they know, what they've seen, have an all-too-real feel to them. The footage looks like it was grabbed without permits. It has the same type of hyperrealism of a young Scorsese picture, living in the moment of a time and a place, rather than just being about it. Miguel (David Illescas) has been detained and deported back to Mexico. Miguel and Magdalena help each other on their journeys. She is looking for her son, and he is looking for his mother.

Identifying Features is a very well-told movie about a specific event that is really about a larger event, a synecdoche of an allegory. Magdalena's missing child is about all of the missing migrants who head up north, never to be heard from again. The more she finds out, the more insidious the serpentine plot begins to unfold. People whisper in hushed tones and speak where no one can overhear them. The bus was potentially stopped and robbed, as so many buses on the same route had been, with the passengers taken out and murdered. And those who weren't murdered were forced into a fate worse than death. A fate so worse than death that it defies human nature as we know it. Imagery of devils appears forth from the flames of a fire. Equating the penchant of inhumanity humans are capable of to a supernatural element of pure evil is the only way for it to make sense.

Fernanda Valdez directs the film with confidence. There are a lot of tones that the film shifts back and forth with, without any feeling of tonal whiplash. It is a very realistic film in parts, especially in establishing the frustrating bureaucracy and its complete disinterest in helping these women find closure on their missing, or dead, children. It is also a terrifying film, dealing with lots of ugliness that people are capable of, the complete horror of cartel gangs and their murder sprees that have left entire towns desolate. It is also a hopeful film, not one that wallows in despair when it uncovers many of these realities. It looks at these horrors without succumbing to a defeatist attitude, like, "If this is humanity, what is the point?" The point isn't the misery, or the possibility of these awful things, it's in the love that propelled Magdalena to continue her search. It's in the hope that Miguel was able to help her, and they both saw their missing family in each other. She saw her son in him, and he saw his mother in her. The movie isn't about the cartel gangs that murder innocents. It's about the people who keep looking even though they know what danger they're in.

Every day, migrants entering the United States go missing and die--oftentimes in the desert, from hunger, thirst and the harsh elements. Organizations like No More Deaths (No Más Muertes) provide humanitarian aid and shelter to migrants. To learn more about this organization, please visit: nomoredeaths.org

Identifying Features opens theatrically this Friday.



DRAMA ♦ REVIEWS

'Identifying Features' Portrays the Haunting Reality of Mexican Immigration

written by Ingrid Dendievel | January 21, 2021



You might associate Mexico with pristine beaches. Turquoise seas. Lots of sunshine. A luxurious, exclusive all-expenses-paid hotel with various restaurants. Exotic cocktails. Maybe even a wedding on the beach. You could, of course, leave your hotel, visit a museum, a temple, or any other tourist attraction. But even then, we find ourselves far away from reality. The question arises: are we really aware of how privileged we are?

The Mexico that **Fernanda Valadez** shows us in *Identifying Features* is far from being paradisiacal. Yes, on an economical level it's certainly doing (a lot) better than some of its surrounding countries; of course, the economy has been severely impacted by a certain pandemic. On the other hand, the drug cartels have won the fight and rule without mercy. And notwithstanding the rule of possibly the worst American president ever, many Mexicans still seek a better life in the USA. But what stands in their way?

In *Babel* (2006), we see what happens when American authorities discover you have been working illegally in the USA. The scenes at the American-Mexican border are heartbreaking; and who can ever forget the harsh atmosphere of the deportation of the nanny. Director Fernanda Valadez goes many steps further. Leaving and/or re-entering Mexico can be a very dangerous and even violent experience. *Identifying Features* makes *Babel* look like a **feel-good movie**.

Identifying Features was released during last year's Sundance Film Festival, where it won two awards. In the meantime, it has made an appearance at other festivals, winning other awards along the way, receiving a lot of praise for its director and the two leading actors, Mercedes Hernández and David Illescas. The movie has two central characters. One of them is a desperate mother named Magdalena (Hernández) waiting for news from her teenage son who tried to cross the border some time ago. The other one is a young man named Miguel (Illescas) who finds himself in a contrary situation: he has just been told to leave the States. Different circumstances lead these two on an odyssey through **Mexico**, each looking for a relative. Confronted with harsh authorities and merciless gangs, the two eventually meet and try to help each other.

Identifying Features first follows the fate of Magdalena and her son Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela). The latter tries to cross the **infamous border** on foot. Two months later, Magdalena still has not received any news from him. The headstrong mother sets out on a quest to find out the truth about Jesús. Unfortunately, she is confronted with lackluster authorities and endless administrative procedures. When finally somebody takes the time to listen to her, the message is clear: it's better to accept that her son didn't make it and to return home without him.

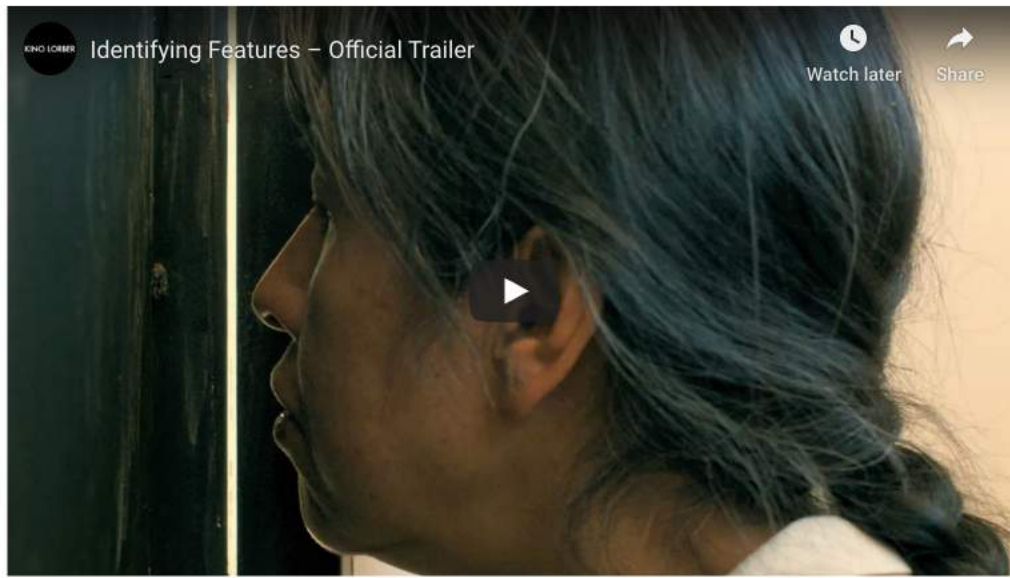
However, Magdalena refuses to give up. She wants proof that her son is dead or alive. She finally finds a lead: a man who was on the same bus to the border as her son. Unfortunately, he lives very far away. This takes her on an even longer journey, to unknown territory. And it's during this part of the odyssey that she meets the other central character, Miguel. Sent back from **deportation**, the young man is looking for his mother. They join forces, but when they find an empty home and no mother, their voyage will take on a very dangerous turn.

I have always associated Mexico with vivid colors. Cheerful colors in its landscapes, people, culture, and food. It makes Mexico look like a happy place. But the country through the eyes of Fernanda Valadez is a very different one. It's a country of mist and rain, of subdued, almost somber colors. We regularly see a bokeh effect in the background, as if the endless landscape is hiding something. That something is a very brutal, ruthless reality.

Along the border, on the Mexican side, **drug gangs** roam, stopping cars and buses transporting desperate people to the border. After having robbed the passengers, they burn all evidence and leave lifeless bodies behind in shallow graves. Buses then return empty or even disappear. In the scene depicting such events, very sharp and bright colors are used. It's the only time you see such colors, as if to underline the **violence** of the events. But how heartbreaking it is that some of these migrants will never reach the border, and that their families will probably never

find out about their fate. Even when you come back from the USA, you are not safe from these criminals.

Notwithstanding the dramatic events in the movie, *Identifying Features* does not become a tearjerker. Valadez keeps her distance and weaves an interesting story about the link between immigration and violence.



Movies / Culture

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Identifying Features is exquisitely shot, but there's even more than meets the eye

Debut feature tells the story of a mother searching the Mexican border for her son

Chris Knight

Jan 21, 2021 • January 21, 2021 • 1 minute read



Truth be told, when I started watching this low-budget festival favourite – it won the Sundance audience prize for world dramatic cinema last year, as well as the best screenplay award – I thought it was going to be all pretty images and no plot. But there's more to *Identifying Features* than meets the eye.

The story follows Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), a woman whose teenaged son leaves to illegally cross the border from Mexico into the United States. When she fails to hear from him, she follows, trying to find out what became of him.

Magdalena finds herself butting up against a system where so many migrants go missing or end up dead that people have stopped caring. A recovered bag and a burnt body would seem to close the case on the boy, but she's not convinced, and goes looking for a mysterious bus passenger who may have seen him. Along the way she runs into another young man, recently deported from the U.S. after several years there and making his way home.

Identifying Features is a first feature from Mexican writer/director Fernanda Valadez, and it tells a story of human tragedy with images so striking it reminded me why the big-screen experience is something we desperately need to get back. There's a long tracking shot over water, so close you can't tell the skim of the surface from the sheen of the sky. Another scene features a still figure backlit by a bonfire, the shot made weirdly alien by the fact that it's running backward, so the flames go down, not up. It's brilliant cinematography in the service of a deeply felt, all-too-common story.

Identifying Features is available Jan. 22 through TIFF Bell Digital Lightbox, at digital.tiff.net.

3.5 stars out of 5



'IDENTIFYING FEATURES': A MOTHER EMBARKS ON A DANGEROUS JOURNEY FROM MEXICO TO THE USA

By [Lia Gomez-Lang](#) | 19 January, 2021

This article was originally published by Sounds and Colours's partner, [Latin America Bureau](#). You can read the original [here](#).

Disappearances of young people in Mexico have grown exponentially in recent years. The latest national statistics have listed more than 73,000 people missing across the country, of whom twenty per cent are children. This has sparked protests and searches for the disappeared. At the centre are mothers, determined to seek answers and action.

Fernanda Valadez's film *Identifying Features* (2020) follows a mother, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), who has not heard from her son Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela) for two months since he left their home in Guanajuato, travelling to the border in an attempt to enter the US illegally. Hope, tension and despair ensue as the audience accompanies Magdalena's search to discover what has happened to her son. Through this one mother's quest, Valadez examines shared migrant stories as part of a large-scale social crisis, asking why so many have been lost on this particular journey.

Ahead of the film's premiere at the [BFI London Film Festival](#), LAB caught up with Fernanda Valadez. Valadez explained to Lia Gomez-Lang how Mexico's social issues have steered the direction of her films. As a middle-class Mexican, she feels a duty to

use her position of privilege to show global audiences the scale of her country's troubles.

Valadez explained that two important tragedies spurred her to begin work on this film: the two San Fernando massacres in 2010 and 2011, which subjected undocumented immigrants to murder on a mass scale. The two events were a result of cartel warfare and "Changed us in Mexico, the way we felt about the country we were living in," Fernanda tells LAB. This is the reason Valdez's character Jesús, like many others, leaves his home in search for a better life, and is lost to the violent landscape across the border.

The main objective of the film, she says, is to engender emotional understanding. She and co-writer Astrid Rondero did not want the audience to be interested in rational terms, but to feel empathy for the characters. To immerse themselves in the place and its people, the director and her all-female crew moved to Guanajuato for a year. Here, the crew scouted different locations, captured each season as it changed and Valadez got to know two parents who had lost a child on a similar path to the protagonists. Perhaps their time in Guanajuato is what helped Valadez to approach such painful issues with tenderness, expressing humanity in many different ways.

Identifying Features teaches through feeling, creating a harrowing yet deeply rewarding cinematic experience. The natural landscape is used to counteract the pain of the stories taking place within it. Claudia Becerril Bulos creates a dreamlike spectacle through her cinematography, showing that there is beauty, despite the heartache, within this story. As tensions build, the unfamiliar border country becomes more absorbing, captured by longshots of pink sunsets over its vast and desolate terrain.

Valadez engages with violence in unexpected and intriguing ways. Bloodshed is at the core of the events, yet her artistic direction steers focus away from the actual acts of terror. The audience are not shown or told what happens along Magdalena's journey, they are only offered glimpses as she travels onwards. Open graves, regulated body identification stations and destroyed and desolate towns give indications into the consequences of these acts of violence. Questions are posed and left unanswered: we draw our own conclusions and are encouraged to learn for ourselves about these unimaginable issues. "The more you show, the less you feel" Fernanda states, preferring to show the emotional impacts of events rather than portray the detail of the events themselves.

The concept of 'border' is crucial to the film's meaning. Whether physical or emotional, borders provide limitations: borders separate, prohibit and distance. In the film Magdalena comes across Miguel (David Illescas), a young man deported from the US who returns to find his home destroyed in the aftermath of an attack. As their paths cross and narratives entwine, both become a source of support from each side of the perilous border. Miguel's story is typical of many migrants who are faced with the brutality of ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement), whereby crossing this space makes them illegal.

As Fernanda highlights, “It is something crazy in itself that people are seen as illegal” and met by systemic structures that lack humanity. Magdalena crosses a symbolic border through her search for the truth, and as she encounters more painful social realities, “She understands that the border between being a victim and being a perpetrator is really thin, making it very confusing and very complicated.”

Identifying Features recognises that the lives lost along the border are often presented as an indistinguishable multitude, and in turn changes the narrative by identifying individuals and their stories. In Fernanda’s words, the message of the film is that “In the end, despite our differences, what we share is humanity. People shouldn’t be forced to cross borders just because they want to look for a better future and we have a co-responsibility as a global society to make life more bearable and more just for all of us.”

***Identifying Features* will be available to stream at virtual cinemas from 22nd January 2020. More information [here](#).**



Movie of the Week

MOVIE OF THE WEEK January 22, 2021: IDENTIFYING FEATURES

📅 January 17, 2021 👤 Jennifer Merin 💎 betsy bozdech, Cate Marquis, fernanda valadez, identifying features, jennifer merin, kathia woods, leslie combemale, loren king, maryann johanson, Mercedes Hernández, mexican films, motw, Movie of the Week, sandie angulo chen, susan wloszczyna

Heartbreaking and quietly powerful, writer/director Fernanda Valadez' debut drama *Identifying Features* shines a light on the complex, tragic realities of what can happen when undocumented immigrants set out to cross the border from Mexico into the United States. It is a truly heartbreaking film that puts a very human face on a humanitarian crisis, sparking both empathy and outrage. The film centers on Magdalena (the excellent Mercedes Hernández), whose teenage son left home to venture to the U.S. in search of a good job and a better life but hasn't been heard from in weeks. So she sets out to find answers, a journey that leads her first to bureaucrats who try to convince her that her son is dead — the victim of the violent cartels, who prey on migrants and leave their victims in mass graves. But her motherly instincts (and the advice of another mother she meets) send her in search of a man who may know more about what really happened to her boy.

Along the way, Magdalena meets Miguel (David Illescas), a young Mexican man who had crossed into the United States five years earlier and has now been deported back to his home country. He's en route to

his own mother's house when he crosses paths with Magdalena; they end up accompanying each other through seemingly empty but still dangerous rural terrain. It would spoil the film's most affecting story twists to say more about where fate takes them from there.

Identifying Features is often difficult to watch; just as in life, there are no easy answers here, and the ending is a kick in the gut. But there are moments of delicate peace and beauty, however fleeting, and Valadez captures them beautifully: a drop of water gleaming on a branch, the sun shining its golden light on a deserted road. And she elicits strong, convincing performances from her stars — Hernández and Illescas say as much with their eyes as they do with their mouths. The power of their story is in both its specificity and its generality: They bring their characters to vivid life, but what happens to Miguel and Magdalena could happen — and has happened — to so many people. And that is truly a tragedy. — **Betsy Bozdech**

Team #MOTW's comments:

Sandie Angulo Chen: *Identifying Features* is Fernanda Valadez's unforgettably powerful directorial debut. Valadez — who also co-wrote the script with Astrid Rondero — centers the story around Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), a middle-aged mother who's desperate to find out if her teen son Jesus has died while attempting to cross the border from Mexico to the U.S. Jesus' best friend and traveling companion's body was found, photographed, and shown to Magdalena, but not his — so she gathers her strength and meager savings to travel from her town in Central Mexico toward a bordertown. Her Odyssean quest for the truth is painful, at times heartbreakingly so, but worth the viewing. The most impactful aspects of the film involve her crossing paths with a young man who was just deported back to Mexico from the States. He discovers his rural home is empty, and his small village is overrun with menacing armed men. Valadez doesn't always provide short-hand for English-speaking audiences (even Spanish speakers are kept in the dark during an elderly witness' story, told in his indigenous dialect). The motives of menacing armed men aren't clear — are they a militia, narcoterrorists, a combination of the two? It doesn't matter, because this is Magdalena's story, and it's told with a poignancy and immediacy that will stay with you long after the credits.

MaryAnn Johanson This is a devastating film, weeping with grief and devastated anguish. I don't think most of us who live in relative comfort can truly appreciate what it means to have to risk *everything* to get to a place where, if we're lucky, we might be able to work our asses off for minimum wage, and count ourselves fortunate to have have risen to such a station. But to see a loved one go off in search of such a small, hard life and then not even know if they made it? Brutal. We should be ashamed that this is the state that way too many of our fellow human beings find themselves in.

Susan Wloszczyna: With *Identifying Features*, first-time director Fernanda Valadez valiantly avoids the usual drug-wars action thriller. Instead, she has delivered a harrowing drama about the migration crisis at the U.S. southern border that is far more intimate and poignant as it focuses the lives of people looking for a better life and the danger involved in doing so. Read [full review](#).

Leslie Combemale *Identifying Features*, directed and co-written by Fernanda Valadez, follows Magdalena Mercedes Hernandez, a desperate mother in search of her missing son, through the Mexican landscape bordering the United States, and reveals the dangers of simply existing in that part of the world. Whether it be danger from doing the bidding of drug cartels, or from armed men in league with the

police, the risk to life is immediate and ever-present. It isn't made clear by the filmmakers who exactly is doing the killing here, which fits the story they're telling, and makes sense. To a mother looking for her child, it doesn't matter. Hernandez has a stoic determination that demands that the audience stick with her character through this excruciating journey. There is a metaphor, we discover, in the name of the film. It is so much worse than the title suggests, which is a reference to how people recognize the remains of their loved ones. It connects the characters and the audience to the loss of self identity, country and safety, that is pervasive in the film.

Jennifer Merin *Identifying Features* is Mexican filmmaker Fernanda Valadez's devastating drama about a devoted mother who is trying to find her son who left their home in Guanajuato to find a better life in El Norte — the United States — and disappeared. The screenplay, co-authored by Valadez and Astrid Rondero, relies on imagery as much as dialogue for exposition, and the conceit works perfectly to communicate the anguish of circumstances. Mercedes Hernandez's performance as Magdalena, the woman in search of her missing son, is brilliantly underplayed in a way that makes you feel rather than observe her anguish. This is not an easy film to watch, but it is one that really must be seen because it so poignantly points to an ongoing issue that is, as it exists in real life, persistently under-addressed. *Identifying Features* is the winner of the 2020 Gotham Award for Best International Film and the Audience Award and Best Screenplay prize at Sundance Film Festival.

Loren King Fernanda Valadez's stunning feature directorial debut *Identifying Features* is the most captivating and harrowing film about Mexican border violence and injustice that I have seen in some time, except for the recent documentary *Blood on the Wall*. But Valadez's film stands out because of its lean, haunting story (written by Valadez and Astrid Rondero) and visuals that are alternately beautiful and terrifying; it's at once a pastoral film and horror movie. In a performance rooted in neorealist tradition, Mercedes Hernández is quietly commanding and completely natural as Magdalena, a weary, middle aged mother. She leaves her home in rural Mexico to search for her son, Jesus (Juan Jesús Varela), missing since leaving for the border with a friend who has since turned up dead. Magdalena's desperate search to find out whether Jesus is alive is both horror story and human drama; and a tense investigation into what routinely happens to Mexicans trying to get to the US border to find work. We follow Magdalena as she doggedly crosses barren fields and sunlit rivers and as her search turns from frustrating to promising to terrifying. This sparse, unsentimental film unfolds slowly, deliberately into a visceral gut-punch, showing what's at stake for poor, rural Mexicans whose land has been overtaken by lawless, marauding drug cartels. The cumulative impact is stunning and heart-wrenching.

Kathia Woods Immigration is a complex issue, but one of the aspects that we don't discuss in this alleged caravan of people are those who go missing, are robbed, kidnapped, or killed before even reaching the border. *Identifying Features* centers on mothers looking for answers about their missing children. Starring Mexico's acclaimed actress Mercedes Hernández as Magdalena and Laura Elena Ibarra as Chuya, two women who are filled with worry after not hearing from their teenage sons. It has been two months since they embarked on the journey to the US to find work. Sadly, one of the women's sons is found dead, leaving the other woman fraught with worry. Fernanda Valadez's *Identifying Features* is a love letter to mothers and to those who are looking for the elusive American Dream. People who are willing to cross the desert, fighting the elements, starvation and unscrupulous gangs, to make a minimum wage in 'the north' don't make their decisions lightly. This film will give light to all those that paid the ultimate price for that elusive American dream.

Cate Marquís *Identifying Features* begins as a melancholy journey as a mother leaves her in rural Mexican home in search for her son who left with a friend intending to travel to the U.S. but then vanished. When authorities present evidence of the friend's death, the mother rejects their conclusion that her son met the same fate and continues on an increasingly harrowing journey as she re-traces his steps. In a chilling tale filled with hauntingly beautiful photography, Mercedes Hernandez gives a heartbreaking performance as the mother, in director Fernanda Valadez's award-winning, shocking expose of the problem of criminal gangs preying on travelers going to the North.

FILM DETAILS:

Title: *Identifying Features*

Directors: Fernanda Valadez

Release Date: January 15, 2021

Running Time: 95 minutes

Language: Spanish with English subtitles

Screenwriter: Fernanda Valadez and

Distribution Company: Kino Lorber



Reviews

IDENTIFYING FEATURES – Review by Susan Wloszczyna

📅 January 16, 2021 👤 Susan Wloszczyna 🔍 fernanda valadez, identifying features, Mercedes Hernández, mexican films, motw,
Movie of the Week

With *Identifying Features*, first-time director Fernanda Valadez valiantly avoids the usual drug-wars action thriller. Instead, she has delivered a harrowing drama about the migration crisis at the U.S. southern border that is far more intimate and poignant as it focuses the lives of people looking for a better life and the danger involved in doing so.

Filmed in rural Guanajuato, Mexico, the film is packed with widescreen images that heightens this saga of a middle-aged mother Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) who is determined to find out whether her son, who left to find a job in the states, is still alive. When his friend and traveling companion turns up in a photo book of bodies found on the bus, his mother transforms into a determined and methodical detective as she collects helpful information along the way, from a nurse whose son was kidnapped four years ago to a woman at a migrant shelter who knows of a recluse who was injured on the raid of the bus and might have some info on her son.

She is also lucky to come across Miguel (David Illescas), a young man who has been deported after living in the states for five years. He goes back home to reunite with his own mother only to learn that most residents of the town are gone while militias roam about. The pair bond together as they help one another filling in for their missing loved ones.

While Valadez gets by with minimal dialogue, she makes hay with Mother Nature's natural vistas with rolling hills, a placid lake, fields and dirt roads. She may be a little too keen on blurred images and sun flares to build tension while jittery electronic sounds fill the soundtrack. But she knows well enough to focus on the faces of her actors and allow us to invest in their journey. At times, the story wanders and the script doesn't fill in all the blanks – including the sight of a mythic creature called El Diablo, who sports horns and a tail. While viewers might be left wanting more of an explanation of the events, there no question that Valadez is a talent to watch.



Identifying Features Review: A Mexican Masterpiece

Fernanda Valadez's award-winning film is every bit as good as you've heard.



by **Manuel Betancourt** | January 16, 2021, 9:15 am



There is a moment in *Sin señas particulares* (*Identifying Features*) that took my breath away. Halfway between a gasp and a sigh, a muffled scream and a wail, I found myself enraptured with what filmmaker Fernanda Valadez had so carefully constructed. This Sundance winner for the World Cinema Audience Award is an intimate epic. *Identifying Features* is at once wholly devoted to telling the story of a mother searching for her son and a wide-ranging indictment of a system that's left too many to fend for themselves.

Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) is searching for her son Jesús. He and a friend departed their town in Guanajuato in search of a better life across the border. But while the body of his friend has been found in a shallow grave, Magdalena is committed to not losing hope. Despite being called to admit that her son should be legally pronounced dead (giving that his bag was found in that same grave), this stoic Mexican woman refuses to let go of her hope that he may still be alive. She therefore begins a journey to find out what really happened to Jesús, unearthing the way her tragedy remains all too common, if too often subsumed in statistics and lurid news stories.

Part of the horror of Magdalena's story is the sheer banality of the bureaucracy that's sprung up around identifying bodies found alongside the border. Blood samples, DNA tests, photo albums of dead bodies, and makeshift morgues in moving trucks are presented as everyday occurrences. The likes of Magdalena come looking for closure, even when they know they're confronting equally horrifying scenarios: either identifying their loved ones (or a piece of clothing) or coming to terms with the fact that they may never be sure.

But eventually the horror extends to the culture of silence and impunity that her journey captures, especially as she comes in contact with another mother and later Miguel (David Illescas), a recently deported young man. As she stares out at him in the middle of an empty plain, Magdalena can't help but see her son. "We all look alike," he tells her. And the more we learn about Miguel's own trek across the border and the desolation that since took over the home and community he left behind, the more we realize how much his story is similar to Jesús's story, a reminder of the scant choices these young men have in front of them.



As much as *Identifying Features* deserves acclaim for its ability to reframe in many viewers' eyes what comes to mind when they think of "cartel violence," it succeeds because of its masterful ability to do so without any resort to didactic storytelling. Valadez's camera is often still and unflinching. It stays on its characters with the chilling indifference that meets Magdalena at every turn. Some images are indelible, many of them weighted with fleeting symbolism: a moth trapped in candle wax, an animal's skull burning in the fire, an arid landscape reflected on the water. This is a tragedy in its most elemental form.

With no musical score to underline its emotional beats, *Identifying Features* leaves us — for much of its runtime — unmoored. It lets the encroaching tension build up slowly around a viewer, eventually leading one to a point where its sucker punch of a revelation feels like the most dispiriting kind of release. Valadez makes the silence around Magdalena feel deafening,

like an aural abyss she cannot escape. The deployment of a lyrical track in its final climactic moments further makes its choice all the more unnerving.

Ultimately, it is no hyperbole to say that is a masterclass in filmmaking from a director whose vision feels very much driven by righteous anger and hardened sadness. Its ending is gasp-inducing precisely because it feels so disheartening yet so familiar. Valadez has crafted an instant classic, a quiet achievement that will echo thunderously for decades to come. Both open wound and jagged scar, *Identifying Features* is a masterpiece.

***Identifying Features* opens in virtual theaters January 22, 2021, including in Canada via <http://digital.tiff.net/>**



MOVIE REVIEW: "IDENTIFYING FEATURES" IS ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL STORIES OF THE YEAR

"I can't recommend this film enough, with its restrained script and talented cast, one of the most powerful stories of 2020."



by Eamon Tracy

January 24, 2021



A mother travels across Mexico in search of her son who authorities say died while trying to cross the border into the United States.

In 2010, in San Fernando, Mexico, the Los Zetas cartel abducted seventy-three migrant workers headed for the US and after an awful display of carnage, they buried the victims in secret graves. The following year in the same region, the ruthless military-trained gang kidnapped another caravan of one hundred and ninety-three immigrants and subjected them to the same torture. Some men were handed weapons and forced to fight to the death. Those fortunate to survive were recruited as hitmen for the cartel.

Most people are fleeing their country for a chance to make some money or escape brutal regimes that were propped up by US policy changes or corporate interests. Mass graves,

bio-data collection, ICE, the cartel, and border vigilantes are just some of the obstacles desperate humans are forced to deal with. "Identifying Features" captures it all with a final act that I'll never forget.

With streaks of grey hair and a pretty but weathered face, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) reports her teenage son missing after he left for the US Border without a word for weeks. The authorities are useless and they callously hand over a binder full of recent corpses to see if she recognizes her son. Fortunately, she doesn't spot him but she's overwhelmed by the experience. Unfortunately, her son's traveling companion was found murdered, and the small village holds a somber candlelight vigil.

On the way home, Magdalena and her husband are briefly followed by a large pickup blasting a narcocorrido ballad. Judging by the ride and bandit music they're most likely cartel members or wannabe gangsters. The threat of violence is palpable yet unpredictable.

Magdalena, alone, arrives at the border and has her blood drawn to compare with any of the nearly unrecognizable bodies found in the mass grave. A pathologist states they were set on fire before being buried in a shallow hole. She learns of one survivor who's living remotely, but gangsters and treacherous terrain surround him.

An eye surgeon is delicately working on a patient when a phone call summons her to the border. She's been looking for her son since he went missing on a trip with friends in Monterrey four years ago. Standing in a trailer full of dead bodies wrapped in body bags, she insists it's not her child when asked to identify the remains.

In a naturally-written moment, the two women meet in the hospital's hallway. The surgeon offers to help Magdalena, who's semi-illiterate, and says if she signs the paperwork the government will stop looking for her son. Magdalena logically ponders what if he is dead and she doesn't acknowledge it. The surgeon encourages her to ignore the government and continue searching.

Miguel (David Illescas) is a young man in his late teens or early twenties, introduced in the process of being deported by the US Border Patrol. Wearing a bright blue KC Royals hat, his re-entry into a nearly foreign environment is a visceral experience to witness. Since he's left his small town of Ocampo, the mayor has been killed and most people are reluctant to travel anywhere near there. In a country ripped apart by corruption and bloodshed, going home is just as complicated as finding a lost loved one.

Without spoiling much more, Magdalena and Miguel cross paths and the third act comes together in a satisfying conclusion. Their journeys are written authentically and never feel overdramatized or manipulative. Watching people with limited resources navigating the unforgiving border is enthralling and should be required viewing for anyone doubting the plight of an immigrant.

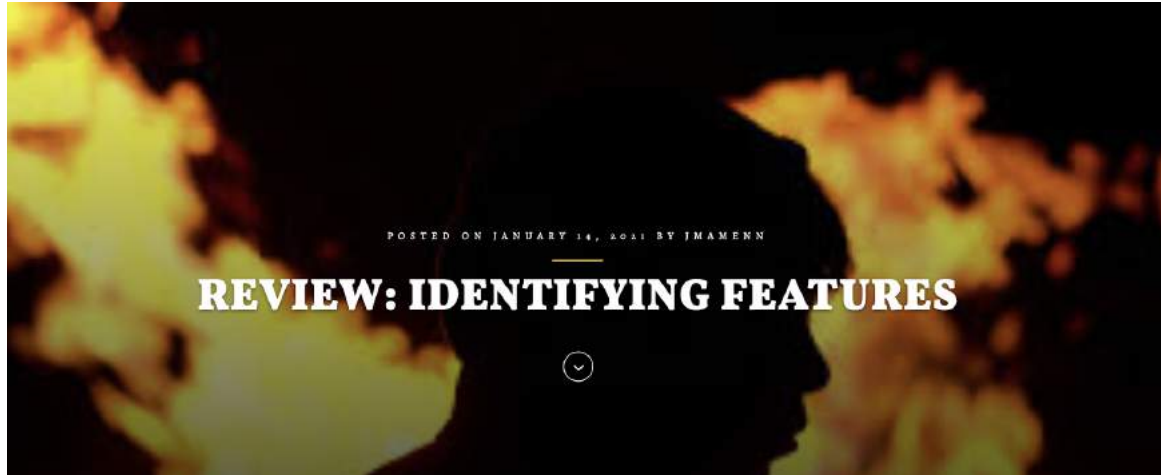
Director Fernanda Valadez and cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos capture the actors in realistic portraits. The tiny villages, lit by streetlights, are colored in greens and yellows with the

rural settings mostly filmed at sunrise and sunset, awash in pink and coral shades. Valadez shoots like Michael Mann, with a humane eye, capturing a city's street life, ruggedly beautiful landscape, lightning, and fire. And just like Mann, she films characters walking with splendid immediacy. Her images pair perfectly with the score by Clarice Jensen which is a vast electronic composition filled with droning pieces and lush notes of synths. I can't recommend this film enough, with its restrained script and talented cast, one of the most powerful stories of 2020.

"Identifying Features" is now playing in Virtual Theaters



IN THEIR OWN LEAGUE



Year: 2021

Runtime: 93 minutes

Director: Fernanda Valadez

Writers: Fernanda Valadez, Astrid Rondero

Actors: Mercedes Hernandez, David Illescas, Juan Jesus Varela, Laura Elena Ibarra, Manuel Campos

By Joan Amenn

Thousands of people have disappeared in Mexico due to drug cartels warring with each other and with the Mexican government. This is the context as to why so many try to cross the border into the United States. The currently exiting federal administration focused on demonizing these immigrants and detaining them in hellish conditions, sometimes deporting them back to the horrors they fled from. “Identifying Features” (2021) is a story of grief, love and resilience as one poor woman attempts to learn the fate of her son who left home for the US.

Magdalena (**Mercedes Hernandez**) is determined to find out anything she can about her son, Jesus (**Juan Jesus Varela**) because she cannot bear living with the uncertainty. But answers are not easily obtained in a country where anonymous body bags are routinely buried in mass graves. Sometimes just identifying the personal affects of a missing person is the only closure their loved ones will ever have. Magdalena’s journey for truth is a harsh test of her resolve and endurance but she seems to grow more determined as

she faces each set back. Along the way, she receives some help but mostly it is just her solitary quest against a background of amazing natural beauty and revolting human cruelty.

“ [“Identifying Features”] is a quiet study of the bonds of love between a mother and her child in a time of strife and malice.”

“Identifying Features” is a little slow in pacing at first but soon engrosses the audience in the perpetual sorrow of the Mexican people who endure continual struggles to survive. It seems as if no one is safe from the threat of brutality and possible separation from their loved ones. Even an innocuous bus ride can be a cause of death from hijackers on the road. Magdalena seems a little insistently questioning authorities who either don't want to answer or have no answers to give.

Sundance recognized “Identifying Features” with the Audience Award and the World Cinema-Dramatic Award and it is easy to see how its harrowing subject matter made it a compelling choice for the judges. Despite moments of surrealism that could have made it more flashy, it is a quiet study of the bonds of love between a mother and her child in a time of strife and malice. Not an easy watch, it is touching and memorable for the dignity it gives its main character as she refuses to give up on her son.

REVIEWS

‘Identifying Features’ Review: A Mother’s Odyssey Across the Borderland Makes a Searing Mark

by [Katie Duggan](#) · January 13, 2021



The last they heard, their sons were taking a bus to the border. Then, they were gone.

Fernanda Valadez’s *Identifying Features* (*Sin Señas Particulares*) is a heartbreaking Mexican-Spanish drama. It centers primarily on mothers attempting to find their missing children, depicting the terrible ordeal of some immigrants who face dangerous conditions on their journeys to new countries. This feature, with a minimalist screenplay by Valadez and Astrid Rondero, was shot on location in Guanajuato, Mexico, and tells the story of the many

immigrants who go missing or die on their journeys. The personal histories of these missing men and women may end with a big question mark, but even if they cannot be found, this film attempts to render visible the pain of those left behind.

At the beginning of the film, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) has her son, Jesus, pack up and leave, heading for a new life in the United States along with his friend Rigo. But when they disappear, the mothers are plunged into limbo as they await news, of which there is little. The men's mothers travel to the police station and leaf through a thick stack of unidentified bodies, finally identifying Rigo as among the deceased. Magdalena holds out hope that somehow her son did not suffer the same fate as her friend. Determined to find out what happened to her son, whose presence haunts the film, Magdalena tenaciously journeys from home to a migrant shelter to remote mountains in search of answers. Magdalena remains somewhat of a cipher in the restrained narrative, yet her anguish is palpable as she moves across a harsh physical and emotional landscape.

This story avoids typical tropes of violence around the border and tells a deeply human story of parents trying to find their children, and children trying to find new lives for themselves. At one point, relatives of those who left Mexico reflect on the risks involved in a border crossing: "Why did he leave? He had a life here..." There are no easy answers given, except that those who leave had to try to make their own way.

As Magdalena continues to search for son, she eventually crosses paths with Miguel (David Illescas), a young Mexican man who was deported from the United States. Miguel has not been able to return to what was once his home, as it has been utterly ravaged by violence and made unrecognizable to him. They share tender moments as they become each other's surrogate family, lost souls trying to avoid becoming ghosts too.

The film favors soft focus, the backgrounds sparkling and blurring behind her characters as we get to see them in silhouette or close-up. The camerawork is inventive and unexpected without being flashy, always keeping the focus on the faces and expressions, showing us their visages from all angles. This cinematography is devastating, equal parts splendid and difficult to watch. The frames have a painterly composition, but also appear a bit like puzzles, and give so much visual information for audiences to attempt to understand as they hunt for clues. The story feels cryptic and mysterious, raising many more questions than answers.

The disturbing and spectral shots remind us of the violence that befell some of these immigrants, though their bodies often remain undiscovered and their stories only half-told. There are hazy and blurred shots that have the visuals and audio distorted as brutal attacks transpire. There are also frequent shots of flickering fires, whether these fires are sources of warmth in the home or scenes of horrific violence in shrouded locales. One immensely haunting shot looks at the reflection of trees in the water, and it is unclear where the sky ends and the mirror image begins when we then cut to Magdalena walking with determination as the sun sets and she makes her way to a dark house. The aesthetic is minimalist, but the emotional weight is

heavy, and even as the most disturbing moments are blurred so we do not have to face their horrors fully, it is still increasingly difficult to stomach the pain these people go through as they search for better lives for themselves and their families.

The story remains enigmatic and puzzling, and it can be frustrating to reach its conclusion without receiving clarity or certainty about the images and events that were seen. While some of the imagery might seem overly opaque, the lack of information or answers reflects how these parents feel, when their children go missing without a trace or a body is found with no identification or identifying features. The methodical pace and restrained dialogue are entrancing and beguiling; first-time director Valadez showcases a carefully crafted aesthetic emphasizing isolation in this debut feature, and there are plenty of “identifying features” that signal she is a remarkable talent to follow.

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IDENTIFYING FEATURES: DARK, LYRICAL MEXICAN FILM BRINGS BEAUTY AND HORROR TO BEAR

January 20, 2021

By Kim Hughes

Rating: A

Beautifully shot and terribly sad, with a wildly twitchy score ratcheting up the tension, the Mexican drama *Identifying Features* is a profound statement about maternal love, brutal inequality, and institutional corruption.

It is also one of several recent, notable Mexican films — Michel Franco's searing *New Order* which played TIFF last year, and Gael García Bernal's *Chicuarotes* from 2019 also come to mind — to sternly and unambiguously question the status quo in a country known as much for its horrors as its tourist-friendly pleasantries.



Age 48, illiterate, poor, and more or less alone, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez, magnificently expressive) sets off in search of her underage son who left their remote Guanajuato state in hopes of crossing the border with his friend Riga to work in Arizona with Riga's uncle. The odds for the boys look terrible from the start, and before long Magdalena is on the road hoping to track down her missing boy.

Characters come and go, pivoting Magdalena in various directions but rarely offering much reason for optimism in her quest. Eventually, at a shelter, Magdalena meets Miguel (David Illescas), an itinerant young man who made it across to the U.S. only to be deported back to Mexico.

The pair form an uneasy bond. Along the way, characters help and hinder each other; acts of remarkable kindness are juxtaposed against terrible violence and, even more unsettling, an ambivalence toward horrible situations signalling a weary surrender to it all.

Early in the film, when Magdalena and Riga's mother attempt to file a missing-person report with the local authorities, they're handed a thick binder containing images of dead bodies, or parts of dead bodies, as casually as a book of mug shots. The pictures, collected and distributed by federal authorities, document unsolved deaths from just the previous two months. Four minutes in and already the stakes are impossibly high.

Director Fernanda Valadez, making her feature debut, leverages the rural Mexican landscape both to ease and amp up the anxiety, as shots of drifting clouds, rolling hills, pink skies and parched earth contrast with and underscore the unrelentingly dark narrative. Valadez uses a fictional story to illustrate a depressingly real one.

The film's mix of professional and non-professional actors drawn from the region where the film was shot adds to the gravitas, which is already considerable given the film's storyline about those who disappear under mostly dire circumstances.

Cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos paints the screen in muted colours, but chaos is created by music director Clarice Jensen, who uses eerie, erratic strings to unnerve. A scene where a bewildered Miguel crosses back into Mexico is a case in point: his walk is scored like a horror film, which is doubtless how it feels to Miguel as he crosses a bridge alongside rows of cars shifting back and forth across a border he can no longer access, fortunes travelling concurrently.

Nothing in *Identifying Features* moves quickly, reinforcing the stultifying and often grave disparities that pin these characters in place despite their struggles carried out over great distances.

The film's ending, which is almost unspeakably bleak and salted with a potentially supernatural bent, ensures *Identifying Features* is equal parts boundless art and sharp political statement, and one of the toughest watches you'll experience.

Identifying Features. Directed by Fernanda Valadez. Written by Fernanda Valadez and Astrid Rondero. Starring Mercedes Hernandez and David Illescas. Available on demand at digital.tiff.net, Kino Marquee and virtual cinemas nationwide beginning January 22.

DEADLINE

HOME / FILM / BREAKING NEWS

'Identifying Features': Trailer For Sundance Hit; Doc 'Miracle At St. Bernard's' Underway In Massachusetts — U.S. Briefs

By Andreas Wiseman 
November 25, 2020 9:13am



Trailer For Well-Received Sundance Drama *Identifying Features*

Here's Kino Lorber's engaging first U.S. trailer for well-received Sundance Spanish-language drama *Identifying Features*, about a mother (Mercedes Hernandez) who travels across Mexico in search of her son who authorities say died while trying to cross the boarder into the U.S. Fernanda Valadez's film picked up two prizes at Sundance and will open in theaters and virtual cinemas in January 2021 after its New York premiere as an official selection at New Directors/New Films. The film was recently nominated for a Gotham Award for Best International Feature, and previously played festivals including San Sebastian, Zurich, Morelia, and Thessaloniki. At Sundance, the film won the World Cinema Dramatic Audience Award and the same category's Best Screenplay prize. Avanti Pictures and Corpulenta Producciones produce, Alpha Violet handles sales.

DEADLINE

‘Our Friend’, ‘Identifying Features’ And A Stack Of Oscar International Feature Contenders Make Their Debuts – Specialty Preview

By **Dino-Ray Ramos** 
January 22, 2021 7:15am

After winning the Gotham Award for Best International Feature, Fernanda Valadez’s ***Identifying Features*** continues to ride the wave of acclaim it makes its North American virtual theatrical debut this weekend.

The Mexican border thriller from Kino Lorber was written by Valadez and Astrid Rondero and included a largely female cast and crew. *Identifying Features* made its debut at the Sundance Film Festival where it won the Audience Award and the Best Screenplay prize in the World Cinema Dramatic category.

The film, which marks Valadez’s feature directorial debut, follows Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) who has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the U.S., hopeful to find work. Desperate to find out what happened to him — and to know whether or not he’s even alive — she goes on a dangerous journey to discover the truth. At the same time, a young man named Miguel (David Illescas) has returned to Mexico after being deported from the U.S., and eventually his path collides with Magdalena’s.



***Identifying Features* Trailer: Sundance Winner Follows a Mother's Harrowing Journey in Mexico**

Margaret Rasberry • November 30, 2020



The winner of the Audience Award and Best Screenplay in the World Cinema (Dramatic) section at Sundance Film Festival this year, Kino Lorber has now unveiled the first engrossing trailer for the immigration drama *Identifying Features*. The directorial debut for Fernanda Valadez, heralding a new talent in the international cinema scene, will play at New Directors/New Films starting December 9 and opens on January 22.

Identifying Features follows the harrowing experience of two individuals, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández)—a mother struggling to find her son after he was deported trying to enter the United States to find work—and Miguel (David Illescas), another deportee whose path converges.



ND/NF Review: *Identifying Features* Charts the Lives Erased and Distorted by Migration and Violence

Mark Asch • December 9, 2020



The original Spanish-language title of *Identifying Features* is *Sin Señas Particulares*, or “No Particular Signs”—a reference to the individuating marks found, or not, on unclaimed corpses found near the U.S.-Mexico border. It’s an echo of *Sin Nombre* (“Nameless”), Cary Joji Fukunaga’s vivid immigration-thriller debut from 2009, and an apt title for a film that takes a fresh look at lives erased and distorted by migration and violence. Though Trump-era border policy is an implicit backdrop to the cartel activity and mass abductions she depicts, debuting director Fernanda Valadez’s zoomed-in perspective is on family trauma, not imperial culpability.

The Sundance audience and screenwriting award-winner *Identifying Features* begins in Guanajuato, in central Mexico, with the lyrical sight of a boy, Jesus, walking through a field to tell mother Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) of his intention to cross the border. Jesus walks off through the windblown grass with another boy; when their mothers don’t hear from them,

they find the other boy's photograph among the snapshots of recovered bodies provided to the local police by the *federales*. With no trace of Jesus, Magdalena travels north to provide a blood sample which the authorities will match against DNA from nameless and paperless bodies found burned beyond recognition or decaying in shallow graves.



The bureaucratic details of these scenes are acute and chilling: The slideshow of distinctive items—bags and basketball shorts and baseball caps—found on bodies; the morgue truck; the legalese of the forms for establishing a death and claiming a body. Magdalena spots Jesus's duffel bag in the slideshow, but another bereaved mother convinces her not to sign anything without a blood match. So she embarks on a quest with echoes of *The Third Man*, searching for someone who everyone else agrees is dead. Her journey takes her to a bus company where there are whispers of cartel hijackings along the routes that her son would have traveled; to a migrant shelter; and on to a rural village now all but abandoned due to cartel activity in the area, where her path crosses that of Miguel (David Illescas), a young man not much older than her son, recently deported and returning after five years without so much as a phone call home to his own mother.

Veteran actor Mercedes Hernández gives Magdalena an amateur, apologetic tentativeness as she pursues the barest of leads. Magdalena has an ever-dwindling stack of money, no phone, no car, limited literacy, no friends or relatives in this part of the country. You see how simple it would be for one little person to get swallowed up entirely by this big indifferent country.

Valadez and DP Claudia Becerril Bulos work in a restricted palette of dead-grass browns and thundercloud grays; the ambient, dirgeful score by Clarice Jensen, imbues lovely landscape shots and drone vistas with something of the bone-weariness of the characters. The pacing drags, especially in the first half of the film. The characters move and speak, and Valadez cuts, at a grief-paralyzed tempo. Though shallow-focus compositions hint at tension, the mood is

more pity than dread, until some final, hallucinatory violent flashbacks to Jesus's fate, with human figures twisted out of recognition by the light of bonfires. The climax is an O. Henry twist—the irony is profound, painful, and predictable. With her late display of stylistic verve, narrative omniscience, and capital-A Authorship, Valadez discards slightly dutiful empathy in favor of slightly dubious sensationalism.

Identifying Features is now playing virtually at New Directors/New Films and opens on January 22, 2021.

Grade: B-



We've now entered a new year, and one that will hopefully go better than the prior one. As we look towards the cinematic offerings of 2021, we'll soon be publishing our comprehensive previews of the best films we've already seen on the festival circuit as well as most-anticipated new films, but first today brings a look at January.

While some high-profile December theatrical releases will make their digital debuts, such as *Promising Young Woman*, *News of the World*, *One Night in Miami...*, *Pieces of a Woman*, and more, this month also brings notable festival favorites finally arriving. Check out our roundup below.

11. *Identifying Features* (Fernanda Valadez; Jan. 22)

The winner of the Audience Award and Best Screenplay in the World Cinema (Dramatic) section at Sundance Film Festival last year, we recently caught up with *Identifying Features* at New Directors/New Films last month. Mark Asch said in our review, "The original Spanish-language title of *Identifying Features* is *Sin Señas Particulares*, or "No Particular Signs"—a reference to the individuating marks found, or not, on unclaimed corpses found near the U.S.-Mexico border. It's an echo of *Sin Nombre* ("Nameless"), Cary Joji Fukunaga's vivid immigration-thriller debut from 2009, and an apt title for a film that takes a fresh look at lives erased and distorted by migration and violence. Though Trump-era border policy is an implicit backdrop to the cartel activity and mass abductions she depicts, debuting director Fernanda Valadez's zoomed-in perspective is on family trauma, not imperial culpability. **Where to Watch: Virtual Cinemas**



New to Streaming: *Atlantis*, *Notturmo*, *The Climb*, *The Salt of Tears*, *Identifying Features* & More

Jordan Raup · January 22, 2021

With a seemingly endless amount of streaming options—not only the titles at our disposal, but services themselves—each week we highlight the noteworthy titles that have recently hit platforms. Check out this week’s selections below and past round-ups [here](#).

Identifying Features (Fernanda Valadez)



The winner of the Audience Award and Best Screenplay in the World Cinema (Dramatic) section at Sundance Film Festival last year, we recently caught up with *Identifying Features* at New

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Where to Stream: Virtual Cinemas



FILM

Review: *Identifying Features* Follows a Mother's Heartbreaking Journey Through Mexico's Migrant Community

BY LISA TRIFONE ON JANUARY 22, 2021 • ([LEAVE A COMMENT](#))

Devoid of a traditional score and brimming with captivating visuals, *Identifying Features* tells the story of a Mexican mother searching for the son who went missing on his way to illegally cross the border into the United States with a starkness that distills the narrative down to its most essential moments and emotions. The debut feature from Fernanda Valadez (who co-wrote the script with Astrid Rondero) unfolds as much in what's on screen as in what's not, as the camera focuses so closely on Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) that in even the most significant scenes we're often only watching her and her reactions rather than ever seeing the authorities, aid workers and elders she meets along the way. Brief moments pack incredible meaning, like

the slideshow of ephemera she reviews to potentially identify some of her son's belongings, a single toddler sandal or weathered baseball cap in the mix. Every moment of the film is artfully realized, drawing us ever further into this particular migrant experience.



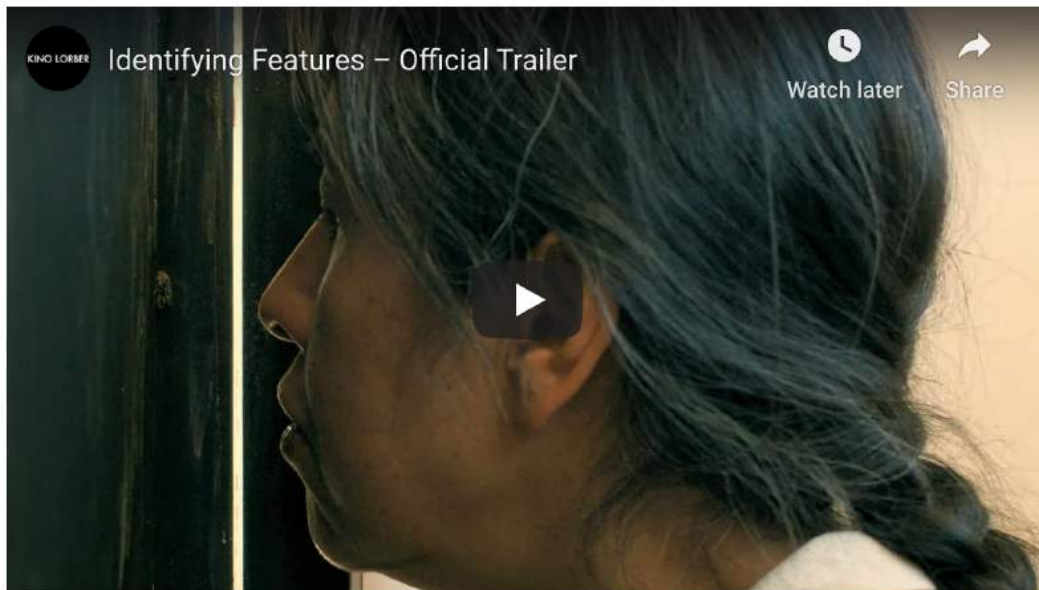
When Magdalena and Chuya (Laura Elena Ibarra) haven't heard from their sons, who left together, in more than two months, they visit the authorities to inquire about how to enlist help to find them. Chuya gets indisputable confirmation that her son died on the journey, but there's no such evidence for Magdalena, meaning she won't give up hope he's still alive until she knows otherwise for sure. With a small wad of cash from Chuya and nothing but the clothes on her back, she sets out to follow her son's path north, inquiring with the bus company they used for any leads on his disappearance. From there, her investigation goes underground, as corruption, cartels and the general strife of the migrant community mean the authorities have little ways to legitimately help her find resolution.

Meanwhile, Miguel (David Illescas) finds himself deported from the US and, with no where else to go, on a similar journey to find something he's lost: the family he left behind when he migrated years earlier. Both on their way to the same rural (and dangerous) region of Mexico looking for answers, Miguel and Magdalena cross paths, trusting each other enough to join the other's journey and provide some mutual support and protection. While their days are filled with their respective searches, each the kind of endeavors that more often than not take them to places they don't anticipate, in their quieter moments they share stories of their lives, what drives them and their shared uncertainty for what's ahead in each of their lives. Both performances are quietly moving, ample in the sort of delivery that makes you want to lean closer to the screen to really *hear* what they have to say.

Valadez finds remarkable balance in prioritizing her protagonist's story while inviting audiences to better understand the world in which it takes place. After learning of an attack on the bus her son was riding that the transportation company would just as soon brush under the rug, Magdalena is directed to spend the night at the nearby migrant center where she can rest

before starting out on her journey in the morning. As she settles in, getting a warm meal for the first time since she set out on her search, Valadez makes special effort to afford the audience a sense of place; we see the migrants (mostly men) praying before sitting down for their meal, and in just a few frames the filmmaker has humanized an entire population of people Americans are all too quick to demonize in headlines and soundbites. It's undeniably moving, as gut-wrenching as anything Magdalena and Miguel experience as the film unfolds. Ultimately a sad affair, *Identifying Features* is also something quite memorable, challenging us to empathize with a mother, a migrant, an entire community that isn't often the focus of such grace and attention.

Identifying Features is now streaming in virtual cinemas





A&EEL BLOG

Streaming Review: Identifying Features (*Sin señas particulares*)

January 22, 2021 Alejandro Riera

I am always weary of critics who claim to have seen the first great film of the year this early in the game. Well I, uh, how can I put it...I recently did: Mexican director Fernanda Valadez's devastating feature debut *Identifying Features* (*Sin señas particulares*) which opens this weekend at virtual cinemas nationwide, including the Gene Siskel Film Center at the School of the Art Institute's Film Center from Your Sofa. Ever since its world premiere last year at the Sundance Film Festival (where it won the Audience Award in the category of World Cinema –

Dramatic and the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Best Screenplay), the film has earned critical acclaim and additional accolades as it has made the festival rounds culminating with a Gotham Independent Film Award for Best International Feature early this month. Co-written with Astrid Rondero, *Identifying Features* not only heralds the arrival of a new powerful voice but stands as a testament to the exciting work that is being made by women filmmakers all over Latin America, including Valadez's compatriot Lila Avilés (*The Chambermaid*) and Perú's Melina León (*Song Without a Name*).

Valadez knows when and how to dole out information, how to snare us in its narrative grasp while creating a deep connection with her characters. I am almost hesitant to even describe the film since one of its pleasures is how we, the audience, are at first left in the dark to the point where some of the characters' names are revealed minutes after their introduction (and I don't mean a couple of minutes; sometimes more than 15 minutes pass before they are addressed by their name by another character).

Identifying Features offers three potential narrative strands: a young man who we later find out is named Jesús tells his mother he is leaving Guanajuato for Arizona with best friend Rigo. Two months later, without news of their sons, the two mothers are sitting in front of a government functionary, presumably an agent of the law who, after telling them the best they can do is file a missing persons report, hands them a huge binder full of photos provided by Mexico's Federal police of bodies found in shallow graves. The camera zooms into the face of Rigo's mother as Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), Jesus' mother, begins to turn the pages. The camera stays on Rigo's mother as she hears the sound of those pages, her face registering anticipation, hope and dread until Magdalena stops flipping and hands over the binder, open on the page with images of Rigo's mangled body. Magdalena will soon experience that same mixture of hope, anxiety and despair as she sets out to find out what happened to her son.

A third mother enters the picture at this point: an ophthalmologist whose son disappeared on a trip to Monterrey four years ago. His body has apparently been found and she is called in to identify his remains at a center where bodies are stored for identification. There she meets Magdalena who has been told to sign a document declaring her son dead after his bag was found next to Rigo's corpse. And just when you think that this woman will play a major role in the film, she disappears after advising Magdalena not to give up on her search; the ophthalmologist's search has come to a sad end after all. Yet, it's a pivotal moment for here we see two mothers, from two very different social strata, finding common ground in the violence that has taken their children away from them. And then, a new story strand is introduced, one that will serve as a mirror to Magdalena's journey: a young man is deported from the United States back to Mexico, the camera following him as he crosses gate after gate, revolving door after revolving door, bridge after bridge, back to the violence he left behind him when his family encouraged him to migrate. His is Jesus' trip in reverse but also Magdalena's. He is coming home and will soon find himself looking for answers to his mother's disappearance. After encountering a wall of silence and fear in her search, Magdalena meets this young man, Miguel

(David Illescas) on her way to Ocampo, his hometown, where she expects to meet a man who may know what happened to her son. Miguel and Magdalena find instead a ghost town, its inhabitants chased out (and in some cases killed) by the local cartels.

Valadez keeps the violence at bay, mostly off-camera, except for a pivotal flashback, which we get in bits and pieces until Magdalena meets that man; and even then the brutal acts are hinted at, not graphically depicted. But the potential for violence is ever present and made manifest in other ways: in that vehicle that follows Pedro, Rigo's father, as he drives Magdalena north to a forensic lab or in the fear in the voice of a bus line employee who at first refuses to help Magdalena but then, behind a bathroom door, shares an invaluable piece of information, her face hidden from view; or even in the decomposing cattle Miguel finds in a cow in his now missing mother's property. And then there's that eerie silence that follows Magdalena's insistent pleas, the silence of the beautiful and imposing Guanajuato landscapes, themselves silent witness to the brutality committed in this land. It is a stillness that Director of Photography Claudia Becerril Bulos patiently captures as her camera watches Magdalena sit or stand patiently in her search for answers. As Magdalena, Mercedes Hernández is the film's emotional anchor, a measured, moving, subtle performance that gives voice and even a name to the thousands of Mexican mothers demanding justice and the right to be given closure.

There is not only pain; there is also guilt. And it is curious that such guilt is voiced by the men while the women do the heavy lifting in their search for answers. "Why did he leave? He had a life here," laments Pedro as he drives Magdalena north. "I hardly sent her anything. If I hadn't been deported, I wouldn't have come back," admits Miguel. Being forced into exile, being ripped from your country, and the violence that migrants face on their journey north leave deep emotional and psychological scars on families and individuals. But nothing, absolutely nothing, prepares you for the emotional gut punch Valadez delivers in the film's final minutes. It turns the idea of a mother's worst nightmare on its head. It is unexpected, inevitable and horrible. It leaves you breathless.

Identifying Features is the work of a confident filmmaker who is in complete control of the expressive potential of the medium, of how to use the aural and visual power of cinema to take us deep inside a national nightmare. I certainly hope critics and audiences, but especially critics, don't overlook this film the way most of them overlooked Fernando Frías de la Parra's equally extraordinary tale about violence and immigration *I'm No Longer Here*. Personally, I cannot wait to see what Fernanda Valadez comes up with next.

Franglais27 Tales

Vive la spontanéité and explore life!

Identifying Features – Film Review



🕒 21st January 2021



Culture, Film, Lifestyle

There are horror stories reported globally of children kidnapped by powerful cartels in Mexico and in *Identifying Features* such a nightmarish scenario is unveiled to devastating effect. *Identifying Features* highlights that plight of a determined mother to locate her son after his disappearance with a strong central performance by Mercedes Hernández as Magdalena the mother. The film shines a spotlight on the anguish encountered by the families of the disappeared in a haunting, riveting tale that will leave its audiences shell-shocked. It is paradoxically a visually beautiful, mesmerising and poetic tale as a feature directorial debut by Fernanda Valadez.

Magdalena's son, Jesús, disappears en route to the US border which unfortunately was an all too familiar occurrence historically in parts of Mexico. Indeed, in 2019, [Human Rights Watch](#) discussed Mexico's humanitarian crisis revealing that there were more than 37,000 missing or disappeared people in

Mexico. It was a crisis that Valadez was keen to highlight within *Identifying Features* particularly regarding the impact on those left behind.

Under Valadez's vision, the camera does not stray far from the emotion overspilling as Magdalena and other women crossing her path undertake DNA tests and other processes effectively to 'identify' the bodies of potential victims. It is especially sombre to watch however Valadez's direction is subtle with the camera lingering on Magdalena's heart breaking, emotive scenes on her quest to discover her son's whereabouts.

Identifying Features sensitively depicts the unimaginable despair experienced by Magdalena amidst that unwavering determination to embark on an investigation for the truth. What is astonishing to watch is that strength of character pervading Magdalena's persona as she undertakes this road trip

through dangerous territory alone. It is this single-minded focus which remains compelling. *Identifying Features* illustrates the unwillingness of the state to assist, to the detriment of mothers like Magdalena, perhaps due to lack of funding or the unquestioning fear of the cartels. Hernández's portrayal of Magdalena conveys a steely, silent confidence, with minimal exposition, despite the adversity faced, which draws the audience further into her inner turmoil. It is certainly an impressive, empathetic performance and with close ups on Hernández, this is very much her film.

The emotional depth of *Identifying Features* is emphasised further by the level of silence permeating throughout and equally the naturalistic settings. As such, there is a degree of beauty interwoven, despite the atrocities of the situation, which works as any violence mainly occurs off-screen. The focus remains on Hernández's Magdalena and her journey throughout some beautiful panoramas and fortunately Valadez made the decision for the camera to linger in such scenes accentuating the aesthetically pleasing cinematography. Such decision ensures that the audience will remain captivated whilst following Magdalena on this journey through Mexico. Equally with such stunning visuals and skilful direction it is no surprise that *Identifying Features* was the winner of the Audience Award as well as the Best Screenplay at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival.

As *Identifying Features* focuses on that depth of a mother's love, it remains convincing that Magdalena would persevere on the road trip, through dangerous terrains, in her desperation to seek resolution about her son's disappearance. It is slow paced, but reflective which provides that opportunity for the film to breathe and enables the full emotional impact of Magdalena's desperation to resonate and be understood. Valadez's use of muted background colours accentuates that tension further creating an eerie sensation which seems designed deliberately to unsettle.

Valadez re-creates this sense of horror throughout *Identifying Features* with its sombre imagery and the underlying sensation of the uncertainty embedded within the real-life horror of disappeared victims. The dynamic is terrifying enough to ensure that parents will never wish to let their children out of their sight again given the ensuing drama encountered by Magdalena. Whilst the plot may not contain many dramatic aspects, those simmering unsettling background elements convey a continuous sense of dread in *Identifying Features* to satisfy most audiences. Such choice of tone by Valadez ensures that Magdalena's journey is a compelling, thought provoking watch with a gut punching denouement and that recognition of the ultimate sacrifice.

Identifying Features is a sombre, poignant and chilling tale which places that focus on a mother's love and the horrific plight of families continuing to search for the disappeared in a race against time. The film portrays the matriarch in a positive light with that drive and determination to seek the truth at any cost which is ultimately heart wrenching. The horror and heartbreak endured throughout *Identifying Features* illustrate Valadez's skilful, artistic direction to convey these fictional but powerful accounts of real-life events in a way that will unsettle and linger with audiences.

Identifying Features certainly identifies Valadez as a director to keep on the radar in the future.

VIMOOZ

Foreign Films

Sundance Winning Mexican Thriller IDENTIFYING FEATURES Opens in Virtual Cinemas in January

January 9, 2021

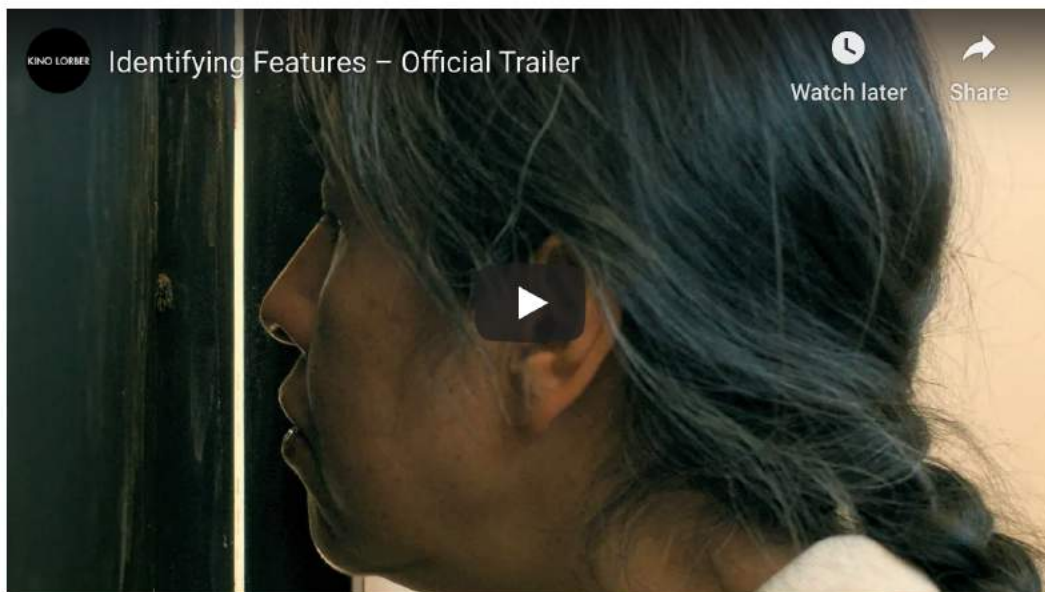


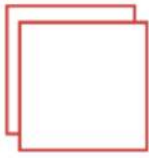
The gripping Mexican border thriller, *Identifying Features* from debut filmmaker Fernanda Valadez will open January 22 on Kino Marquee and virtual cinemas nationwide including in New York at Film at Lincoln Center along with BAM; and in Los Angeles at Laemmle.

Identifying Features starring Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez, Laura Elena Ibarra, and Xicoténcatl Ulloa has won multiple awards including Audience Award and Best Screenplay, World Cinema Dramatic at Sundance Film Festival Winner; Best Film, Audience Award, Best Actress at Morelia International Film Festival; and Golden Alexander at Thessaloniki Film Festival. The film was also nominated for Best International Feature at Gotham Awards

In the film, middle-aged Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the U.S., hopeful to find work. Desperate to find out what happened to him—and to know whether or not he's even alive—she embarks on an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous journey to discover the truth. At the same time, a young man named Miguel (David Illescas) has returned to Mexico after being deported from the U.S., and eventually his path converges with Magdalena's.

From this simple but urgent premise, director Fernanda Valadez has crafted a lyrical, suspenseful slow burn, equally constructed of moments of beauty and horror, and which leads to a startling, shattering conclusion.





In Review | Online
film and music criticism

BY MORRIS YANG FILM HORIZON LINE

Identifying Features | Fernanda Valadez

January 20, 2021



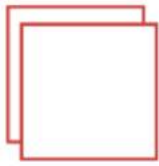
Within a cinematic tradition that associates the violence of Mexico's crime-infested northern

Fernanda Valadez's debut, while sometimes frustratingly broad, tells a well-known tale through unusual eyes, giving the classic immigration tale a welcome twist.

border with the high-stakes machismo of drug cartels and CIA spies, *Identifying Features* sets itself apart by virtue of its provenance and scope. The feature debut of Fernanda Valadez, a young and relatively unknown director, the film is also, atypically, centered around the victims, rather than the agitators of the region's carnage. Its ostensibly prosaic title, taken from procedural terminology, clues us into this gear-shifting: Many would-be emigrants never make it

past the border and are killed along the way, and parents yearning for a sense of closure make their way to the authorities, providing the physical traits of the deceased needed to identify them. Some, however, cannot be conclusively labeled dead or alive, and are henceforth declared missing, their whereabouts unknown. Valadez's assured narrative follows Magdalena, an elderly woman whose son made the trip from Guanajuato to the north two months prior and has not been sighted since. While his companion has been found dead, his throat slashed open by a machete, the only trace of her son is his duffel bag, recovered near a mass grave. The border police believe him dead, and urge her to give up the search; the grieving mother persists all the same.

While refreshingly situated on the other side of the U.S.-Mexico border — focusing less on the implications of mass immigration and more on the emigrants themselves, specifically those who meet their ends at the hands of bandits and kidnappers — *Identifying Features* avoids deeply interrogating its landscape's political history, consigning its purview to impressionistic visuals and sparse storytelling that shed little light on the equally cryptic violence it depicts. For one, it is not clear who the villains are, exactly; buses get stopped en route and gunmen ransack their passengers' worldly possessions, not before slaughtering them indiscriminately. The relentless sadism and perpetual menace Magdalena bears witness to as she treks across no man's land clearly contrasts her more small-scaled human encounters (a recently deported man around her son's age; a surgeon and fellow mother claiming her dead son), shifting the focus away from geographical specificity and onto personal subjectivity, which is seen best in her subdued, suspended grieving and attempts to reconcile with fate. Bordering on abstraction, *Identifying Features* ultimately frustrates given a dearth of broader context, but it latches onto one key attribute: as proof of kinship, the bereaved draw blood to compare with the departed, identified too by the blood they shed.



In Review | Online *film* and *music* criticism

[BY INRO STAFF](#) [FESTIVAL COVERAGE](#) [FILM](#)

New Directors/New Films 2020 — Dispatch 2: *Identifying Features*, *The Killing of Two Lovers*, *The Mole Agent*

December 9, 2020

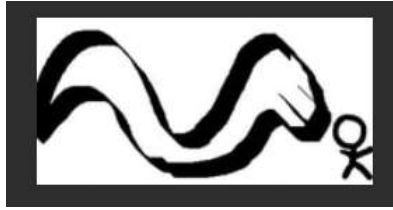


Identifying Features

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IDENTIFYING FEATURES -- A Subtle and Stirring Debut

1/8/2021

[0 Comments](#)

Review by Sean Boelman



Sometimes, the most terrifying films of the year aren't horror movies, but those which are stark and shocking depict the harsh reality in which we live. Fernanda Valadez's feature debut *Identifying Features* is just that: an unflinchingly personal movie that challenges audiences with its nuanced approach to difficult subject matter.

The film follows a mother who travels across Mexico searching for her son that the authorities claim died while trying to cross the border into the United States. It's a truly heartbreaking story, but the script (co-written by Valadez and Astrid Rondero) doesn't go for low-hanging fruit, instead blending meditative drama and slow-burn thriller to achieve its emotional effect.

Something else that really stands out about the movie is that it isn't didactic. Of course, Valadez has a stance on the issues surrounding the immigration crisis, as one would expect of any film

about the topic, but she seems more interested in having the audience come to it on their own. Rather than telling the audience what to think, she shows them the reality in a way that only leaves one option.

It's very easy to connect to the protagonist because Valadez and Rondero write her in a way that is immediately compelling. The arc of the character is really interesting because it blends so many different emotions that we are used to seeing on screen, but rarely together. The result is often staggering in its weight.

The most impressive thing about the movie is the leading performance from Mercedes Hernández. Her performance is quiet, and she doesn't even have much dialogue for significant portions of the film, but it's one of the most powerful turns of the year nevertheless. The amount of emotion she is able to get out of even the smallest of moments is truly impressive.

Additionally, the movie is quite beautiful in a visual sense. The aesthetics are just as restrained as the script, but despite not being too flashy, it still manages to have some great moments. Even though most of the scenery in the background is rather desolate, Valadez contrasts it with the suffering the protagonist is experiencing to create an interesting effect.

That said, the film does make one significant misstep, and that is including a subplot involving another immigrant returning home to Mexico. The way in which this ties into the overall narrative is mostly effective, but there had to have been a better method of doing the same thing while further developing the lead's emotional arc.

Identifying Features is a wonderfully nuanced movie that feels like the type that will sadly go under-the-radar. However, the powerful story and phenomenal lead performance will allow this to stick in the mind of those viewers that do seek it out.

Identifying Features is now streaming in a virtual sneak preview run. Tickets can be purchased [here](#).

Rating: 4/5



disappointment media's Favorite Lead Actress Performances of 2020

12/31/2020

[0 Comments](#)

By disappointment media Staff



Note: Due to repeated infractions against disappointment media's strict anti-gatekeeping policy, all Netflix titles have been blacklisted from coverage on the site for a period of 30 days. This includes mentions in this article.

...

Sean Boelman's Pick: Mercedes Hernandez, *Identifying Features*



Oftentimes, the performances that get the most attention on end-of-year lists like these are those which are big, flashy, and command the screen. However, it is just as important to recognize those turns which have a quiet power to them, and that is exactly what Mercedes Hernández brings to her role in *Identifying Features*. As a mother looking for her lost son who went missing while emigrating to the United States, Hernández doesn't have a ton of dialogue, but when she does, she delivers it in a way that is entirely subtle. Instead, it is the emotion of her performance that she is able to convey through her smaller mannerisms and movements that is more impressive. In a year full of great performances from seasoned veterans and newcomers alike, Hernández's is one that could be overlooked, but certainly deserves the attention.



Review | Identifying Features | 2021

👤 Matthew Lucas 📅 February 01, 2021 📁 Kino Lorber , 💬 0 Comments



The harrowing border crossing from Mexico into the United States has been the subject of much debate for years, a controversy escalated by Donald Trump's "build the wall" campaign platform during the 2016 election and beyond. Yet for all the talk radio bloviating and xenophobic panics about "migrant caravans" that have highlighted the issue from the American side, we in the States rarely get to see things from the Mexican point of view.

Enter Fernanda Valadez's savage *Identifying Features*, a gut-wrenching examination of the dangers of illegal border crossings that's framed almost as a horror movie. The film traces the journey of Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), a woman searching desperately for her teenage son who attempted to make the crossing into the US with a friend to find work, only to vanish along the way. Working with the police becomes a nightmare - so many are lost along the crossing, leaving only small items behind, lost to hunger, bandits, or murderous gangs, that local authorities are left with few clues and even fewer resources to track down the leads. So

Magdalena takes it upon herself to find her beloved Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela); her journey will lead her into the heart of darkness, accompanied by a young migrant worker named Miguel (David Illescas), searching for his mother after being deported from the US. They become something akin to surrogate family for each other on their journey, but the answers they find may ultimately be more terrifying than the pain of not knowing the fates of their loved ones.

The picture *Identifying Features* paints is almost unrelentingly bleak, but it's nothing if not consistently compelling. Valadez's border is a vast, unknowable wasteland, where the risk of a crossing isn't worth the "reward" to be found on the other side. Valadez offers no solutions or musings on the politics of immigration, and instead focused on the tragedy of those lost in an attempt to find a better life, chasing a promise of prosperity that ultimately turns out to be in vain. Its austerity achieves almost abstract levels, with Valadez finding a kind of grim beauty in the barren landscape that recalls Alejandro Landes' *Monos*. Magdalena remains something of a blank slate throughout the film, but this allows the audience to place itself in her situation, and she becomes a kind of avatar for the viewer, guiding us into hell without ever bringing us back. The film's "twist" doesn't quite land with the impact that it should because it all happens so quickly, but it nevertheless leaves us shaken in its terrifying suddenness. There's an air of hopelessness to the entire affair, its characters trapped in a never-ending cycle of death and despair. If it sounds like a downer, that's because it is. But there's a fearsome power to Valadez's artistry that is hard to shake. It's a holy terror of a film, a raw, fiery modern "Heart of Darkness" that is an unforgettable exploration of what is being fled, and the cruel joke of what is being run towards.

GRADE - ★★★½ (out of four)

IDENTIFYING FEATURES | Directed by Fernanda Valadez **| Stars** Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela **| Not Rated | In Spanish w/English subtitles | *Now playing in virtual cinemas nationwide.***



Film Review: Powerful Testimony from Mexico — “I Am No Longer Here” and “Identifying Features”

JANUARY 30, 2021 — 2 COMMENTS

By Tim Jackson

What do these young Mexican filmmakers want? For us to bear witness.



A similarly subjective approach is taken by Fernanda Valadez in her first film, *Identifying Features*. Its story is simple: a mother, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), searches for her young son Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela), who, after recently leaving home in Guanajuato for the United States, has gone missing. The film unfolds slowly, each scene fraught with a nervous ambiguity. Magdalena's quest is tangled up in bureaucracy from its very beginning. Definite proof of her son's whereabouts or fate is not easily found. She searches through grizzly images

of incinerated bodies, items inventoried from the victims, bunkers of corpses in storage. Finally, Magdalena is called for an interview and is told there is a “very old man” who might know something about her son. She is advised by the police to turn back, but she quietly pleads: “I need to find my son.” The camera remains on her face throughout the torturous conversation.

Mercedes Hernández is a stunning presence: grim, persistent — as beautiful as a Diego Rivera painting. Finally, with the name of a general location to find the old man, she sets off on her own. Along the way she stumbles upon Miguel (David Illescas) in a remote shack that gangs have ravaged. His parents have been killed. Miguel’s circumstances are as dire and precarious as hers. “From behind, you almost look like him,” Magdalena tells Miguel, referring to her son. “From behind, we all look alike,” he responds. It is a statement that speaks volumes about the social anonymity (to outsiders) of the countless victims of random violence, poverty, and heartless immigration policies. To Americans they “all look the same.” Is there no meaningful future for people whose lives have been turned upside down through no fault of their own? The narrative’s deliberate pace concentrates on the mother’s desperate experience — Valadez demands that we consider the human cost of gang violence in Mexico. As the mother’s slow journey continues, her surroundings become increasingly satanic. Claudia Becerril Bulos’s stunning cinematography turns the world of the protagonist into an increasingly nightmarish and hallucinogenic place.

Both films revolve around small heroes in irreconcilable life struggles, cast with actors, in D.W. Griffith’s phrase, “untrammelled by technique.” There is more to be gained looking into the eyes of an actor who knows, and has possibly lived, these experiences, than by hours of Hollywood huffing, puffing, and gunshots. There is no redemptive resolution supplied. What do these young Mexican filmmakers want? For us to bear witness.

THE MOVIE BUFF

DRAMA

Review: 'Identifying Features' is an Alluring Drama with Visuals of Actuality and Pain of the Journey



By [ARPIT NAYAK](#) — January 30, 2021 [No Comments](#)



The journey can teach you a lot about life; and for a few, it just becomes life. Cinema has often used the subject of journey to form stories. In contrast, many of the stories inspire us, yet some do the opposite. Some journey stories touch upon reality, the reality we know but to which we

close our eyes. The film **"Identifying Features"** ("Sin señas particulares," original title) talks about such a journey.

The story is set in Guanajuato, Mexico where Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela) mentions to his mother Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) that he is going to the United States—along with his friend—as there are better job opportunities there. As time passes, Magdalena waits but does not hear anything from his son, which keeps her worried, so she decides to venture out on a journey to find out what happened to her son. She does not find a photo of Jesús, but on her way, she spots a friend of her son, whose mother has been avoiding the pictures, as she knows what has happened to his son. Magdalena makes it her expedition to uncover the truth, wherever these explorations may take her, and does not mind the agony that may come from the knowing.

On her way, she gets to see that she is not the only one who has lost someone close; she comes to a doctor who was in a similar position to her a few years ago. The doctor receives a phone call to inform her that her own son died two weeks ago whom she thought died long back.

Later, Magdalena meets with Miguel (David Illescas), a deportee from the States who reminds her of her son, which connects. This journey a mother takes out of endearment, despite the likelihood facing her, is daunting. Did her boy die on the way to desert, or did the Cartel get hold of him? Is the government making her believe in accepting his son's dismissal, sight unseen, or are they trying to cover up unclaimed bodies? The answer lies in the journey of the story.

"Identifying Features" is directed and co-written by Fernanda Valadez along with Astrid Roderó. Speaking of the script's writing, both writers perfectly balance this substantial and tense drama by splashing the exceptional naturalism and ethereal representations within. As with many feature films made in an indistinguishable manner, the story-moving and establishment are very accordant, and do not depend on the acceleration of dramatization to capture in the narrative.

Speaking of the direction, the frequent use of pixilation is not an exceptionally comprehensive visual ornamentation. Still, it is pleasing to gaze at, and elicits the segregation of the individuals we are following. The techniques metaphorically speak for the scarcity of certitude the characters have of what inspires them to mitigate the visual around them.

As the first feature of Director Valadez, the film is exceptionally and skilled. The production is entirely about connections between a mother and a stranger who feels like her lost son, which becomes the focus extremity. The scenes between Magdalena and other outsiders—either vague or supportive—are with stories and experiences and a look of ache and hankering.

The cinematography of Claudia Becerril Bulos is pleasing; she captures each frame beautifully. Clarice Jensen's music is also stunning; it gives the narrative the needed aching actuality, one that feels impertinently soaked in shred, distress, and captions. The leading cast of Mercedes Hernández and David Illescas, and the supporting cast, is realistic and astonishing. "Identifying Features" is stoical, as it takes us to the pressure and time of the scenario. We feel deeply for them, and when the truth comes, no matter how painful it is, it will come out.

"Identifying Features" is a realistic drama filled with rich and stunning visuals. This film premiered at the *Sundance Film Festival* and the *World Cinema Dramatic Competition*. It won the 'Audience Award' and a 'Best Screenplay' award at *Sundance*, and was nominated for a 'Grand Jury Prize' at *World Cinema – Dramatic*. The story talks about something we don't pay much attention to, and the film is backed by fantastic direction and performances. It's a must-watch, and something one should not miss out on.

**No streaming options are currently available for this film.*

CAMBRIDGE DAY

Coronavirus edition, XLVII: Films to shelter with, from MLK to Bruce Lee, and following the border

By **Tom Meek**

Sunday, January 24, 2021

Last revised on: Wednesday, January 27, 2021

'Identifying Features' (2020)



An arcanelly told narrative that feels told from the chair of a seasoned auteur. Yet this is Fernanda Valadez's first feature wrapping its arms around the challenges and perils facing border-crossing Latinx people, who don't always make it. And then what of those who send, love or expect them? The eternity of not knowing is the burn; as we embed with one such haunted soul – a mother (Mercedes Hernández) seeking news of her son – narratives of gangs, drug lords and corrupt agents take form. The misty shards of grim reality, cut to the bone, are relayed brilliantly by Valadez in eerie, terse teases. Part of the **Brattle's Virtual Screening Room**.



IDENTIFYING FEATURES (SIN SEÑAS PARTICULARES)

29 January 2021 / by [Monique Vigneault](#)

 DAVID ILLESCAS / FERNANDA VALDEZ / JUAN JESÚS VARELA / MERCEDES HERNÁNDEZ / SPANISH



Mexico, Spain / Languages: Spanish / Subtitled

A take in the final act of Fernanda Valdez's chilling debut, *Identifying Features*, is a discordant and rapturous display of magical realism. Showcasing rogue violence against a bus of asylum-seekers by curdling fire—the orchestrator of terror's silhouette grows horns and a tail.

Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) is looking for her son, Jesus (Juan Jesús Varela). With only a battered knapsack found on the edge of the U.S. border, and the remains of his best friend in a body bag, she's unwavering in the resolve to find the truth. Aloof government officials in alabaster offices tell Magdalena to take a stipend of money and simply accept her son as a statistic. Hernández's embodiment of motherly desperation and hope is beautifully devastating.

Unconvinced of her son's fate, and driven by an unending motherly determination, she journeys by foot and coyote-navigated convoys through the dead of night. In her journey, she finds people of similar circumstance, such as young Miguel (David Illescas), a recently deported migrant, who traverses the border once more following his mother's disappearance.

The ending, hinged in brutal realism, is grim.

As a Mexican myself, *Identifying Features* effectively portrays the kind of encroaching terror that I'm all too familiar with. I often find it hard to write about Mexico, yet Valdez captures the underbelly of what's happening to Mexican society masterfully.

With a cinematic language that resembles early Claire Denis, *Identifying Features* is intensely political and unrelenting in its story of civil collapse. This dichotomy is handled with precision, and compressed into an air-tight feel of looming doom. Valdez illustrates, through characters that exist on broad ends of Mexico's economic spectrum, the system's apathy when its own people go without a trace.

In Valdez's Mexico there's no room for glorification. She illustrates this through the sudden appearance of a bloodied goat head one morning, the gut wrenching pleas to not cross the border again, and the persistent apathetic response from Mexican bureaucracy.

Often, Mexican cinema, or shall we say, cinema about Mexico, fails to capture what's been happening to the country for the last few decades — the all-encompassing grip of corruption, the mounting violence, and the way in which the culture has become completely overshadowed by derivative stereotypes.

Blockbusters like *Sicario* portray the fragility of the country by glorifying drug cartels, punctuating the trope with gratuitous gore and action, and painting Mexico's Northern neighbours as anything but complicit. But *Identifying Features* strays from all that, it fictionalizes the experience of real Mexicans—collateral to corruption, who are wedged between a country they no longer recognize, and an asylum that will do anything but.

You'll want to forget *Identifying Features*, but you'll never be able to. *Identifying Features* captures a horror that needs no face-paint or jump-scares, for it isn't the kind that washes away once the credits roll.

Identifying Features opened on Kino Marquee virtual cinema on January 22.

Sin señas particulares, de Fernanda Valadez

Filo luminoso



Por: NAIEF YEHYA

05/02/2021 21:55

Para pensar la catástrofe de inseguridad y crimen fuera de control que vive México es indispensable dejar de hacerlo sólo en términos de víctimas y victimarios, así como de confiar en la ilusión de erradicar la violencia con más violencia. A partir de esa simple y poderosa reflexión, Fernanda Valadez dirigió y coescribió (con su productora, Astrid Rondero) su debut en largometraje, *Sin señas particulares*. Una cinta filmada a pesar de contratiempos, recortes y únicamente con la mitad del presupuesto triunfó en la 18 edición del Festival Internacional de Cine de Morelia, obtuvo el premio del público y el premio especial del jurado para el mejor guion en Sundance.

Se trata de una poderosa reflexión sobre la necrosis social que padece México, donde se evita hasta lo posible la violencia explícita y neurótica que llena tantas

horas del infoentretenimiento atroz, generado por la epidemia de destrucción provocada por el narco, la corrupción y la militarización del país. Lo que importa aquí es la dimensión social de la catástrofe, la cual conforma una especie de espacio negativo del horror. En vez de buscar en los titulares escandalosos, Valadez se centra en historias simples y devastadoras, en particular la de una madre que busca a su hijo desaparecido y la de un hijo que busca a su madre. Simetría de tragedias que enfatizan la condición irredimible del país.

La historia de esta cinta fue imaginada en las condiciones de inseguridad que prevalecían en el país hace una década pero lamentablemente sigue siendo actual en un tiempo en que vivimos la normalización de las masacres de inmigrantes, los asesinatos de periodistas, la literal desaparición de comunidades enteras, el tráfico humano, la crueldad extrema como cotidianidad y la mercantilización del narcohorror. Valadez presenta un mundo sin protección ni autoridades, donde la labor del Estado se limita a desenterrar fosas clandestinas, recoger cadáveres y pertenencias, llenar formas y hacer trámites para almacenar, transportar, entregar cuerpos.

Las primeras palabras que escuchamos vienen de Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela), un muchacho de diecisiete años quien anuncia a su madre Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández): “Me voy a ir con Rigo (Armando García), su tío nos va a dar trabajo en Arizona”. Poco después nos enteramos que los dos jóvenes han desaparecido mientras viajaban en un autobús hacia la frontera. A sus madres les muestran carpetas repletas de fotos de los cadáveres recuperados en los últimos dos meses para identificarlos. La visión de una madre desesperada no es aquí motivo de melodrama o sensiblería, sino un paseo angustioso por los infiernos de la burocracia de la muerte: desde revisar fotos de *memento mori* (cadáveres, camisas, chanclas, mochilas), hasta aventurarse por carreteras hostiles donde ni la noche ni el día dan seguridad al viajero. Magdalena se obstina en pensar que: “Mi hijo puede estar muerto pero yo tengo que saber” y rechaza las advertencias de quienes le dicen que se olvide, que en este tiempo de miedo intenso: “Aquí se está perdiendo mucha gente” y nadie quiere hablar con extraños. En su búsqueda con la policía, en los albergues y con otras víctimas, Magdalena se encuentra con Miguel (David Illescas), a quien acaban de deportar después de vivir cinco años en Estados Unidos, y a pesar de su situación le ofrece ayuda a Magdalena para buscar a su hijo. Se conforma así, por la solidaridad y la comprensión del sufrimiento, una pequeña familia en medio del huracán de la devastación humana.

Una sociedad dividida social, cultural y étnicamente encuentra en el terror de los hijos desaparecidos algo parecido a un centro de gravedad, un espacio de conmiseración común donde Magdalena, quien es analfabeta, conoce a una doctora que también perdió a su hijo, aparentemente secuestrado mientras viajaba con amigos en la carretera. El crimen como igualador y fuerza democratizadora del dolor. Magdalena apenas tiene “una casita y una parcelita” en un rincón de Guanajuato, pero le ofrece a Miguel comenzar una nueva vida. No se puede reparar la desgracia pero ella cree que es quizá posible reacomodar las dolencias para hacerlas soportables.

Magdalena camina apesadumbrada pero decidida por un mundo de fantasmas que inevitablemente hace pensar en Juan Rulfo. “No queda nadie, vete”, le advierte su padrino sin atreverse siquiera a abrir la puerta o mostrar la cara. Valadez y Rondero crean una estética de la amargura con un guion casi minimalista, con una economía de diálogos purgada de cualquier exceso dramático. El texto tiene su perfecto reflejo en la fotografía de Claudia Becerril que opta por contrastar *close ups* y planos frontales con tomas amplias y fondos fuera de foco que evocan soledad, desesperación, abandono, aislamiento, al tiempo que insinúan, por su ambigüedad, sombras que se desplazan acechantes. Becerril filma las espaldas y nuca, evitando imponerse, deslizándose al lado de los protagonistas (“Todos nos parecemos de espaldas”, dice Miguel), como si se tratara de un ejercicio de *cinéma vérité*, pero a la vez respetando el anonimato de quienes no desean exponerse.

La sintaxis visual muestra el agobio, la amenaza, la decadencia y frustración con tanta delicadeza como contundencia. En vez de presentarnos un camino por el que “nadie llega a Ocampo”, se enfoca en una fractura del parabrisas, como una rasgadura en la realidad, un portal a un mundo de muertos vivientes. Es gracias a esta estética como se puede dar un salto del extremo realismo a un universo mágico e inasible donde rige el mal. A su vez la imagen establece un contrapunto con la música austera y escalofriante de Clarice Jensen, que se sostiene genialmente apuntalada en los silencios.

Pero gran parte del peso agónico que ofrece esta obra se debe al extraordinario trabajo de Mercedes Hernández, a la naturalidad de sus gestos, a la cadencia de su voz y su andar. Ella es el eje de la cinta que logra dar verosimilitud y engrandecer las actuaciones del resto del reparto, que son actores *amateurs*. En términos estéticos, *Sin señas particulares* recuerda un tanto a otra cinta emotiva y poderosa, *Sanctorum*, de Joshua Hill (2019), donde terror y misticismo crean un panorama espectral. Asimismo, podríamos pensar en la cinta ucraniana *Atlantis*,

de Valentyn Vasyanovych (2019), que trata sobre las ruinas y la desolación dejadas por la guerra y que tiene un tono emocional emparentado al de la película de Fernanda Valadez.

La odisea de Magdalena hacia una especie de Comala del siglo XXI es el relato de una madre desesperada que ya no tiene nada que perder y tan sólo cuenta con la solidaridad y la empatía de los otros. Ése es el último y único mensaje de optimismo que puede dar una historia que podría imaginarse como un relato apocalíptico, pero en realidad está más cerca de ser el epitafio de una nación descuartizada.

It's Just Movies

Review: *Identifying Features*

— *by* **RON WILKINSON** —



The trope of wanting to know something that could kill is such a staple of Western crime stories we hardly know it is there. It takes powerful voices and acting to remind us that this kind of knowledge is a real thing. Magdalena hears this kind of information whispered by a terrified unknown woman separated by a toilet stall and from a nearly blind old man. The universal advice is to go home and stop her search. Her son is dead.

The movie begins with the camera looking out the house doorway into the beautiful wide world, the big sky of central Mexico. Jesus (Juan Jesus Varela) tells his mother Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) that he is going to cross illegally into the US to find a promised job. He leaves with Rigo (Armando García) the son of Magdalena's friend Chuya (Laura Elena Ibarra). After weeks of no word, the two mothers go to the authorities to search for their boys. Rigo's body has been recovered and has identifying features.

Magdalena is presented with a corpse burned beyond recognition and given papers to sign, which she cannot understand, to confirm it is her son. The authorities tell her blood tests have confirmed it is her son as the look in her eyes tells us this is a lie. Whispered voices later tell her, and us, the blood test story is a fake to stop her from asking further questions.

Fear is everywhere around the border crossing, an area of hundreds of square miles controlled by drug cartels and human trafficking gangs. The mother's search for her son evolves into our search for what has brought the devil to Mexico. Is it the corruption of local officials, or greed? Or is it our own American taste for drugs we, as a nation, prefer to pretend does not exist?

Magdalena's journey, alone, is a wondrous, harrowing and courageous dropping into the unknown that is a beautiful movie all by itself. People help her at every turn and at every turn she is reminded they are risking their lives to do so. Cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos uses well executed long takes and creepy night sequences to saturate the screen with the presence of the devil. Bonfires used to burn the dead summon him up in the depths of the night and the ghosts of the slain turn the sky upside down as hope is lost.

Valadez co-wrote the script with Astrid Rondero immersed in magic, especially powerful through the words of the indigenous old man (Manuel Campos). Nearly killed when his bus is

hijacked by cartel sicarios, his vision is too blurred to identify a photo of Jesus. Perhaps his vision is blurred, like ours, because he can no longer bear seeing.

The film's sound team and composer Clarice Jensen builds this sense of foreboding with a stirring score punctuated by throwaway sounds such as distant gunshots and dislocated auto engine sounds in the night. The combination of sound and ultra-realistic acting and cinematography landed this film both Sundance awards and a spot in the annual NYC New Directors / New Films series.

With acting and locations so real the first half of the film looks like a documentary, we are immersed in fear ourselves and imprinted with the indelible message that in this place and time all hope is lost. In the quest to do work that no one admits exists, we have created a space where carnal knowledge rules and life has no value beyond the ability to kill. The mother and the old man live on even as they question why.



Rating: 8/10

FILM

The 50 Best Films of 2020 (and the first part of 2021)

written by Andrew Parker | February 5, 2021



For a practically immeasurable number of people, 2020 sucked in every possible way, and 2021 hasn't gotten off to a better start. Between the pandemic, politics, and any number of staggering setbacks that fell in-between, it's pretty much safe to say that the year was a write off for almost everyone. Time became immaterial, the outside world sort of drifted away, and for millions around the world, the only way to safely watch a film was to do it from home.

And yet, despite all the ink that's been spilled about the dire state of the film industry at home and abroad as a result of the global pandemic, 2020 (and the first couple of months of 2021, which will see the release of some major Oscar contenders, thanks to the Academy's extended deadline) has yielded a bumper crop of great films.

How many great films, you might ask? So many that I had to push back my publishing of this list a full month later than usual to make sure I saw as many films as possible, and somehow I still ended up with 37 honourable mentions when trying to come up with a list of the 50 best. And of those 37 “runner-ups” are some cuts that were positively brutal to make.

The criteria to make this list is pretty loose. Did it come out in theatres or on VOD or a streaming service in 2020? It’s eligible. Is it eligible for Oscars and comes out sometime in the first part of 2021? Eligible. Is it feature length? Also, eligible. Things have been too much of a mess these days to overthink this more than I already have.

...

49. **Identifying Features** (Kino Lorber)

A gut-wrenching, remarkably layered debut feature from Fernanda Valadez, *Identifying Features* is the story of a Mexican mother (an outstanding Mercedes Hernandez) desperately trying to find out what happened to her missing, and presumed dead son, who tried to make the border crossing into the United States. Less a mystery and more of a dramatic expose on the sorts of dangers and bureaucratic injustices families face under such situations, *Identifying Features* has been racking up awards season momentum (including wins for Best International Feature at the Gothams and a screenwriting prize at Sundance), and it’s easy to see why. It’s the sort of drama with the power to change opinions and haunt the memories of all who see it. [*Currently streaming via virtual cinemas across North America, including digital TIFF Bell Lightbox, Sudbury Indie Cinema, and Winnipeg Cinematheque*]

AFTERGLOW

Afterglow

Son of Mine

Fernanda Valadez's IDENTIFYING FEATURES (2020)



Glenn Heath Jr.

Feb 2  1  



The oppressive threat of cartel violence imbeds itself into the DNA of *Identifying Features*, becoming inseparable from the sobering story of a distraught mother who travels to the Mexican/American border hoping to find her missing son. Every carefully composed frame illuminates this duality, and the ghostly absences produced by a nationalized trauma that keeps spreading like a virus.

Director Fernanda Valadez is careful to keep most references to the narco lifestyle and drug trade off-screen, focusing instead on the weathered face of Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) and all that she comes to represent about life in modern Mexico.

Harkening from a rural area in Guanajuato, her quixotic journey north (and then south again) is a portrait of prolonged uncertainty complicated by mechanisms of bureaucracy and corruption. As a single parent, she's now doubly alone.

Still, she meets a cast of characters along the way who aide in her pursuit, providing clues to her son's whereabouts after he disappeared with a friend on his way to the United States.

Some of these people share a similar story, like the doctor who has been asked to identify the remains of her son who's been missing for four years. It seems that education and background are not contributing factors to whether one will avoid experiencing terror. Others remain faceless, merely voices left just out of frame in order to emphasize the impact their words have on Magdalena's psyche.

Since Mexico is such a vast country, modes of transportation are essential to telling this particular story. Buses, cars, boats, planes, and foot traffic all feature prominently in propelling the narrative forward, backward, and sometimes upside down. The film's singular examination of narrative directionality reveals how a shoestring investigation can essentially take the shape of a snake eating its tail.

But even more impressively, *Identifying Features* manages to present the invasion of Narco influence on everyday existence in dystopian terms. The horizons are mostly devoid of people. Houses lay abandoned. Entire families have disappeared.

Any sense of joy, normalcy, and community have been seemingly erased from existence. There's still beauty in the landscapes, and in the way some people are able to help each other. So often though, these gestures of kindness are juxtaposed with random acts of violence.

Identifying Features tips too far into the subjective horrors during its hallucinatory flashback climax, and in the process loses some of its subtle power. Still, Valadez's impressive debut remains one of the few Mexican films to examine the impact of cartel violence without delving

into the very cinematic aesthetics that so often glamorize their fascist fear-mongering techniques and iconography. And for that, it's a must-see.

***Identifying Features* is now available to stream through these [virtual cinemas](#).**

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TAOS NEWS

Monday, February 8, 2021

A film and filmmaker to watch

[Tamra Testerman](#) Feb 3, 2021 Updated Feb 4, 2021 0



Many Taoseños and those who feel immediately at home with nature and the ever-changing landscape of terrain and sky will be drawn in and captivated by the color palette and accompanying sounds of nature which are part of Fernanda Valadez' debut feature film, "Identifying Features," which streams at the Taos Center For The Arts Big Screen at Home series from Jan. 29 to Feb. 19.

Valadez has a story to tell which includes some harsh realities, but can be distilled to the more universal one of the relationship between a mother and son. The external landscape provides the canvas for the rollout of the storyline - which can feel brutal, charting the emotional journey of a mother seeking her son and the persons she meets along the way. And as it often happens, there is still another son seeking his mother. All this against the complex realities of life where there is no assurance we will know if the son or mother is alive, dead or what, we will never know.

The broader canvas continues to draw us in, much like an Agnes Martin landscape. The film opens with the camera panning a wide open arid space, and catapults the viewer into a

heart-rending story about loss. A mother looking out over a field of high grass, her son walks over to tell her he is leaving to cross the border from Guanajuato, Mexico, into the United States. We hear the sound of wind and the young man's footsteps trudging away. Like Martin's work, this film speaks of vigilance, silence and introspection. This filmmaker takes us on a journey through a montage of landscapes with the characters' inner emotional dialogues front and center.

Valadez uses a muted palette of bottled ambers, night black, hazy greens, dry wheat, blushing, erubescant and bittersweet reds. The cinematography soars through frames without conventional melodrama, deep glances in places of expanse, both by land and in the main characters' faces.

At one point, there is a border crossing, a blaze of a hundred red taillights, a gunmetal turnstile, a room with a green fluorescent haze where mothers find themselves in search of something, anything familiar in a photo album full of the details of life snuffed out. Some, all but erased. Of persons attempting a border crossing.

There are cracked adobe walls, and tin plates of beans at a rickety wooden table in front of a roaring fire. There is a cacophony of turkey vultures soaring over silent shallow graves, and a dark night canopy with a shooting star and dazzling moon.

This is a universal story of unstoppable love of a mother for her son, the bravado of youth and hope, the rapprochement of truth and tragedy. The state of the world, a migrant story.

There is no flag fluttering, finger-pointing, no gratuitous macho cartel violence or preaching about the dangers of a militarized border. Instead, the visual and sound dialogue of every frame holds a secure space in the timeline of a mother firm in her resolve to find her son in a complicated world where red-tape, vigilante lawmakers and life-takers rule the day.

It is a twist in the backstory that has dominated the news cycle. People trying to leave somewhere, anywhere, for something better. By boat, by plane, a livestock truck, on foot. Swimming away.

"Identifying Features" is a perfect storm of story, director, cinematographer and historic timing. Actor Mercedes Hernández who plays the mother Magdalena Loreda Martínez, with a gentle firm stoicism, an inconsolable resolve to find her son retracing his steps from migrant shelters, to bus stations aided along the way by the kindness of strangers. Magdalena's emotional and physically compelling journey are at the film's heart center.

Another nuanced performance is provided by David Illescas, who plays Miguel, another young man who is deported and making the journey back. It is through Miguel's journey across the border and the return to a family home, ransacked and no longer occupied, that we get a glimpse of the hard choices Jesús, Magdalena's son, and Miguel have to choose from. Miguel and Magdalena meet, she without her son, he without his mother.

The bureaucracy always looms large in Magdalena's story. There are linoleum-floored buildings. Blood specimens, color photo archives of the dead, their clothing, a backpack, a tennis shoe, anything familiar to help identity. There is also the bleak - the futile in seeing something recognizable and coming to terms with not knowing ... forever.

"Identifying Features" is more than a story of the trauma of a missing child, and a system that cannot protect the vulnerable and instead is complicit. Director Valadez and her co-writer editor and producer Astrid Rondero and cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos, achieve a masterpiece in this montage of long, searching frames centering on the emotional landscape of characters in the center of a dreary abyss. Danger close, tension ramped up.

This film resonates, provokes, percolates and surfs just beneath the surface like the landscapes of Agnes Martin. They do not assuage or sooth, but serve to surface universal truths relevant now.

The film streams as part of the Taos Center for the Arts Big Screen At Home series, cost \$12, at tcataos.org/film/ In Spanish with English subtitles; 94 minutes. You can watch the film on your computer, smartphone or tablet.



IDENTIFYING FEATURES is a Bracing Border Journey

Writer-Director Fernanda Valadez's award-winning debut is a small-scale epic of grief and determination set along the US-Mexico border



Julian Singleton [Follow](#)

Feb 19 · 5 min read



In Fernanda Valadez's Sundance-winning debut feature *Identifying Features*, middle-aged mother Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) arrives at the Mexico-United States border searching for her son. He left to cross the border illegally months ago—and has vanished without a trace. After waiting in line for hours, trapped in the heat of slow-crawling bureaucracy, state officials collect DNA samples in the hopes of an eventual match with a recovered body. A glimpse of her son's backpack among evidence prompts officials to push Magdalena to declare her son dead. A chance encounter with a fellow grieving mother (Ana Laura Rodríguez), however, steels Magdalena's resolve—and she begins a winding journey along a path others have died walking in search of answers.

From *Sin Nombre* to *La Jaula de Oro*, a handful of films in recent years have granted a long-suppressed voice to the migrant communities who risk everything to cross the border. While setting these films immediately within these victimized communities lends them a needed sense of urgency, not many films have focused on those who don't take the journey—yet are impacted by it all the same. There are countless families left behind for every person who vanishes along the border, left waiting for word that their loved ones have either survived the crossing—or that their remains have been discovered. While Magdalena drives the film's narrative, *Identifying Features* drifts in the orbits of other mothers searching for their sons, as well as one son, Miguel (David Illescas), who searches for his mother after he's deported back to Mexico. What results is a film that feels as justifiably grieving and angry as the characters within it—and whose impact lingers on its audience long after the credits roll.

Anchoring the film is Mercedes Hernández's performance as Magdalena—whose devotion and determination to find her son is externalized by her every Sisyphean step down dusty abandoned roads or winding forest paths. Hernández speaks tenderly throughout — as *Identifying Features* unfurls, though, we learn this isn't out of Magdalena's initial fears or from being blindsided by the labyrinthine world of bureaucracy and violence she finds herself in. Rather, it's out of a deliberate effort to seize leads where she can and follow them to their end — lest Magdalena scare off the wrong person or leave a vital piece of evidence or advice unheeded. In a film full of important yet incredibly delicate subject matter, Hernández and writer-director Valadez ensure that Magdalena and *Identifying Features* retain just as much agency and nuance without falling prey to easy stereotypes or generalizations about border plight.

The same can be said of the film's two major supporting players. David Illescas' Miguel and Ana Laura Rodríguez's Olivia illustrate two widely different socioeconomic perspectives that, despite their own circumstances, find themselves just as wrapped up in the indiscriminating violence and danger of the border as Magdalena. Olivia is a seemingly affluent doctor whose son disappeared while on a drive to visit friends—and finds her search coming to an end just as Magdalena's begins. Olivia also pointedly has the financial and travel resources to keep up such a draining search—which only underscores Magdalena's relentlessness as she takes this arduous journey by foot, by bus, and eventually by shady boat crossing in the hopes that her son has avoided the same fate as Olivia's. The two women share the same unshakable bond towards their sons, though — and in their brief scene together it's as if a hope-lit torch is passed out of a shared moment of grief.

Miguel, as a further counterpoint, is a son on the opposite end of the search. After being deported back to Mexico, he crosses paths with Magdalena as he makes his way thorough dangerous gang-controlled territory to his home village—where he hopes his mother has managed to survive unscathed. The pair forge a surrogate parent/child bond of their own, through which Magdalena begins to piece together her son's deeper motivations for leaving her—while Miguel is forced to reckon with his own guilt in leaving his mother behind.

This ebb and flow of guilt and grief is manifested in *Identifying Features*' sparse yet evocative cinematography and editing, a credit to Claudia Becerril Bulos and the editing team of Valadez, Susan Korda, and Astrid Rondero, respectively. *Features*' frames are full of wisps of flame and dirt, as well as ever-shifting darkness and light — creating a world of oppressive, elemental change whose exact sources of heat and misery are difficult to target and extinguish.

Much like her almost cosmically-predestined encounters with Olivia and Miguel, *Identifying Features* still retains further figures to come into Magdalena's path — building to a climax that further underscores the random brutality at the heart of a conflict that seems as devoid of an ending as it does any sense at all. Valadez's direction, however, is much like her protagonist's determination — unwavering, headstrong, and willing to accept whatever truth can be salvaged at the end of the path. No matter how heartbreaking it may be.

Identifying Features is now playing in Virtual Cinemas courtesy of Kino Lorber. Support the efforts of the Austin Film Society and Kino Lorber by [getting screening tickets here.](#)

Cinema365

Identifying Features (Sin señas particulares)



Posted on [February 16, 2021](#)

Immigrants from south of the border have been demonized to the point of ridiculousness; not everyone who comes into the country from Mexico is illegal, not everyone that comes into this country is a criminal, not everyone who comes is illiterate. Most are just ordinary folks trying to make a better life for themselves and their families. I don't think anyone could possibly disagree with that instinct.

But this isn't a film about them. It's not easy or dangerous to migrate from Mexico's interior to the United States, and uncounted numbers of those who try to get to our border never arrive. They are kidnapped, robbed, raped and often murdered. For their families, it is as if they disappeared off the face of the earth.

Magdalena (Hernandez) had bid goodbye to her teenage son Jesus (Varela) and his best friend Rigo (A. Garcia) who were heading to Arizona where they hoped to find work. But months have

gone by and no word from either boy, nothing to say they'd arrived, nor a sign that they had returned. Magdalena and Rigo's mother Chuya (Ibarra) go to the authorities hoping to get some word, but the authorities either can't or won't help. Finally, begrudgingly, they are shown a book full of pictures of corpses that have been recovered – and to the horror of both women, there is Rigo. However, there's no certain proof that Jesus shared the same fate as Rigo. So as any good mother would do, Magdalena goes off in search of her son, trying to retrace his steps.

It is a dangerous journey, with corrupt officials, cartel killers and unscrupulous coyotes who would murder her in a heartbeat, but doggedly she tries. She gets some help along the way; a sympathetic receptionist at a hostel for migrants; another mother named Olivia (A.L. Rodriguez) who had been searching for her missing son for *four years* without any sort of word, and lastly from Miguel (Illescas) who had made it to the promised land and spent several years there, only to be captured and deported back to Mexico. Now he's hoping to reunite with his own mother, but there is no guarantees he will find her.

This is a unique look at the issues facing Mexican migrant workers; the looming threat of violence that hangs over every step of their journey and in fact has insinuated itself into all avenues of Mexican life, as well as the inability of those sources that would ordinarily aid them to provide any sort of protection or assistance. Valadez tells her story simply and starkly, without a lot of frills although there are a few and when they show up they are kind of jarring.

One thing Valadez and cinematographer Claudia Becerril have is a good eye; the shots are exquisitely framed and photographic effects are often utilized to illustrate subtle points (a flashback of the day Jesus informed Magdalena he was leaving is shot through a dirty glass window, giving a kind of faded patina to everything – but Jesus himself remains in sharp form, as if Magdalena's memory is beginning to fade). There is a little bit of Catholic mysticism here as well that shows very late in the movie and almost comes out of a different movie into this one.

The performances are naturalistic. Most of the cast and crew here are women, which is something to celebrate; this is definitely a mom-centric film and any mother's heart is going to ache for the women here as they wait interminably for word of their missing loved ones. Despite a modest budget, the technical proficiency of the movie stands out. The movie is often gripping and while it never has the emotional catharsis an American version might make of it, there is a quiet dignity that may change a few viewpoints about the Mexican people...in a perfect world. In the world we live in, however, stories like this are all too commonplace and too many Americans seem to think that those who disappear deserved what they got. That's the truly messed-up aspect of all of this.

REASONS TO SEE: Quietly suspenseful. Very powerful in places.

REASONS TO AVOID: The ending is a bit jarring.

FAMILY VALUES: There is violence, profanity and some disturbing images.

TRIVIAL PURSUIT: This was the directing debut for Valadez.

BEYOND THE THEATERS: [Virtual Cinema](#)

CRITICAL MASS: As of 2/16/21: Rotten Tomatoes: *100% positive reviews*, Metacritic: *85/100*.

COMPARISON SHOPPING: *El Norte*

FINAL RATING: **7.5/10**

NEXT: *Willy's Wonderland*

Last Full Show

Identifying Features Review: An Eye-opening Border Thriller

🕒 February 11, 2021 👁 68 views 🗒 0



Identifying Figures uses a modest family drama to show a different perspective to the border story.

The plot is one part slow-burn thriller and one part odyssey. As Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) tries to find her son, the story reveals a [humanitarian crisis in Mexico](#). When she meets a deportee named Miguel (David Illescas), we see the impact of this violence.

A tense undercurrent keeps the story intriguing. There are clear hints of cartel violence but it isn't spoken out loud. In one scene, a kind employee at the bus station gives Magdalena a clue through a door of a bathroom stall. Magdalena's journey takes you through a naturalistic setting of the Mexican countryside, interspersed with otherworldly images.

Cinematography and sound design use magical realism to portray the unease of Magdalena and what she's up against. Gang members are portrayed with horned silhouettes and tails against a backdrop of intense flames. After Magdalena finds out what happened, a reflection in a lake conjures the image of a world upside down.

Performances from the cast are good all around. The only thing that Magdalena and Miguel can do is to endure as long as they can. They can't defeat the cartel, but managing to live despite their presence can be a form of resistance.

The result is an artful and subdued yet haunting thriller driven by a nuanced voice. Director Fernanda Valadez wants to shed light on the violence that has flourished in her hometown. Her aim is to portray a journey that seems like a descent to hell and successfully achieves this in a road movie.

Identifying Features highlights a world that is subdued by such a malevolent force that they seem inhuman, where the government doesn't seem to care, and the people are browbeaten to accept all its chaos and loss.

The movie ends with a cruel plot twist that will make you gasp and leave you heartbroken. In this kind of world, there is only one outcome. Identifying Features is about the cycle of violence and the lengths people need to go to survive it.

‘Identifying Features’: Grand Illusion Cinema screens Fernanda Valadez’s heart-wrenching testament to hope in the migrant age

By Andy Chia The Daily Feb 10, 2021 0 2 min to read



“[Sin Señas Particulares](#)” — the original title of the film “Identifying Features” — does not refer to the bucolic plains of Northern Mexico or the journey by which countless young people travel to the United States in search of work. Rather, this phrase, which means “without identifying features,” refers to the process by which mothers try to identify their children in photographs taken by authorities.

Director Fernanda Valadez draws inspiration from that premise, telling the story of mothers who will never stop trying to identify and reunite with their children.

Current socio-economic circumstances which have led to the migration of children do not provide an adequate understanding as to what this film is about. The pain and loss of the mothers who have witnessed their children become victims of this complex mechanism is a uniquely burdensome form of grief.

Loss is a word with two conceits in this film. In one sense, loss is the insurmountable feeling of wailing at a loved one's grave, torn over the decisions by a deity or a universe so cruel as to take that loved one away. Loss is also that indescribable question of "Why me?" which is only punctuated by a tinge of hope when someone realizes their loved one may still be alive.

Within the first 10 minutes, both forms of loss are on display. While two mothers converse after a funeral, one (the protagonist, Magdalena) embraces the other. Heading on the road toward an identification center, she attempts to find her son, looking for clues of his fate. The other mother, Olivia, ends up in the same location, with similar hopes of locating her missing child.

Anguish does not begin to describe how it feels — for mothers and the viewer — to look at the articles of clothing of teenagers who are revealed to have been burned and buried in shallow graves. The circumstances by which someone finds their child in a body bag is just the beginning of a new turmoil that extends into a bureaucratic nightmare.

Identifying a body requires biological confirmation from the parents, because the bodies are often too decomposed or otherwise disfigured to be properly identified. Valadez never shies away from this reality. The danger faced by youth in the hopes of arriving in the United States is not the worst part of the journey — the ambiguity of waiting for a body to have the correct identifying features is what haunts those mothers who must wait for an answer.

Ambiguity persists for those who arrive in the United States and is the atmosphere of the border stations and detention centers that men like Miguel (Magdalena's son) encounter. Violence awaits him on the journey back into Mexico, as he confronts, time and again, the surreal and wanton murder of mayors and anyone who walks into a town held by gangs.

In their respective journeys, Magdalena and Miguel are united by an unwavering hope that leads the film into its third act. Dilapidated towns overtaken by nature give way to the mouth of a river, steeped in hope and fear, where mothers and sons must face the reality of violence and torture. The senseless rapids and dismal poverty of the area fuel the gangs, ultimately leading Magdalena to discover her son is alive but has fallen prey to the very forces that led him and others to journey to the United States.

Magdalena must make the choice to relinquish hope in a way that is different from other mothers in the film. There is no burial, but rather a pyre lit in the hearts and mind of the audience. Magdalena cannot save her son, so she must find a way to forget him.

Seventh Row

[ORLA SMITH](#) / FEBRUARY 11, 2021

'In Mexico, reality surpasses fiction': Fernanda Valadez and Astrid Rondero on *Identifying Features*

*Writer-director Fernanda Valadez and writer-producer Astrid Rondero discuss how the political climate in Mexico impacted *Identifying Features*.*



At Seventh Row, we pride ourselves on seeking out the best hidden gems that nobody's talking about to ensure that our readers never miss a great film again.

In the second scene of *Identifying Features*, the camera stays fixed on Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) and her friend in a police station as they plead for information on the whereabouts of their missing sons. Both boys left home to cross the border from Mexico to the US, and neither of the women have heard from either since. We never see the face of the man Magdalena and her friend are talking to, who eventually relents and hands the women a binder of photos of corpses that were found near the border. After a few minutes of flipping through pages, Magdalena's friend breaks down when she recognises her son's body; Magdalena is left sitting there, stunned, still unsure of what happened to her son or if she'll ever find out.

This is just one of several scenes in which writer-director Fernanda Valadez limits what we can see, focusing solely on Magdalena's face, which gives her importance in the frame even in scenes where authority figures treat her as unimportant. She travels to the border, determined to find her son, but wherever she turns, she's met with silence and people who see her as just another desperate person chasing a dead end. Along the way, she meets Miguel (David Illescas), a young migrant worker who was recently deported from the US back to Mexico, and who becomes a sort of son figure to Magdalena.

Valadez developed *Identifying Features* in a close creative collaboration with Astrid Rondero, who produced, co-wrote, and co-edited the film. The two have been collaborators since film school; both are directors, and they produce each other's films. I spoke with them over Zoom about the horrifying true stories that inspired *Identifying Features*, how they incorporated documentary elements into the shoot, and how their collaboration operates.

Seventh Row (7R): What was the genesis of *Identifying Features*?

Fernanda Valadez: We shot a short film in 2013 [called *400 Maletas*], so I already had the idea of a mother looking for her son, as well as the deported young man going back to Mexico. We had been researching a lot, and we had a lot of information. After the short film, I wasn't satisfied with the result. You can't put everything you want in twenty minutes. At that time, I was too shy to approach the characters.

We almost began from scratch [for the feature], rewriting the script together. We tried to give the story the sense of a broader humanitarian crisis, and a violence that was crossing social classes and wasn't just located in the rural communities of Mexico.

7R: What kind of research went into the script?

Astrid Rondero: We read a lot of works by different researchers and journalists. That was the base for the film. We had contacts with human rights organisations who work with a lot of families of victims, so we discussed if [focusing on one of those individual stories] was the way

we should go. We decided not to, because we didn't want to feel like we were using a specific case.

We started working with journalists in Mexico who themselves are victims of violence. It's one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist. That gave us the freedom to use different pieces of the tragedy we're living here to give a broader view of the humanitarian crisis that we are living.

7R: Could you tell me a bit about your creative collaboration? On a practical level, how do you approach devising and writing a script together?

Fernanda Valadez: I think we are very free. I wrote a version of the script, Astrid wrote another, then we read it out loud and write in the moment. It depends what we think the script needs. We write alone and together. If there's a particular scene that I thought I wasn't getting, I'll give it to Astrid.

Astrid Rondero: In this case, it really evolved as we were writing. A lot of things were happening in Mexico, so it was very difficult for us to not take pieces of those [real stories]. That made the writing process very long, but also very free. In Mexico, reality surpasses fiction.

7R: What does your collaboration look like when it comes to actually shooting the film? To what extent do you work together when making creative choices on set?

Astrid Rondero: When you're working with a producer that is so close to the material, you're always thinking about how to tackle certain aspects that are really related to the budget.

I think a lot about that scene with the truck and the corpses. In the script, it was written as a regular morgue. When we were starting the pre-production part of the film, it was impossible to hire one of those places. At the same time, there was terrible news in Guadalajara, a big city here in Mexico, where they discovered a refrigerator truck packed with corpses that was there for a long period of time, and it began to smell really terrible. People around called the police thinking it was the drug cartels hiding corpses there, and they realised, with horror, that it was the government itself that didn't have space to put the bodies of victims of crimes. That news helped us to, at that point when I was producing, [to decide to] write the scene in this other way. When you're working as a creative producer, it helps a lot.

Fernanda Valadez: It really made us a creative team. Even though I'm the director and Astrid's the producer, and we're co-writers, the film really belongs to both of us in terms of authorship.

7R: How did you collaborate with Mercedes Hernández to craft the character of Magdalena?

Fernanda Valadez: She was also the actress in the short film, so the work we did then really helped us to have the ground to begin to do something different [with the feature]. She's also a very politically and socially active person, so she was constantly researching the mothers of missing people. She had some conversations [with real people in that situation].

I tried to work differently from what we did in the short film. In the feature, we were working with a lot of non-professional actors. I tried to work with less words, less concepts, and less intellectual work. It was more about finding motivations [for each scene] to create emotional atmospheres.

She [Hernández] didn't know much more than the non-professional actors. They could be in the same universe. That might have been a bit frustrating for her, because I think actors like having conversations with directors and creating the character from that intellectual perspective, but I was convinced that this was the way. I think when she saw the film, she appreciated the result.

7R: How did you collaborate with cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos to devise the film's aesthetic?

Fernanda Valadez: She's just an incredible person to work with, very easy going and generous. I think she has the best of two worlds, because she has a lot of experience shooting documentaries. She's very agile and in the moment. She helped the scenes evolve when we were shooting in documentary situations, like in the shelter for migrants. We were very playful. Because our project was very tight [on time and budget], we'd just do crazy stuff like, we only have candles, or the light of the fire, so what can we do?

7R: You said you were shooting in some documentary situations. Were you using real people and places?

Astrid Rondero: Yeah, for instance, the scene of the crossing was completely documentary style: Fernanda, the DP Claudia, and the actor [David Illescas], on the other side of the border. They had all the permits and letters saying [what they were doing].

Another thing about Claudia is she doesn't think that the result [of an image] is linked to the equipment you use. She's open to use any camera and make the best of it. That helped us a lot, especially in those kinds of situations.

7R: The film is full of these gorgeous, kind of iconic images, even though what they're conveying is really horrific. How did you think about how to visually portray violence and trauma?

Fernanda Valadez: That was a discussion we had from an early draft of the script. We were wondering where to let the audience know about the violence. We decided to give the audience partial knowledge of the violence that was going on, so we could feel the experience of this mother making a journey into the unknown. That decision was kind of like a beacon light.

At some point, I was going astray, showing too many details of violence in some scenes. When I made one rewrite, it almost became pornographic. One of Astrid's brilliant ideas was to use visual metaphors for evil. [For example, in one scene, instead of seeing graphic details of murder, we see the silhouette of a devil set against the light of a campfire.] We could experience terror but not make use of the gory details of the violent event.

Astrid Rondero: Which takes away the humanity of the experience. [When you see graphic violence,] it becomes so shocking that you feel it's not so human anymore. In Mexico, the violence is very graphic.

7R: Partway through, the film reveals itself to have two main characters, as we briefly switch perspectives to follow Miguel. Why did you choose to follow two characters together, rather than just staying with Magdalena?

Astrid Rondero: That was something that Fernanda had decided from the very beginning. She wanted to do a mirror of the son with this other man that returns years after. In our previous film, we also had that same idea.

We like to explore how the people we love somehow transform into the people you later know. The short film before felt too small, like we were telling just that story. With the feature, we wanted to tell how the situation in Mexico is touching all layers of society.

7R: I understand that the two of you co-edited the film along with another editor, Susan Korda. What does that collaboration look like?

Fernanda Valadez: I have to say, I'm not a good editor.

Astrid Rondero: [Laughs, shakes head]

Fernanda Valadez: I cut the first two cuts, then Astrid jumped in. Astrid is a much better editor than I am.

Astrid Rondero: I've edited more films than Fernanda, that's it. The good thing is she had more freedom of time to edit. When she had a second cut, I jumped in and fixed the middle part and the ending. At some point, when you're editing, you just get stuck, which is why it's good to edit in pairs or a trio.

Susan Korda is an editor herself and our mentor. We met her at the Berlinale Talents years ago. She's edited everything we've directed. Susan knows us so well that she knows how to find a balance between my speed and her [Fernanda's] speed. Fernanda's first cut was too long. Susan found a negotiation between my time and her time, and in doing that, she found the right rhythm for the film.

7R: How did you approach the sound design in *Identifying Features*?

Fernanda Valadez: We both enjoy thinking about sound. I learned from Astrid, when we were students, how to write a script thinking about sound. The orthodox format is more for images. There's no format for sound like there is for dialogue. So when I read her scripts, as a student, I realised it was so important, because then you could think about what you were seeing and listening to. You don't necessarily hear what you are seeing.

We were thinking about sound when we were writing. Because we had decided to be very partial about what was in front of the camera, what you hear became important. It was giving you more dramatic information. When the sound designer jumped in on the conversation and many of the scenes really grew from his input. Some of the most important scenes changed.

7R: In what ways did sound change some of the scenes?

Fernanda Valadez: For example, at the end, when Magdalena and Miguel run out of the house and hide in the brush. We didn't write [in the script] how they would communicate. [The sound designer] had the idea of using whistling. They recorded that and showed it to us.

Astrid Rondero: That scene completely grew after that.

7R: What are you working on next?

Astrid Rondero: We're in financing for our next feature. I'm going to be the one directing, but it's a script we wrote together. It's about an orphan from the cartels. It's like a coming-of-age film, but instead of him turning into a criminal, he turns into something very different. It's a little brighter than what we've done before.

Fernanda Valadez: We are doing interviews in Mexico as well as the US, and in an interview, a journalist asked Astrid about this coming feature. We told her the synopsis and he said, "Well, that's science fiction." We want to be hopeful and not to think that the destiny of this generation has to be violence.

Watch Identifying Features in virtual cinemas in Canada and the US.

Bill's Media Commentary

Reviews of films, television series, plays, musical compositions and performances

“Identifying Features”: harrowing drama of a mother in Mexico looking for son lost to trying to enter US illegally (or maybe to drug cartel)



billsme

February 14, 2021

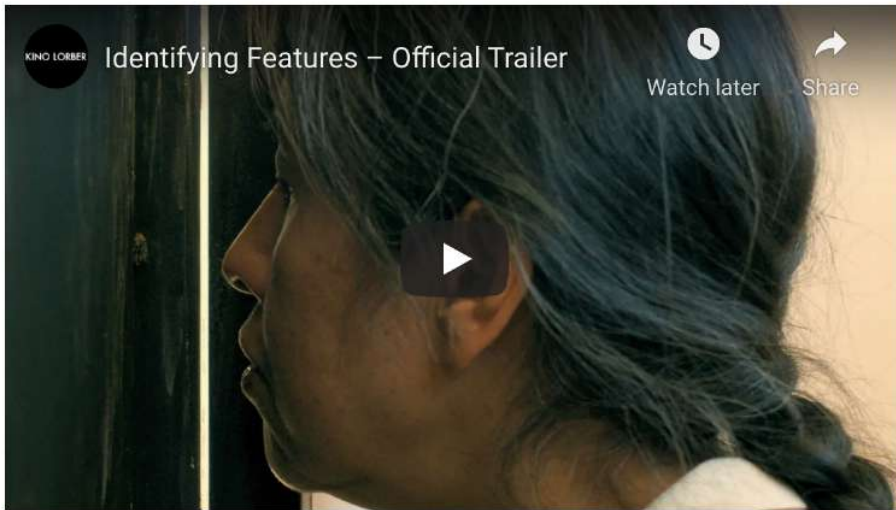
B-Movies, criminal justice problems, drugs, foreign language, immigration, migrants, Sundance

Kino Lorber



“Identifying Features” (*“Sin senas particulares”*), directed by Fernanda Valadez and written with Astrid Rondero, at Sundance in 2020, will be a timely release as the Biden administration becomes more reasonable about immigration.

Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), a shopkeeper with no phone in a small Mexican town, has reason to believe her adolescent son Jesus (Juan Jesus Varela) may have perished trying to enter the US illegally, at the hands of a drug cartel.



Officials believe they have found the body, but she insists on not signing because the identifying features don't match (including a white spot on his forehead). She is told she risks her son's being buried in a communal grave and never identified.

She goes on a journey north to look.

At the same time, Miguel (David Illescas) a teenager about the same age and appearance as Jesus, re-enters the US "voluntarily" after deportation, and tries to survive the drug cartels.

Magdalena and Miguel eventually come into contact, leading to a violent nighttime conflict with the cartel. Magdalena wants to "adopt" Miguel as her son and take him back. The climax has supernatural dreams of the devil (with a tale) and odd shots of reflections in ponds and water to look alien.

Drug raid in Matamoros, [wiki](#).

2021-02-15 09:26:06- Nuestratele Internacional

“Sin señas particulares” se encuentra disponible en salas selectas y cines virtuales de Estados Unidos gracias a Kino Lorber



La película México-española “Sin señas particulares”, que en inglés se titula “Identifying Features”, tuvo su debut en la edición 2020 del Festival de Cine de Sundance, donde se llevó el premio de la audiencia y el premio especial del jurado a mejor guion.

Hace unas semanas, obtuvo el premio Gotham a mejor película internacional, estatuilla que se suma a muchos otros reconocimientos importantes en las muestras de San Sebastián, Zúrich, Morelia y Salónica entre otros.

Recientemente, la compañía Kino Lorber adquirió los derechos de distribución del film en los Estados Unidos y por ello se encuentra disponible en salas selectas y cines virtuales del país desde el mes pasado.

La producción dirigida por Fernanda Valadez y escrita por ella al lado de Astrid Rondero, cuenta la historia de Magdalena, una mujer madura que ha perdido contacto con su hijo luego de que este y un amigo partieran de Guanajuato con la intención de cruzar la frontera con Estados Unidos de manera ilegal.

Desesperada por encontrarlo y saber qué le ocurrió, Magdalena emprende un viaje peligroso para descubrir esa verdad. Al mismo tiempo, un hombre joven llamado Miguel ha regresado a México luego de ser deportado de los Estados Unidos. Su camino se topa con el de Magdalena.

El elenco está compuesto por Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez, Laura Helena Ibarra y Xicoténcatl Ulloa.

Nuestra Tele Internacionala

'Identifying Features' Chilling / 'One Night in Miami' Compelling

FILM REVIEW

By ohtadmin | on January 28, 2021

By Loren King



Mercedes Hernández stars in the powerful Mexico-set drama "Identifying Features," available from the Jane Pickens Theater.

Fernanda Valadez's feature directorial debut, "**Identifying Features**," is the most captivating and chilling film about Mexican border violence and injustice that I have seen in some time, except for the recent documentary, "Blood on the Wall," which is streaming from [nationalgeographic.com](https://www.nationalgeographic.com).

But Valadez's film, now available from the Jane Pickens Theater, stands out because of its lean, haunting story (written by Valadez and Astrid Rondero) and visuals that are alternately beautiful and terrifying.

It's at once a pastoral film and horror movie, so it comes as no surprise that it won the Audience Award and Best Screenplay prizes at the Sundance Film Festival.

In a performance rooted in neorealist tradition, Mercedes Hernández is quietly commanding and completely natural as a weary mother named Magdalena. She leaves her home in rural Mexico to search for her son, Jesus (Juan Jesús Varela), missing since he left for the border with a friend who has since turned up dead.

Magdalena's desperate search is a tense investigation into what routinely happens to Mexicans trying to get to the U.S. border to find work. We stay with Magdalena as she doggedly crosses barren fields and sunlit rivers. Her search turns from frustrating to promising to horrifying. She crosses paths with Miguel (David Illescas), a young man who has returned to Mexico after being deported from the U.S. Magdalena becomes a mother figure to him as the story deepens and comes to a nightmarish full circle.

This sparse, lyrical, but unsentimental film unfolds slowly and deliberately into a visceral gutpunch, showing what's at stake for poor, rural Mexicans whose land has been overtaken by lawless, marauding drug cartels. The cumulative impact is stunning and heart-wrenching.

Emmy and Oscar-winning actress Regina King makes her feature directing debut with **“One Night in Miami”** (Amazon Prime) and proves she is as proficient behind the camera as she is in front of it, creating an operatic ensemble piece.

Adapted by Kemp Powers from his 2013 stage play, the action is set on the single night of Feb. 25, 1964. It's the night that Cassius Clay (Eli Goree) won the world heavyweight championship at age 22 by defeating Sonny Liston in a title bout at the Miami Beach Convention Center. Clay then meets up to celebrate at the Hampton House Hotel with three friends who are also in town, Malcolm X (Kingsley Ben-Adir); football legend Jim Brown (Aldis Hodge); and singer Sam Cooke (Leslie Odom, Jr.).

The compact, single room setting and time frame expands rather than limits the drama. We get to hear the four characters, each at a crossroads in their lives, as they wrestle with fame, racial injustice and personal ambition. They talk, argue, tease one another and even sing. King allows these virtuosic performances to flourish. Moments of levity and tension, verbal fireworks, vulnerabilities and macho bravado reveal each character as he deals with his life in that moment.

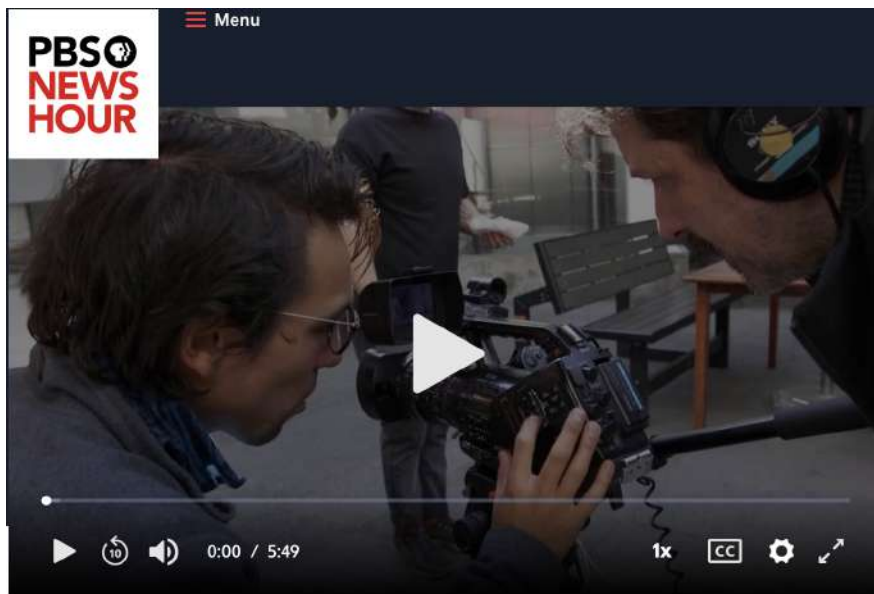
Malcolm X is about to break with the Nation of Islam; Clay plans to declare he's a Muslim and wants to be known as Muhammed Ali; Brown weighs life after the NFL and offers from Hollywood; and Cooke defends his performing for white audiences by recounting the ways in which he promotes and helps advance Black musicians and songwriters.

The acting is masterful as all four men go beyond what we know about these historical figures to deliver their contradictions and quirks, their psyches and defenses. By the time Cooke launches into one of his signature songs, “A Change Is Gonna Come,” with a tour de force performance by “Hamilton” star Odom, the night has come full circle and we see each character both within and transcending their moment in time.



What global success of Mexican filmmakers means for the next generation at home

Nov 23, 2020 8:25 PM EST



Mexico has a rich history of cinema. But in recent years, a number of Mexican filmmakers have found remarkable success on the international stage. For Canvas, our ongoing arts and culture series, Jeffrey Brown shares a story produced before the widespread international response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Read the Full Transcript

Fernanda Valadez:

It's part of our reality. Film and art in general can be enjoyable in a way. It's not entertaining, but can still be enjoyable, because you have an emotional connection through art.

Jeffrey Brown:

She says the success of the Three Amigos has paved a path for Mexican filmmakers. There's now even an expectation at international film festivals.

Fernanda Valadez:

It's like being perhaps an American that goes to the Olympics, and, oh, it's American, so it's a good athlete.

Jeffrey Brown:

Yes.

Fernanda Valadez:

So, for filmmakers, if you're Mexican, oh, you must be a good filmmaker if you're Mexican. But then every generation wants to make something different, of course. It's good for us to think about doing films in Mexico. And perhaps our generation can change that.

Jeffrey Brown:

Mexico's most famous directors remain active, working on new films, with a new generation already finding its own success.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown in Mexico City.



SEVEN FILMS TO SEE AT NEW DIRECTORS/NEW FILMS 2020

 December 11, 2020



While the list of legendary film festivals with incredible pedigrees seems to be growing ever so quickly, few film festivals have the sheer history within their alumni as Film At Lincoln Center and the Museum Of Modern Art's New Directors/New Films. Names like Fassbinder, Akerman, Bi Gan and even the likes of Spike Lee and Kelly Reichardt have all been associated with this annual collection of films, all from filmmakers at the very earliest stages of their careers. One of the most exciting and exhilarating collections of films within any given year, New Directors/New Films 2020 is no change in that history. And these are just seven of the incredible films from this year's lineup that you need to keep an eye on.

3. Identifying Features



The proverbial bronze medal here goes to *Identifying Features*. Directed by Fernanda Valadez, this film tells the story of two people, caught on the outskirts of society, as they attempt to find missing connections in their own lives through one another. The film introduces viewers to Magdalena, a middle aged mother attempting to find her son after he disappeared following a journey across the border to find work. Then there is Miguel, a young man himself who has recently been deported back to Mexico. The two find solace in one another, particularly as the journey to find Magdalena's son becomes one of increasing danger. At points deeply intimate and moving and others utterly harrowing, Valadez's film is a haunting work of empathy and humanity. Owing a debt to the increasing strain of hybrid cinema found within the world of modern independent/art filmmaking, *Identifying Features* is a film of both beauty and desperation, a film embracing raw, human performances in a manner as to both evolve a compelling narrative and hit at larger truths about life, loss and the blind eye we as a society turn to a pandemic of murder at our borders.

THE PLAYLIST



52 Films Directed By Women To Watch In 2021

👤 Lena Wilson 🕒 January 13, 2021 12:49 pm 📁 Features, News

“Identifying Features”

Director: Fernanda Valadez

Cast: Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez

Synopsis: A mother travels across Mexico in search of her son, who authorities say died while trying to cross the border into the United States.

What You Need To Know: This wrenching drama, co-written by Valadez and **Astrid Rondero**, won the Audience Award in the World Cinema Dramatic category and the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Best Screenplay at last year’s Sundance Film Festival. Vulture calls it “one of several powerful films about immigration to come out of Mexico in recent years,” as well as “quite possibly the most despairing.” Inspired by the real-life epidemic of immigrants who die or go missing on their journeys, this crucial film could not be more relevant. Grab some tissues and catch it when it premieres on **Kino Marquee**.

Release Date: January 22, via Kino Marquee.



A look at the border hell of acclaimed Mexican movie: 'Sin señas particulares'

Director Fernanda Valadez makes her debut with a drama about the drug-controlled "Parallel State" and trafficking on the border that has critics excited.

By Beatriz García

December 08,
2020

Magdalena has lost "her treasure" somewhere on the U.S.-**Mexico** border. Under a sun of justice, she searches for her son, but on her way, she comes across another boy who is returning home after being deported and cannot find his mother.

Separated families and disappeared young people in the context of drug cartels and an indifferent government are the ingredients of the debut feature film of Mexican Fernanda Valadez. The story she recreates is not at all dystopian, but rather, rooted in the drama of violence that is being experienced in Mexico today.

It's a country where the death toll is relentless at the moment.

In 2020 alone, 4,960 people have been registered as missing, and most were between 15 and 30 years old, largely due to organized crime. However, the statistics do not show the pain of the

stories — they do not have face — which is why films like *Sin Señas Particulares* (*With no particular signs*) break the fourth wall and pull us into reality.

However, the film also brings a ray of hope. It's a cinematographic journey to a dusty hell sown with pain that has earned it the applause of critics at some of the most renowned international festivals.

Sin señas particulares has won awards such as the "Audience and Special Jury Award for Best Screenplay" at the Sundance Film Festival; the "Best Film Award" in the 'Horizons' section of the San Sebastian Film Festival and the "Golden Eye for Best International Feature Film" at the Zurich Film Festival.

"You can always ask yourself why we are killing ourselves in Mexico," Valadez told *La Vanguardia*.

One of the biggest debates that the director and screenwriter Astrid Rondero had to face is whether or not they should get into the causes of who or what is killing the young people, whose only sin — if any — is to try to reach the United States.

For Fernanda Valadez, "the drug trade, the murders of women, the fuel trade, and the disappearances and kidnappings at the hands of **immigration traffickers** are all interconnected" in a network, she says, that has created a new slavery. Where migrants are an important part of the business, "those who don't carry money or can't get it from their relatives in the north are part of the victims," she says.

But the Mexican film also brings a ray of hope, as it reflects the solidarity that exists among the families of the disappeared and how they organize for power against corrupt institutions.



El infierno fronterizo de la aclamada película mexicana 'Sin señas particulares'

La directora Fernanda Valadez debuta con este drama sobre el "Estado Paralelo" controlado por el narco y la trata en la frontera que ha entusiasmado a la crítica.

Por Beatriz
García

Diciembre 08,
2020

Magdalena ha perdido a "su tesoro" en algún lugar en la frontera de México con Estados Unidos. Bajo un sol de justicia, busca a su hijo, pero en su camino se cruza con otro chico que vuelve a casa tras haber sido deportado y no encuentra a su madre.

Familias separadas y jóvenes desaparecidos en un feroz escenario donde el crimen súper organizado impone su propia ley sin que el Estado haga nada para evitarlo de verdad son los ingredientes de la ópera prima de la mexicana Fernanda Valadez, que recrea una historia que no tiene nada de distópica sino que está enraizada en el drama de la violencia que se vive hoy en día en **México**.

Un país donde el conteo de muertes es incesante: sólo en este año 2020, se registraron 4.960 desaparecidos y la mayoría tenían entre 15 y 30 años, en buena parte a causa del crimen organizado. Sin embargo, las estadísticas no muestran el dolor de las historias -no tienen caras-,

por ello películas como *Sin señas particulares* rompen la cuarta pantalla y nos jalan a la realidad.

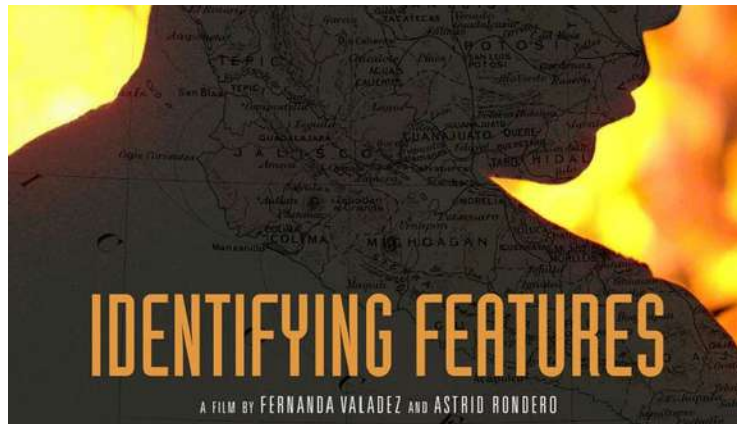
Aunque también aporte un rayo de esperanza. Un viaje cinematográfico a un infierno polvoriento sembrado de dolor que le ha valido a la mexicana el aplauso de la crítica en algunos de los más reputados festivales internacionales:

Sin señas particulares ha ganado premios como los del Público y Especial del Jurado al Mejor Guión en el Festival de Sundance; el Premio a la Mejor Película en la sección Horizontes del certamen de San Sebastián o el Ojo Dorado al Mejor Largometraje Internacional en el Festival de Zúrich.

“Siempre cabrá preguntarse por qué en México nos estamos matando”, dice Valadez a *La Vanguardia*. Ya que uno de los mayores debates a los que la directora y la guionista Astrid Rondero tuvieron que afrontar es si debían entrar o no en las causas de quién o quiénes están asesinando a los jóvenes, cuyo único pecado -si es que lo es- es tratar de llegar de forma clandestina a los Estados Unidos.

Para Fernanda Valadez, “el narco, los asesinatos de mujeres, el tráfico de combustible y las desapariciones y secuestros a manos de los tratantes de la emigración están interconectados” en una red que, asegura, ha creado una nueva esclavitud. Y donde los migrantes son parte importante del negocio, “quienes no llevan dinero o no pueden sacárselo a sus familiares en el norte son parte de las víctimas”, sostiene.

Pero la cinta mexicana aporta también un rayo de esperanza, ya que refleja la solidaridad que existe entre las familias de los desaparecidos y cómo se organizan para ir a su encuentro.



'Identifying Features' is a new thriller that unveils the horror behind the quest at the border

Mexican director Fernanda Valadez and Astrid Rondero lead an important female cast to present their take on the border debate.

By Albert Gomez

January 14, 2021

The affection of a mother can be such a malleable force, especially if it's over a child that has disappeared and when even the police don't listen to reason. That is the drama that *Identifying Features* explores through many branches and in the form of an intense thriller and social drama.

The premiere of the show will be on Jan. 22 and multi-platform. It can be seen streaming at [Kino Marquee](#) and in movie theaters across the country, including New York's Lincoln Center and Los Angeles' Laemmle Virtual Cinema.

The story follows Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) as she tracks her son's disappearance at the U.S. border while confronting the ruins, remnants, and flashes of horror with intense imagery from the hundreds of similar cases.

Another branch of the film follows Miguel (David Illescas), who has just been deported. Both characters' stories converge on the border as a political and social entity that, almost like a monster in a fantasy film, devours and transforms lives.

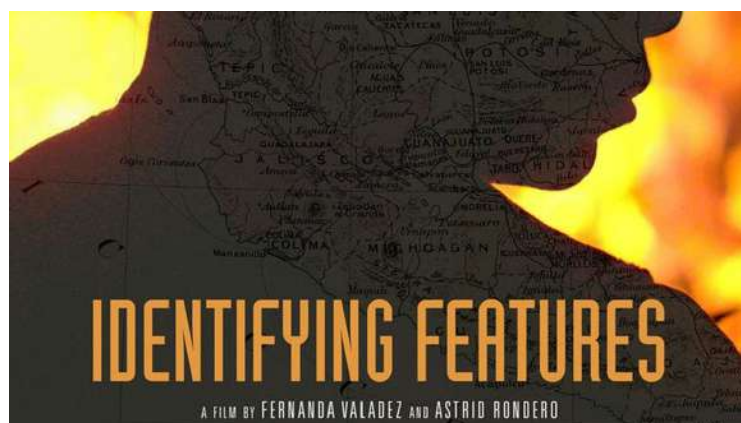
The film is produced by Kino Lorber and directed by Fernanda Valadez (1981), a well-known Mexican director who won numerous international awards for her short film *De este mundo*. *Identifying Features* is the current winner of the Gotham Award for "Best International Feature."

The script was written thanks to a grant from the Young Artist of the Mexican Fund for the Arts (FONCA) by Astrid Rondero, also a Mexican producer and director with an illustrious career (*Los días más oscuros de nosotras*, *400 maletas*).

Both have a filmography that presents social fiction in intense genres that compete with the accelerated pace of international trends.

Earlier in the week, another **series**, *Coyote*, premiered which also seeks to reinvent the imaginary of the border, emphasizing that it has already become a symbol and narrative trope, and a metaphor for the paranoia and the states.

In this case, the metaphor is also confronted as an overwhelming void, a source of unanswered questions that can fall from many directions, hence the notes of horror and thriller that contribute to his proposal.



El horror de la búsqueda en el thriller “Sin señas particulares”

La directora mexicana Fernanda Valadez dirige *Sin Señales Particulares*, una particular propuesta sobre el debate de las fronteras.

Por Albert
Gomez

Enero 14, 2021

Puede que todos nos parezcamos de espaldas y que al afecto de una madre sea una fuerza tan maleable que pueda expandirse pero lo cierto es que quienes acaban desapareciendo cumplen con un perfil muy concreto. Desaparecer de verdad, cuando ni tan siquiera la policía escucha razones. Ese es el drama que en varias direcciones explora “Sin señas particulares” en forma de intenso thriller y drama social.

El estreno es el 22 de enero y totalmente multiplataformas. Podrá verse en streaming en [Kino Marquee](#) y presencialmente en cines por todo el país, incluyendo el Lincoln Center de Nueva York o los Laemmle theaters de Los Angeles.

La historia sigue a Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) siguiendo la desaparición de su hijo en la frontera con Estados Unidos mientras se enfrenta a ruinas y vestigios, destellos de horror con una intensa fotografía, de los centenares de casos similares.

En otra dirección opera Miguel (David Illescas) que justo acaba de ser deportado. Ambas direcciones confluyen en una historia de la frontera como ente político y social que, casi como un monstruo de una película de fantasía, devora y transforma vidas.

El film es propuesta de la productora Kino Lorber que cuenta con la dirección de la consolidada directora mexicana Fernanda Valadez (1981), reconocida por el corto *De este mundo* y numerosos premios internacionales. Por el momento es la ganadora del Gotham Award for Best International Feature.

El guion fue escrito gracias a una beca de Young Artist of the Mexican Fund for the Arts (FONCA) junto a Astrid Rondero, también productora y directora mexicana con importante trayectoria (*Los días más oscuros de nosotras*, *400 maletas*). Ambas con una filmografía que apuesta por la ficción social presentada en intensos géneros que así puedan competir con el acelerado ritmo de las corrientes internacionales.

Esta misma semana informábamos también del estreno de una **serie** que buscaba reinventar el imaginario de la frontera haciendo énfasis en que ésta se ha convertido ya en un símbolo y tropo narrativo, metáfora de la paranoia y la dermis de los estados.

En este caso enfrentada la metáfora también como un vacío abrumador, una fuente de preguntas sin respuestas al que puede caerse desde muchas direcciones, de ahí las notas de horror y thriller que aportan a su propuesta.



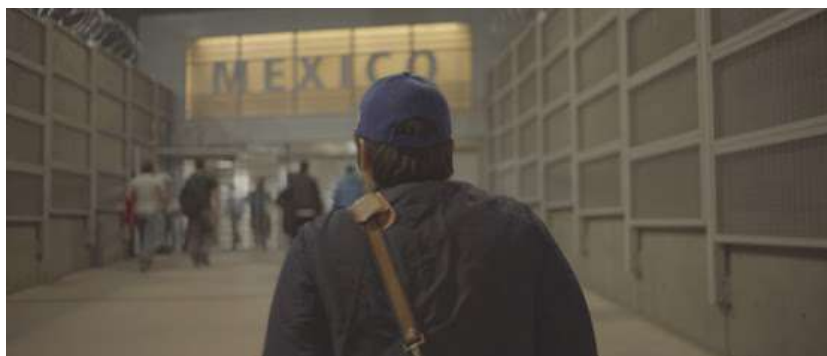
FERNANDA VALADEZ'S 'IDENTIFYING FEATURES:' AN INTIMATE, HEARTBREAKING LOOK AT THE IMMIGRATION CRISIS — MOVIE REVIEW

 Christine Burnham

There are many films that deal with the crisis on the U.S./Mexican border, but none that have hit me with quite such a punch in the gut as Fernanda Valadez's new film, *Identifying Features*.

Synopsis:

Identifying Features tells the story of middle-aged Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), who has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the U.S., in hopes of finding work. Desperate to find out what happened to him — and to know whether or not he's even alive — she embarks on an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous journey to discover the truth.



Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez: *Dos Veces Tu*), a worried mother, sets off in search of her son, Jesus (Juan Jesus Varela), when he goes missing after boarding a bus on his way to America. Border authorities show her his bag, which was found in a shallow grave next to a friend he was traveling with. They tell her son is probably dead. Magdalena doggedly refuses to accept that, needing to know for sure. Along the way, she meets Miguel (David Illescas: *Here on Earth* TV series), a boy just deported from the U.S. Together, they search for the truth. But is it really better to know the entire truth or to simply live wondering?

This is a film of quiet, subtle power. Besides Magdalena and Miguel, there seems to be no traces of humanity here. The photography is absolutely gorgeous—a stark contrast against the horrors that play out in the land. It's a world full of drug cartel violence, hijackers, and others looking to prey on the innocent. Mercedes Hernandez is an absolute powerhouse as a mother who refuses to give up on her son.

Identifying Features is a slow burn, but it has a great payoff at the end. Absolutely everyone, regardless of their political views, should see this film. It will open in select theatres nationwide on Friday, January 22, 2021.



COMING SOON TO VIRTUAL THEATERS: FERNANDA VALADEZ'S 'IDENTIFYING FEATURES'

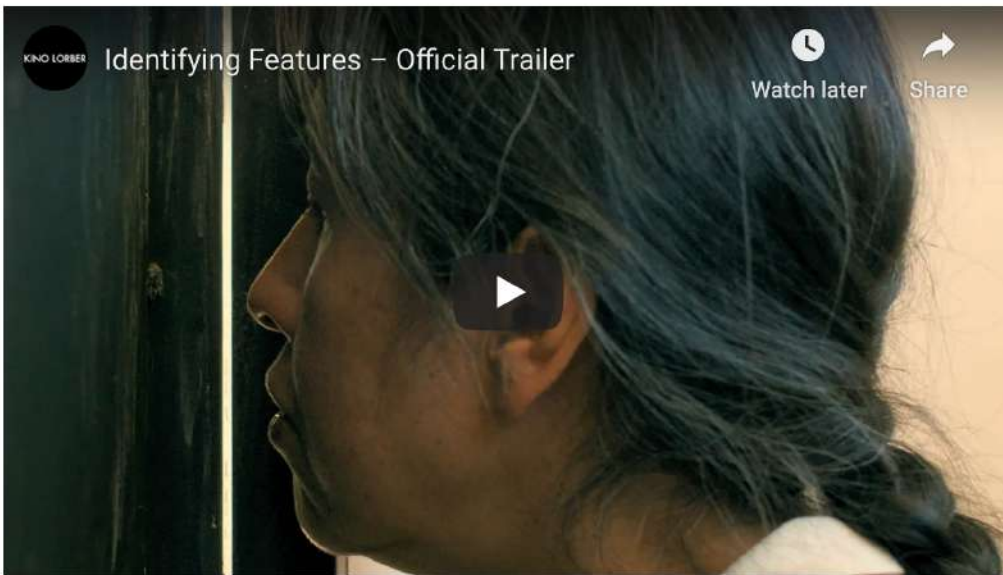
Christine Burnham

Coming soon to virtual theaters nationwide is a thriller directed by Fernanda Valadez (*400 Maletas*) called ***Identifying Features***. The film stars Mercedes Hernandez (*Todo en juego*), David Illescas (*Here on Earth*), and Juan Jesus Varela. It will be available on January 22, 2021.

Synopsis:

Identifying Features tells the story of middle-aged Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), who has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the U.S., in hopes of finding work. Desperate to find out what happened to him — and to know whether or not he's even alive — she embarks on an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous journey to discover the truth.

Check out the trailer below:





SCREEN TIME

Full Stream Ahead: Dave Franco's horror debut, Budapest's best film of the year and, you guessed it, Frank Stallone

BARRY HERTZ >

PUBLISHED JANUARY 21, 2021

With movie theatres reopening and then closing and then who-knows-what, there is comfort in knowing that, thanks to streaming and video-on-demand, we can all program our own double (or triple, or quadruple) bills at home. Here are this week's best new digital releases.

Identifying Features, **digital TIFF Bell Lightbox**



Fernanda Valadez's debut feature *Identifying Features* is coming to the digital TIFF Bell Lightbox.

A rebuke to the streaming world's unceasing flow of narco-thrillers, director Fernanda Valadez's debut feature offers a more nuanced, humane look at Mexico's migration crisis. Tracing twin narratives – one involving a mother's (Mercedes Hernandez) search for her border-destined son, another following a young man's (David Illescas) deportation from the U.S. – *Identifying Features* finds drama not in guns and shootouts, but smaller everyday tragedies. While the details of Valadez's world can be vague at times, and the filmmaker is no fan of dialogue, *Identifying Features* is an intriguing corrective to cinema that treats Mexico as little more than a land of cheap thrills.

Plan your screen time with the weekly What to Watch newsletter. Sign up today.



Reseña – Sin Señas Particulares (Identifying Features)



POR RENÉ SÁNCHEZ

enero 21, 2021

“Me voy a ir con Rigo”, le dice Jesús a su madre mientras aguarda al filo de la puerta de su vivienda. Ante la falta de oportunidades y la creciente ola de violencia que arrecia por todos los rincones del territorio mexicano, el adolescente ha decidido partir rumbo a Arizona, con la esperanza de encontrar un futuro más próspero del otro lado de la frontera. Han pasado dos meses desde aquella melancólica despedida entre los pastizales cubiertos por una densa capa de neblina, y Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) no ha vuelto a escuchar de su hijo. Lo último que se supo fue que éste abordó un autobús de pasajeros con dirección al norte del país, para después desaparecer sin dejar rastro alguno.

Sin Señas Particulares (Identifying Features), la ópera prima de la directora Fernanda Valadez, nos conduce a través del doloroso calvario que vive Magdalena, el mismo que tristemente ha sido recorrido por tantas madres mexicanas en años recientes. Ante la indiferencia y la negligencia de las autoridades, la protagonista decide tomar la investigación de los hechos por su propia cuenta, embarcándose en una incansable búsqueda por la franja fronteriza con tal de encontrar a su hijo desaparecido.

El guion, escrito por Valadez y Astrid Rondero, se aparta del típico drama que explora tanto los efectos de la migración, como de la violencia que se vive actualmente en México. Es a través de la sutil pero sumamente expresiva mirada de su protagonista, interpretada con gran fuerza por la actriz Mercedes Hernández, que observamos ambas temáticas desde la perspectiva de aquellos que se quedan atrás, en espera de noticias o de una resolución. Historias de pueblos fantasmas y familias fracturadas, de sueños sin cumplir y de una justicia inexistente.

Con un ritmo contemplativo y con un estilo que contrasta la belleza de los paisajes naturales del occidente mexicano con los horrores de una sanguinaria guerra que ha arrebatado la vida a miles de víctimas inocentes, **Sin Señas Particulares** reflexiona de una forma lírica sobre los demonios que andan sueltos por el país, actuando a plena luz del día y bajo el cobijo de las mismas autoridades. Un imperdible, poderoso y conmovedor debut cinematográfico.

Sin Señas Particulares (Identifying Features) estará disponible a partir del 22 de enero del 2021 a la renta a través del cine virtual del ***Grand Illusion Cinema*** en Seattle, o en ***Kino Marquee*** en distintas sedes virtuales de la Unión Americana.

Calificación: ****

Título original: Sin Señas Particulares (Identifying Features)

Año: 2020

País: México, España

Dirige: Fernanda Valadez

Con: Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas y Juan Jesús Varela



CINEPHILIA. PH

Movie Review: 'Identifying Features' (2020)

JANUARY 27, 2021 • Posted in [REVIEWS](#), [WORLD CINEMA FILM REVIEWS](#) • Tagged [DAVID ILLESCAS](#), [DRAMA](#), [FERNANDA VALADEZ](#), [IDENTIFYING FEATURES](#), [KINO LORBER](#), [MERCEDES HERNANDEZ](#), [MOVIE REVIEWS](#)



REVIEW BY LOUIE BAHAROM (ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON HIS PERSONAL LETTERBOXD ACCOUNT BUT WITH MINOR REVISIONS)

Year Released: 2020

Directed by Fernanda Valadez

Genre: Drama

Mexico/Spain

Valadez' creation announces itself as a dedicated, cathartic piece of storytelling simultaneously nationalistic and personal.

War in and of itself is a savage; a remorseless entity pressing its weight on a nation's collective body and psyche. History tells us that the past remains in the present, but more vile and cruel is how much the present can feel so much like the past that the future stands uncertain and dim. Stories about immigration to America to sow dreams and reap the fruits of their labor seem to merely be fairytales in Fernanda Valadez' IDENTIFYING FEATURES. Nothing more but myths

shrouded in enigmas nevertheless clarified by the nature of the deeds and unlawful laws of the forces in operation confining their victims in torment. Yet it's a myth that every (aspiring/persevering) immigrant ought to prove false — only for some to befall a fate harkening back to their predecessors'. A cycle is what they're caught in, and reason as to why is how some lands fail to nurture and breed hope in the face of oppression — even with resilience and courage to guide them. Not because they're unable to, but because of the ghosts of trauma there instilling fear. To accept that as the truth in the reality of this film may raise the notion it's hinging on defeatism, but Valadez' directorial voice and vision aiding us into the depths of her observation on where she grew up in, and the investigation into her peoples' lives, definitely says otherwise. Confidently, she instead conducts a masterclass with the immediacy of a documentarist; branding her a storyteller that might just be one of this decade's hottest commodities.

In fact, she is so well-versed with this story that the narrative flow — as cinematic as it can get — never truly makes us feel as though these scenes we're being subjected to, are motivated by artifice, what some like to view as the will to engage the audience in the characters' drama. Rather, it is driven by the search for, and the uncovering of truth; the truth unnerving her for so long that has prompted her to conceive this exact film. Hence the severity achieved via the entrancing blend of naturalism and surrealism, wherein she applies the aesthetics of slow cinema for the experience to feel close in proximity to what the affected have to face day by day. Accomplished a directorial debut, it tells us through every stroke aching, bleeding on the canvas; her command of nuances — be it in symbolisms, the relaying of sparse information, or the relishing in her actors' facial expressions and gestures — scaling up the narrative with just two characters at her disposal. That of a mother searching for her son (Mercedes Hernandez' Chuya), and of a deported adolescent (David Illescas' Miguel) forced to confront the present state of the land he left five years ago. Pensiveness of atmosphere forged by Valadez pronouncing the opulence of every element employed, Chuya's narrative descends into hell — only the flames roast her soul with such inhumane languor; the poetry of her journey she carries in her agonies permeating every frame, the weariness in the occasional muting of time.

Fascinatingly, even the casting choices attest to its virtually innate lyricism and universality; Hernandez and Illescas' presence taking away their performer selves every time they appear onscreen. Mobilizing Chuya is her friend insistent to aid her, whose truth surrounding her son, is to be found in the grief she wallows in. Placing it in a more poetic context (as validated by her final destination of a bullet to the heart), Chuya is actually standing right in front of the truth; the bleakness making an appearance in the shadows, shaping her quest as just one of unrealized prolonged agony. It is, however, fended off for the most part as Chuya's innate will and love as a mother takes over her. Every step of the way, Hernandez grips us tightly with gestures constantly feeling strained and restrained from liberation; almost serving as an ode to the people she represents: mothers that have had to suffer from forced disappearances, executions, and in general, demises prompted by bullets and the might of hands.

We aren't really to see the absolute version of hope there, but it nevertheless has a light (if not one diffused) to shine with. Virtually each person Chuya encounters all have their stories told in passing, but such unnervingly vivid scenes flashing before our eyes, resonating with its sting, are all offset by the humanity they guide her with; their kindness tilling rather unkind land. Sooner than later, out of the seeming proximity with the truth comes uncertainty; sobering us up to the land she walks on as being limbo. Conveying that transfixing notion are the techniques DP Claudia Becerril calculatedly utilize to evoke the sensation of a fever dream. Scattered light juxtaposed over Valadez' performers speaking for the ominousness coming alongside hope. Long takes and back of the head shots serving as tunnels for introspection, bridging character to setting until they're singular; a towering presence. Wide shots scaling down subjects, communicating their insignificance to the land they're treading on. Closeups capturing the depth, complexity, and density of subjects' emotional states as though they were a map of intersecting roads.

Becerril and Valadez go on to transcend us from the screen as their ingenious, synergetic collaboration oppress in a flashback sequence placing us in the events being narrated by a voice that somewhat becomes our own at the absence of subtitles. It is in that exact momentous moment where Valadez' creation announces itself as a dedicated, cathartic piece of storytelling simultaneously nationalistic and personal upon unfolding as what one might embrace to be folklore or even a bedtime story told to children; the allure it breathes turning into screams for liberation as the devil comes to taunt against the flames, weaving their fates with one look upon the fire ravaging all hope. All that happens to be the truth and it really is so, seeing how the succeeding occurrences strike the note of such fate; ripping apart Chuya and Miguel's relationship, finally being shaken by the truth glimpsed at by their twin fates permitting them to play the roles of the respective people absent in their lives.

In its conclusion cementing it as an epic, the tale of Mexico itself is told with distinct femininity signaled in the stripping away of its people's "identifying features"; reducing them to their vulnerabilities, steeping them in a nightmare unforgivable and unbelievable for its atrocities. Chuya now carries with her the extreme burden of being a mother, of a person living in Mexico where the wailing and the headlines never cease to shock, where the devil oversees what transpires day by day, just as aspirants like Miguel stoke the fire of the nation's anger and melancholy. It's not necessarily nihilism announcing itself as a presence, but rather Valadez' brutal humanism marking it a work of sheer essentiality free of politics (that would've just so easily squander its heft) not as a creative choice, but more because what she assembles and how she presents scenes suffice for profound engagement into discourse and the tapping into empathy. Reel consequences pleading for change to be carried out in real actions, real conflicts whose onscreen representation keep us aware of quotidian tribulations people around the globe are reeling from, and fighting against; easing us in *the* reality we might just be desensitized from.

Rating:

4.5/5 ★



Thelma and Alice *Reviews and writing about films directed and written by women*

Review: Identifying Features

Posted on January 24, 2021



Identifying Features (2020)

Director: Fernanda Valadez

Writers: Astrid Roundero & Fernanda Valdez

When two boys head out alone into the world, leaving their mothers behind, you know you're in the realm of fairy tales. What makes Mexican filmmaker Fernanda Valadez's new drama so powerful is that she marries the stark emotions and visual imagery of myth with the harsh reality of illegal border crossings between Mexico and the United States. The story centers on Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), who searches for her teenage son, Jesús, who has gone missing after leaving his rural Mexican hometown with a friend to find work in the U.S. Within the film's first five minutes, we learn a crucial piece of information that sets Magdalena on her journey. Normally I would feel fine about spoiling that plot development, but the opening scenes of *Identifying Features* were so immediately compelling that I don't want to dilute their power.

The title refers to the practice of identifying a body after death, or, if a body is not found, in identifying the possessions of a lost person. Although evidence quickly points to the likely death of Jesús, Magdalena refuses to concede, not only because she fears the worst, but because if she makes this legal concession, the government will stop searching for her son and she'll never find out what really happened. She resolves to investigate her son's probable death on her own terms. What begins as a visit to federal authorities turns into a quest, one that takes her far afield to places where a woman shouldn't travel alone. But she doesn't let her fear stop her. Valadez shows us Magdalena's vulnerability, but also her determination. When Magdalena questions government officials and others who might know about her son's whereabouts, the camera rarely shows us the faces of the people Magdalena is interviewing. Instead, the camera stays on Magdalena, and we watch for her response to information that is unhelpful and often obfuscating. Hernandez's performance is riveting throughout; she shows us that Magdalena doesn't see this quest as a choice. She has to know the truth.

For most of the film we follow Magdalena, though we are briefly in the point of view of two characters who aid her in her search. Through these side characters, we see that there are many stories of border crossings and that Magdalena's particular journey is part of a collective story of immigration between the United States and Mexico. In one arresting scene, we see the masses of people returning to Mexico after being deported from the U.S. Other encounters show the strange mix of lawlessness and bureaucracy that characterize travel between the U.S. and Mexico. The most haunting scenes take place in the empty desert town where Magdalena ends up in a last-ditch effort to find her son. The imagery becomes elemental: fire, water, land. There's one particular scene that crosses over into magic realism, and it's especially striking because the rest of the movie is told so naturalistically, and with such attention to quotidian detail, from the white government-issues binders that contain photos of the recently dead, to the small, crappy television in the migrant shelter where Magdalena rests for the night. It's the magical scene that ends up foretelling the fate of Jesús, and when Magdalena finds out the devastating truth, the image comes back to haunt her — and the viewer.

Cinema Art Theater streaming 'Identifying Features'

January 27, 2021



In "Identifying Features," a woman tries to learn her son's whereabouts after he leaves Mexico to find work in the United States. SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Rehoboth Beach Film Society's Cinema Art Theater is offering virtual cinema access to "Identifying Features" a compelling drama about a woman who tries to learn her son's whereabouts after he leaves Mexico to find work in the United States.

Middle-aged Magdalena, played by Mercedes Hernandez, has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the United States. Desperate to find out what happened to him – and to know whether or not he's even alive – she embarks on an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous journey to discover the truth. At the same time, a young man named Miguel, played by David Illescas, has returned to Mexico after being deported from the U.S., and eventually his path converges with Magdalena's.

Director Fernanda Valadez has crafted a lyrical, suspenseful slow burn, equally constructed of moments of beauty and horror, which leads to a startling, shattering conclusion.

For more information, go to rehobothfilm.com.



January 12, 2021

Gotham Award Winner IDENTIFYING FEATURES, A Gripping Mexican Border Thriller, Opens On Virtual Cinemas On January 22

**Kino Lorber Announces the North American
Theatrical Release of the Gripping Mexican Border Thriller
IDENTIFYING FEATURES by Fernanda Valadez**

**The Gotham Award and Sundance Winner,
Opens on Kino Marquee and Virtual Cinemas Nationwide
on Friday, January 22**

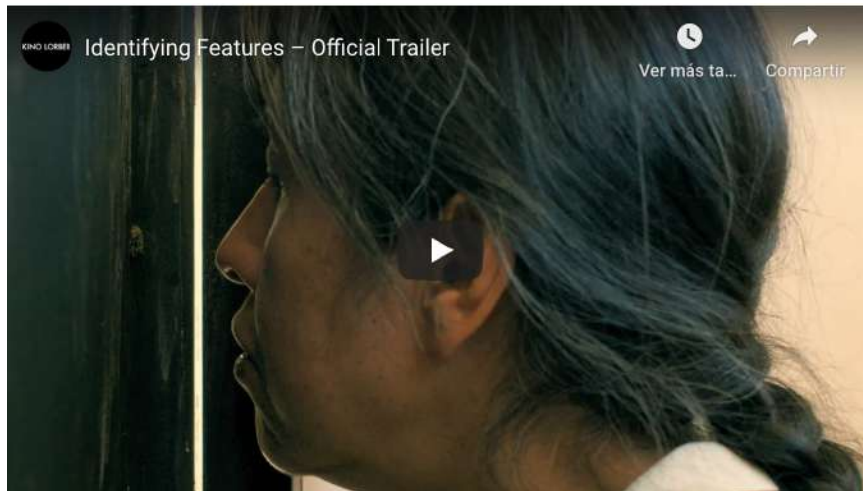
Kino Lorber is proud to announce the North American virtual theatrical release of the acclaimed and gripping Mexican border thriller *Identifying Features* (*Sin señas particulares*), directed and co-written by Fernanda Valadez, co-produced and co-written by Astrid Rondero, and including a largely female cast and crew.

Winner of Gotham Award for Best International Feature, the film opens on **Kino Marquee** and virtual cinemas nationwide—including Film at Lincoln Center and BAM in New York City, and the Laemmle theaters in Los Angeles—on Friday, January 22, 2021.

"Combines stunning cinematography, evocative sound design and hints of magical realism to create a visionary work of devastating power."
—Anjana Janardhan, *Sight & Sound*

"On every level, this is impressively accomplished cinema."
—Wendy Ide, *Screen Daily*

"A confident, accomplished and distinctive feature directorial debut."
—Dennis Harvey, *Variety*



Winner of the World Cinema Dramatic Audience and Screenplay awards at the Sundance Film Festival, among many other accolades at numerous international film festivals including Morelia, San Sebastian, Thessaloniki, Zurich, and Stockholm, *Identifying Features* tells the story of middle-aged Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), who has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the U.S., in hopes of finding work. Desperate to find out what happened to him — and to know whether or not he's even alive — she embarks on an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous journey to discover the truth.

At the same time, a young man named Miguel (David Illescas) has returned to Mexico after being deported from the U.S., and eventually his path converges with Magdalena's. From this simple but urgent premise, director Fernanda Valadez has crafted in her striking debut feature a lyrical, suspenseful slow burn, constructed equally of moments of beauty and horror, and which leads to a startling, shattering conclusion.

More Info:

When: January 22, 2021

<https://kinomarquee.com/film/venue/5f4e6aa412657c0001a653ac>

Capsule reviews for Jan. 22

22 January 2021 [Todd Jorgenson](#)



...

Identifying Features

Both gut-wrenching and eye-opening, this sharply observed Mexican drama offers an intimate glimpse into the desperate circumstances facing many immigrants and their families. Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) is a mother whose teenage son left with a friend from their small town to seek work across the border. That was months ago, and she hasn't heard from him since. But when Magdalena seeks the truth behind his disappearance, fearing the worst, she's met with casual indifference and bureaucratic red tape. A gritty and evocative debut for director Fernanda Valadez, the film starts to meander in the second half, yet its even-handed perspective makes it that much more powerful. (Not rated, 95 minutes).

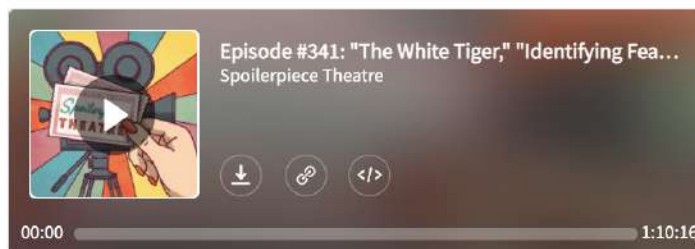
SPOILERPIECE THEATRE

THE MOVIE PODCAST THAT DOESN'T CARE ABOUT SPOILERS

THE WHITE TIGER, IDENTIFYING FEATURES, BREAKING FAST, AND OUTSIDE THE WIRE ON EPISODE #341

After a everyone talks a little bit about the inauguration and plugs recent guest appearances on the Screen Fix podcast, Evan and Megan review [OUTSIDE THE WIRE](#) (5:05), a Netflix sci-fi film starring Anthony Mackie and Damson Idris, about a cyborg military officer and a drone pilot working together to stop a nuclear attack. Next, Dave and Megan discuss the queer romantic dramedy [BREAKING FAST](#) (18:18), Mike Mosallam's directorial debut about a gay Muslim man (Haaz Sleiman) navigating romantic challenges during the month of Ramadan. Then, Megan and Evan dig into [IDENTIFYING FEATURES](#) (33:59), Fernanda Valadez's devastating drama about a mother (Mercedes Hernández) traveling across Mexico looking for her son when he goes missing trying to cross the border into the U.S. Everyone wraps up with [THE WHITE TIGER](#) (53:06), Ramin Bahrani's Netflix drama, an adaptation of the novel, about an Indian servant (Adarsh Gourav) trying to break free from his employers. And in this week's [Patreon exclusive audio](#), we review a Patron's choice: the 1985 martial arts flick [THE LAST DRAGON](#).

Listen:





‘Cowboys’ and ‘Identifying Features’ top this week’s streaming movies at Cleveland Cinemas and Cinematheque

Updated Jan 20, 2021; Posted Jan 20, 2021



By **John Benson**, special to cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Veteran film actor Steve Zahn showcases his leading man talents as a well-intentioned father in director-writer Anna Kerrigan’s new movie “Cowboys.”

The [Cleveland Cinemas](#) (Cedar Lee, the Capitol and Chagrin Cinemas) will be streaming the movie online Jan. 22. The modern western is about a father who runs off with his trans son into the Montana wilderness after his ex-wife refuses to let their child live as his authentic self.

Also on Jan. 22, The [Cleveland Institute of Art’s Cinematheque](#) begins screening director Fernanda Valadez’s impressive film debut, “Identifying Features,” which won an Audience Award in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival.

The movie revolves around a Mexican mother trying to discover the fate of her adolescent son who left home to cross the U.S. border. The suspenseful drama has a 100 percent critics rating on Rotten Tomatoes.

Virtual screening rooms continue to offer movie lovers a safe way to view first-run films online during a pandemic. Half the proceeds from the virtual films go back to the local theater. Costs vary for each film, which is accessible for either 48 or 72 hours.

Here's a look at new and current films streaming this weekend through Cinematheque and Cleveland Cinemas:

OPENING FRIDAY

“Identifying Features”

Director Fernanda Valadez's impressive film debut, “Identifying Features,” which won an Audience Award in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, revolves around a Mexican mother trying to discover the fate of her adolescent son who left home to cross the U.S. border. The suspenseful drama has a 100 percent critics rating on Rotten Tomatoes. (Cinematheque)



Sag Harbor Cinema And Cinema Tropical To Welcome "Identifying Features" Director And Co-Writer For Virtual Chat



Sag Harbor Cinema (SHC) is partnering with Cinema Tropical to present a special virtual conversation with *Identifying Features* director Fernanda Valadez and producer/co-writer Astrid Rondero on Sunday, January 31. The drama will be available to screen via SHC's virtual cinema starting Friday, January 29.

"*Identifying Features* is a special debut. Fernanda and Astrid, together with their cast and crew, bring compassion, poetry, visual beauty and an unexpected touch of thriller to a story that well exemplifies the ongoing tragedy at our Southern border," SHC Artistic Director Giulia D'Agnolo Vallan said. "I am excited to have them in conversation and to present the film. I am also delighted to continue our collaboration with Cinema Tropical. Their support plays an important role in our continuous exploration of Latin American Cinema."

Identifying Features is Valadez's directorial debut. The film follows a mother's journey to learn what happened to her son after he vanishes while crossing the U.S. border. "I found the story I wanted to tell in the travelers and immigrants vanishing by the day, and in the families that look for them in the mass graves where corpses appear by the hundreds," Valadez said about the film.

The film was celebrated with Screenplay Awards at the Sundance Film Festival, the 2021 Gotham Award for Best International Feature, and Winner of the World Cinema Dramatic Audience.

The chat with Valadez and Rondero will take place on Sunday, January 31 on 4:30 p.m.

"Cinema Tropical celebrates its twentieth anniversary this year. Since our debut in 2001, we have found that it truly takes a village to keep this art form vibrant - filmmakers, distributors, scholars, critics and most importantly our partnerships with cultural institutions. The Sag Harbor Cinema and the village it calls its home will be an exciting partner in screening the best new Latin American Cinema," noted **Mary Jane** Marcasiano, Director of Strategic Partnerships Cinema Tropical.

Additional upcoming Cinema chats include a conversation with Pietro Marcello, director of *Martin Eden*, on Saturday, February 6 at 4:30 p.m. and a conversation with John Powers, critic at large for **NPR's** *Fresh Air with Terry Gross* and *WKW: The Cinema of Wong Kar Wai* co-author, on Sunday, February 14th at 4:30 p.m.

For more information, visit www.sagharborcinema.org.

REEL CHICAGO

FILM

Gotham winner ‘Identifying Features’ comes to Siskel

By Reel Chicago Jan 15, 2021



(new film opens Jan 22 at Siskel Virtual)

The acclaimed, gripping Mexican border thriller from debut Mexican filmmaker Fernanda Valadez, *Identifying Features*, will open January 22 with Chicago’s Gene Siskel Film Center Virtual Cinema. Middle-aged Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the U.S., hopeful to find work. Desperate to find out what happened to him—and to know whether or not he’s even alive—she embarks on an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous journey to discover the truth.

At the same time, a young man named Miguel (David Illescas) has returned to Mexico after being deported from the U.S., and eventually his path converges with Magdalena’s. From this simple but urgent premise, director Fernanda Valadez has crafted a lyrical, suspenseful slow burn, equally constructed of moments of beauty and horror, and which leads to a startling, shattering conclusion. Watch the trailer below:



Los Angeles Times

ENTRETENIMIENTO

Estas fueron algunas de las mejores películas del año

DIC. 23, 2020 7:28 PM PT



Aunque hubo menos estrenos y varios títulos no pudieron disfrutarse en la gran pantalla por la pandemia, hubo grandes películas en 2020.

Los que siguen, son los mejores largometrajes que pudieron ver durante estos doce meses, en salas, festivales y plataformas de streaming, los especialistas Adriana Fernández y Rafael Aviña.

Rafael Aviña

*Sin orden de preferencia

Sin Señas Particulares, Fernanda Valadez

México-España, 2020

“Es la mejor película mexicana del año y seguirá siendo la mejor por mucho tiempo. Tiene el terrible tema de las desapariciones forzadas y esta presencia del horror, el pánico, la paranoia que acecha a todos los ciudadanos en este país. Tiene enorme sensibilidad y destaque que es un equipo de mujeres”.

VULTURE

COMING ATTRACTIONS | JAN. 5, 2021

65 Movies We Can't Wait to See in 2021 In fact, we couldn't wait to see a lot of them last year. But here we still are.

By Alison Willmore, Bilge Ebiri, and Katherine Brooks



As 2020 neared its end — a year of Hollywood asterisks and movie-release delays and anticlimactic couch premieres and exhausted industry shrugs — a handful of movies quietly made themselves available ... sort of. Chloé Zhao's devastating *Nomadland* debuted in extremely limited digital release in early December. Lee Isaac Chung's semi-autobiographical *Minari* was temporarily unleashed into select American theaters a week later. The Anthony Hopkins-led dementia drama *The Father* technically premiered a week after that, though it's frankly impossible to determine where. We're told the charming little documentary about a group of rare-fungus-obsessed men, *The Truffle Hunters*, came out for a minute at some point, but did you see it?

These four bows were more like gestures for certain awards-granting bodies, which are tasked with doling out accolades to the movies that managed to hang on to a release date in the calendar year of COVID. They will all receive wide(r) releases in 2021, making the next stretch of 365 days feel even more like a grueling extension of the 365 before it. A vaccine has arrived and proved perilously difficult to distribute; there is hope, but it has abated (which we've become accustomed to in a pandemic). Things will change, we're told, but also things will largely stay the

same. The movies of last year, for example — the *Nomadlands* as well as the bigger-budget projects we celebrated a January ago and heard little from again, your *French Dispatches* and *Dunes* and *West Side Storys* — are the movies of this year, too. Are we anticipating them? Well, we've *been* anticipating them. We've been anticipating a lot of things.

But tradition is tradition. It's the first week of the first month of another year, and duty dictates that we be excited about a whole new slate of upcoming cinema. Here are the 65 movies we can't believe ~~are actually coming out~~ wait to see in 2021.

January

Identifying Features

Fernanda Valadez's stark drama about a mother looking for her missing son who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border has already garnered a number of awards and nominations. It's one of several powerful films about immigration to come out of Mexico in recent years. It's also, quite possibly, the most despairing. (*On the Kino Marquee platform January 22.*)



Travelling for love. Films reviewed: Make Up, Identifying Features, Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time



Hi, this is Daniel Garber at the Movies for culturalmining.com and CIUT 89.5 FM.

They say love is true, and some people travel far and wide to keep that love alive. This week I'm looking at three new movies, directed by women in Hungary, England, and Mexico, that explore this theme. There's a teenaged girl who moves to Cornwall to spend time with her boyfriend; an American surgeon who moves to Budapest to be reunited with her lover, and a Mexican farmer who crosses the country in search of her missing son.



Identifying Features

Dir: Fernanda Valadez

Chuya (Laura Elena Ibarra) is a farmer in Guanajuato, Mexico. She's a single mom who's raising her teenaged son Jesus in a small farmhouse. But when he suddenly tells her he's heading north with his best friend to take a job in Arizona, she packs his bag and says goodbye. And that's the last she hears from him and his friend. Are

they kidnapped? Lost? Or dead? She reports it to the police to no avail. His best friend is found but nothing is found of Jesus except the bag Chuya had packed. And when a woman she meets tells her not to give up, she sets out on a journey to try to find her son, or else confirmation that he's dead.

On the way she falls in with a young man named Miguel (David Illescas) who was recently deported from the US. He is looking for his mom who lives in Ocampo a region plagued with crime. It's also where Chuya thinks she can find the answers to her son's disappearance. Will

she ever find out what happened to him? And can an ordinary, kind woman survive in a society filled with greed, suspicion, and murder?

Identifying Features is a deeply moving and gripping mystery/drama that looks at the lives of Mexicans, trapped within larger forces — *el migra*, organized crime, and a corrupt police force — over which they have no control. It takes you into fascinating places, rarely portrayed — like indigenous villages, hostels for migrants — that tell an unforgettable story with a shocking ending. Stunning cinematography, and natural acting combined with compelling drama, makes for a terrific film.

Make Up just opened on VOD across North America. *Preparations to Be Together for an Unknown Period of Time*, and *Identifying Features* both open today at the digital TIFF Bell Lightbox.

This is Daniel Garber at the Movies, each Friday morning, on CIUT 89.5 FM and on my website, culturalmining.com

WOMEN AND HOLLYWOOD



Pick of the Day: "Identifying Features"

BY

Rachel Montpelier

January 22, 2021

There is no shortage of disturbing images in "Identifying Features," Fernanda Valadez's poetic tale of family, violence, and migration. We see an eyeball being operated upon and the bodies of livestock being burned. These are gruesome sights, but the film refuses to cut away. Whether it's these moments or the excavation of its characters' personal and social pain, the award-winning film forces the audience to confront harsh truths. It won't let us look away.

"Identifying Features" follows Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), a middle-aged Mexican woman determined to track down her son. She hasn't heard from him since he decided to migrate to the U.S. two months ago, and the authorities believe he is dead. But Magdalena has to know for sure.

A young man recently deported from the States, an elderly gentleman haunted by brutality he's witnessed, a doctor searching for her own son, and several civilians afraid to speak openly are among those Magdalena encounters on her journey to the truth. Detail by detail, hint by hint, she finds out what happened after Jesús departed for his new life.

"For more than 10 years now we've been experiencing a crisis of violence in Mexico. It's a very complex phenomenon that involves drug trafficking, human trafficking, oil trafficking, migration, corruption, disparity, and social injustice, among other factors," Valadez told us. "Besides that, I come from a region in Mexico that expels many of its young people: they leave for the U.S. looking for a better future." She explained, "I think ['Identifying Features'] is my attempt to

understand and process all of the violence that we have been experiencing through a story that feels familiar: the love we can share for each other.”

With its unhurried pace and bare-bones plot, “Identifying Features” is a self-assured piece of filmmaking, one that’s more concerned with mood than action. Like Magdalena herself, it knows what it is and what it wants. The protagonist is desperate for her son; the film is adamant that the viewer takes in and understands horrors that happen every day, yet are routinely ignored.

“Identifying Features” was recently **named Best International Feature** at the Gotham Awards. It also picked up prizes at **Sundance** and **Zurich Film Festival** last year. Valadez penned the script with Astrid Rondero.

*“Identifying Features” is now in **virtual cinemas**.*



WOMEN AND HOLLYWOOD

Trailer Watch: A Mother Investigates Her Son's Disappearance in Border Drama "Identifying Features"

BY Laura Berger

November 25, 2020

A woman searches for her missing son in a new trailer for Fernanda Valadez's "Identifying Features." Set in Mexico, the Spanish-language drama sees Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) desperately trying to locate Jesus (Juan Jesús Varela), a migrant worker who has been MIA since he took a bus to the U.S. border two months prior. "My son might be dead, but I need to know," she says.

"Although the story is basically a drama that deals with issues that I believe are relevant in Mexico — violence, enforced disappearances, and migration — I tried to give the film the sensation of a thriller," Valadez told us. "It's more lyrical than naturalistic. I wanted to capture the feeling of dealing with a dangerous reality that surpasses our understanding, but at the same time, leaning on an emotion that's easy to relate to: the love of a mother for her son."

"Identifying Features" won Zurich Film Festival's Golden Eye for best feature film and the Latin Horizons Award at San Sebastian Film Festival. The pic marks Valadez's feature debut. She co-wrote its screenplay with Astrid Rondero.

You can catch "Identifying Features" in theaters and virtual cinemas in January.



Jan 22, 2021 9:40am PT

New Movies to Watch This Week: 'No Man's Land,' 'The White Tiger,' International Oscar Submissions



With the Sundance Film Festival less than a week away (and available to anyone in the U.S. willing to buy tickets to a COVID-safe 2021 virtual edition), late January sees more streaming options than virtually any week since the pandemic began. That doesn't necessarily mean big movies for home viewers, but at least it offers a raft of new options.

Here's a rundown of those films opening this week that *Variety* has reviewed, along with information on where you can watch them. Find more movies and TV shows [to stream here](#).

New Releases on Demand and in Select Theaters

Identifying Features (Fernanda Valadez)

Distributor: Kino Lorber

Where to Find It: In virtual cinemas via [Kino Marquee](#)

Most of the film's primary characters are mothers trying to find out what happened to their vanished would-be-émigré offspring, providing Valadez's feature with a compelling subject and some powerful scenes. But the narrative is also frustratingly cryptic, holding back basic intel that might clarify things (or

even this story) for viewers unfamiliar with the issues. A film that straddles the line between artful and arty like this one isn't designed for a wide public. There are moments that are striking, even if the their impact is muddled by a minimalism that at times feel pretentious. — Dennis Harvey

[Read the full review](#)

Esquire

The Best Movies of 2021 (So Far)

The year might be young, but it has already provided some great films for you to stream right now. ▲



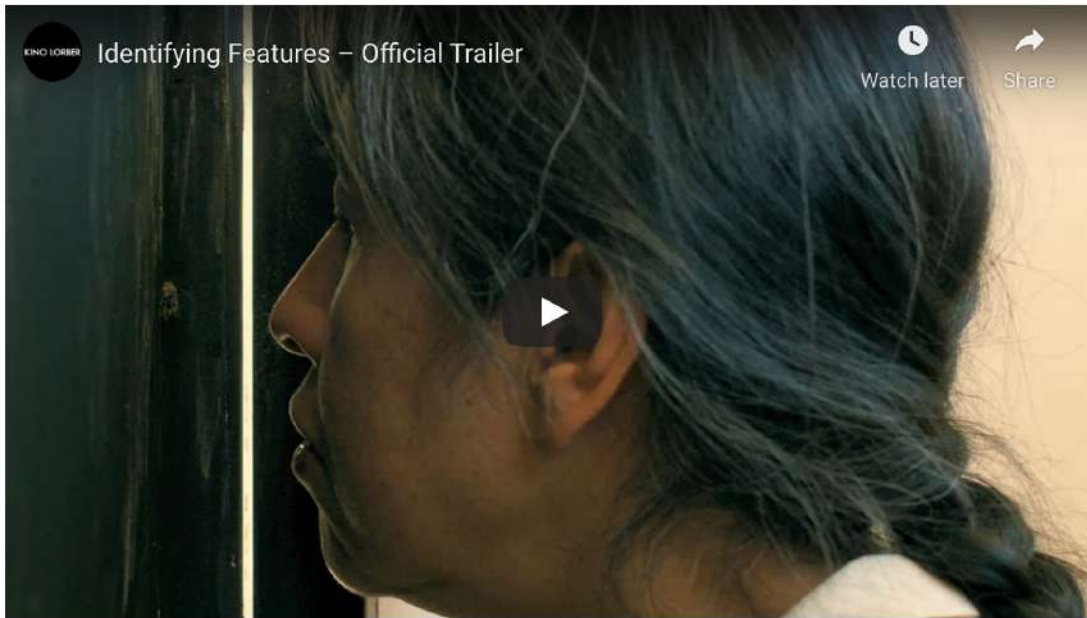
By Nick Schager Feb 11, 2021



When it comes to movies, it still feels a bit like 2020, largely because pushed-back award-season deadlines have allowed early 2021 releases to qualify for the upcoming Oscars. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this annual rundown, it's a brand new year, and we've already been blessed with a handful of great fiction and non-fiction efforts, including a star-studded period piece, two mesmerizing documentaries, and a Mexican thriller that seems destined to remain near the top of this list for the foreseeable future. It may be cold and the pandemic may still be raging, but these features suggest that it won't be a long cinematic winter. Kicking off what will undoubtedly be a fascinating twelve months, these are our picks for the best movies of 2021 to date.

...

1) Identifying Features



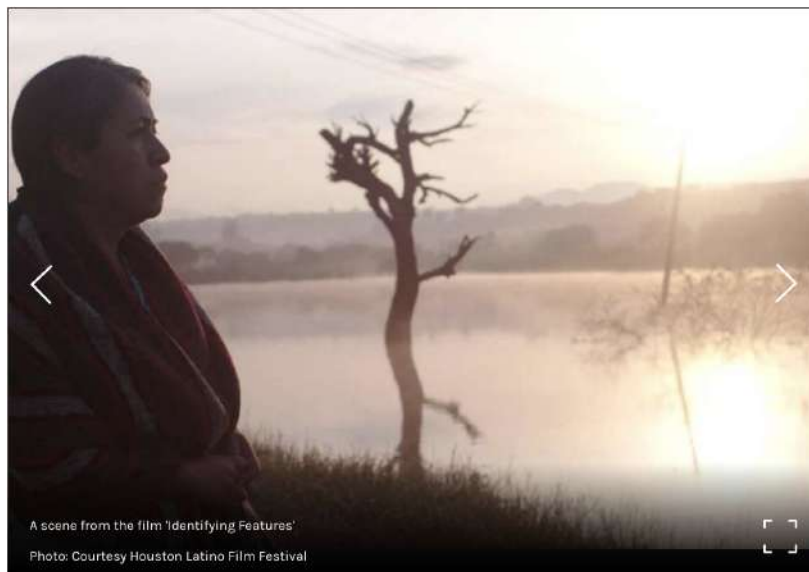
Whether seen in agonized close-ups or at an alienated remove, director Fernanda Veladez's characters are alone—and forlorn—in *Identifying Features*, a masterful Mexican drama of grief, guilt and dislocation. Consumed with finding her son, who's gone missing while trying to cross the Mexican-American border, single mother Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) embarks on an investigative journey through a dusty, dangerous country of migrant shelters, remote gas stations, vacant homes and wide open plains that echo their inhabitants' lonely sorrow. Her path eventually crosses with Miguel (David Illescas), a young man who, having been deported by the U.S., now seeks to reunite with his long-abandoned clan—one of many lyrical parallels found in this haunting descent into a national heart of darkness. Though dialogue is minimal, Hernández and Illescas' pained-yet-resolved countenances speak volumes about the anguish and terror of a people plagued by separation and yearning. The film's stunning formal beauty enhances its unholy nightmarishness, as Veladez alternately frames his protagonists amidst expansive landscapes and constricting structures in order to highlight their simultaneously lost and trapped condition. And in an unforgettable late sequence set to an indigenous speaker's un-translated recollection, the filmmaker presents a vision of demonic cruelty so horrifying, it can barely be comprehended.



New Films: 'Our Friend,' 'Breaking Fast' are among the options

Here are some of the major releases hitting theaters and streaming services this week.

Cary Darling | January 21, 2021



A scene from the film 'Identifying Features'
Photo: Courtesy Houston Latino Film Festival

Here are some of the new films being released in theaters or for streaming, rental or purchase this week.

“Identifying Features”

One of the more acclaimed indie films of last year — it was the audience award winner at Sundance in 2020 — gets wider exposure. Fernanda Valadez’s film follows a mother from Mexico as she searches for her son in the United States.

Unrated. Begins streaming Jan. 22 through mfah.org/virtualcinema.



Review: Identifying Figures



What makes a missing person truly gone? What makes a body truly dead?

Fernanda Valadez's *Identifying Features* takes a look at Mexico's disappeared through a mother's eyes. In Mexico, as of 2020, there are over 73,000 people that have disappeared since 2006. That's an average of fourteen people per day. Some of the first scenes of this film show the magnitude of this loss — and the nonchalance that officials have towards it. It is a film about sons, mothers and the bonds that burn and become forged in flames.

Based on the 2014 short, *400 Bags*, *Identifying Features* is a film that is powerful in its quiet moments. It follows Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), a Mexican mother, who is looking for her missing son, Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela), whose bus disappears on its way to the US border. Desperate to find him, Magdalena decides to take matters into her own hands. She travels to the border to find the truth of what happened, but what she discovers instead is not what she expected. The film forces the viewer to stay and linger in the real time through long shots, in the slowness of each second ticking — in every moment that Magdalena does not know where her son is. In the stillness of the frame, Magdalena's face is tired, worried, empty, and anxious. Mercedes Hernández

anchors her performance in the resilience of Magdalena's character and carries the soul of the film with it.

At the US Mexico border, Magdalena meets resistance from locals who tell her looking for her son is too dangerous. Frustrated, her luck later changes when she meets Miguel (David Illescas), a recently deported young man who is looking for his family. Together the pair look for their missing relatives and develop a mother-son bond in the process. Through their relationship we are given glimpses of the type of mother Magdalena was and wanted to be to her own son.

Throughout the film, nature is on display with images of the sky, plants, and landscapes providing an interesting emphasis on the narrative itself. The solemn desert backdrop is desolate but feels heavy with the personal journey of both main characters. Saturated in symbolism, *Identifying Features* comes to a haunting climax when Magdalena learns of the events that happened on the fateful night Jesús disappeared. Through the eyes of the sole survivor we see fiery images, a bloody massacre and the blurry shadow of a devil figure. The audience begins to piece together the puzzle at the same time she does and are equally as horrified to see the whole picture completed.

Bleak, profound, and sobering, *Identifying Features* is a masterclass in atmospheric slow burn and the horrors that mothers like Magdalena have to confront. It's a film that stays in the viewer's minds and pulls at their hearts long after the final credits. *Identifying Features* is available to stream in virtual cinemas and theaters today.



Two international releases to be watched – IDENTIFYING FEATURES / TWO OF US

These semi-lockdown times might become an excellent opportunity to watch movies from beyond the usual borders of North America. Streaming services—even the most conventional ones like Netflix—are now opening screening space to films made from places other than Hollywood. Good examples of this wider focus are the two films I have reviewed here. “Identifying Features” a Mexican production directed by Fernanda Valadez, and France’s official submission for the Best Foreign Language Oscar category, “Deux” (“Two of Us”) by Filippo Maneghetti.

International releases to be watched

IDENTIFYING FEATURES: Dangerous Borders

For some time now, Mexico has been a country with a conflicting situation at its northern border. Both Mexicans from different regions of the country and many Central Americans arrive there intending to cross into the United States in recent years. However, Mexico also seems to have another sort of “internal frontiers,” the ones set by the various drug cartels and other organized crime groups. In this film, there is a convergence of both kinds of borders and the dramas they entail.



Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), a forty-something woman from a rural region in the state of Guanajuato is desperate after losing contact with his son. The latter had left for the US with a friend. She then decides to go on his search, fearing that something could have happened to him. There are many rumours about people being abducted or murdered in the border region.

During her journey, she would meet a woman who just happened to recognize her murdered son's body. Magdalena also learns that the friend with whom her son was travelling has been killed. That is something she heard since often the victims are burned, and their bodies are rarely found.

Although the movie's pace is at times very slow, it still manages to attract the viewer for its elements of suspense. When by chance, Magdalena meets Miguel (David Illescas), a young man who was just deported from the US. The story takes its most interesting twist. Magdalena is convinced that an indigenous man who had recently survived an attack on a bus, may provide her with information about her son. Miguel helps her reach the remote place where she finds the man, but the information she gets is not conclusive. When she is back at Miguel's home, the local criminal gang's attack will occur, and Magdalena would finally learn what happened to her missing child.

"Identifying Features" is a film that explores the emotional impact that organized crime, poverty, and the hope of reaching the US has on families in those remote regions of Mexico. An area where the cartels have imposed a violent rule for years. It is a sad story that tells us a great deal about why young people, devoid of hope, try to find their way to the Promised Land north of the Mexican border. However, to reach that goal, they have to deal with both the American border patrols and those who control Mexico's cartels' territories.

The movie won the Gotham Award for Best International Film and the Audience Award and Best Screenplay prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Available at various streaming services (Spanish with English subtitles). *Running Time: 98 min.*

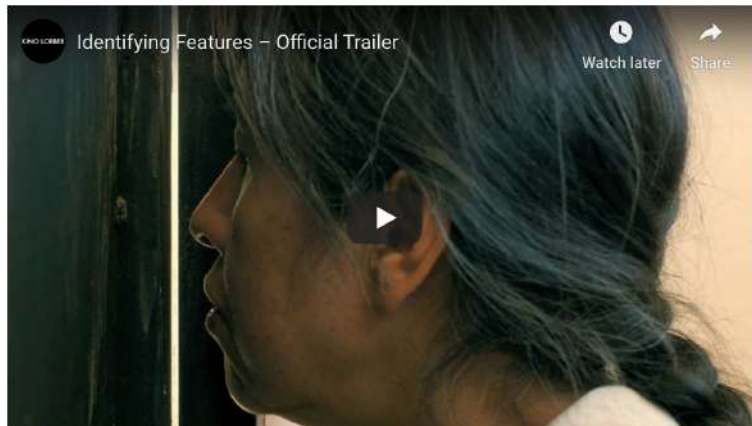


A Journey to Find the Truth in US Trailer for 'Identifying Features' Film



"Don't ask those questions in public. You don't know who's listening." Kino Lorber has unveiled an official US trailer for an indie mother drama from Mexico titled ***Identifying Features***, also known as ***Sin Señas Particulares*** (*No Particular Signs*) in Spanish. And the German title is *Was Geschah mit Bus 670?*, which just translates to *What Happened to Bus 670?*. The film follows **Mercedes Hernandez** as a mother who travels across Mexico in search for her son who authorities say died while trying to cross the border into the United States. "From this simple but urgent premise, director Fernanda Valadez has crafted a lyrical, suspenseful slow burn, equally constructed of moments of beauty and horror, and which leads to a startling, shattering conclusion. Winner of the World Cinema Dramatic Audience and Screenplay Awards at this year's Sundance Film Festival." This also stars **David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez, Laura Elena Ibarra**, and **Xicoténcatl Ulloa**. This looks like very powerful cinematic storytelling indeed.

Here's the official US trailer (+ posters) for Fernanda Valadez's ***Identifying Features***, from [YouTube](#):



*Middle-aged Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the U.S., hopeful to find work. Desperate to find out what happened to him—and to know whether or not he's even alive—she embarks on an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous journey to discover the truth. At the same time, a young man named Miguel (David Illescas) has returned to Mexico after being deported from the U.S., and eventually his path converges with Magdalena's. *Identifying Features* is directed by Mexican filmmaker [Fernanda Valadez](#), making her feature directorial debut after a few short films previously. The screenplay is written by Astrid Rondero and Fernanda Valadez. This premiered at the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year, and also played at the San Sebastian Film Festival. Kino Lorber will release Valadez's *Identifying Features* in select US theaters + "virtual cinemas" starting [January 22nd, 2021](#) this winter. For info, visit [their site](#).*

Pass the Remote: Watch films competing for the Oscars' Best International Feature award from home

by Randy Myers, Bay City News Foundation January 20, 2021

While many of us miss the simple pleasure of entering a darkened theater so we can surrender ourselves over to a movie, one of the benefits of online screenings is the breadth of fine global filmmaking you can watch from the comfort of your couch.

Pass the Remote will be highlighting many of these films in the weeks ahead. Here are a few to add to your queue as well as an award-winning drama from Mexico that debuted last year at Sundance but didn't make it into the Oscars race.

"Identifying Features": Not part of the Rafael's "For Your Consideration: A Celebration of World Cinema" and overlooked by Mexico for Oscar consideration, this harrowing and uncompromising drama from Fernanda Valadez should be up there. It possesses a heavy heart in its outrage over the violent radicalization of those seeking to cross the border into the United States. Mercedes Hernandez will break your heart as Magdalena, a mother sacrificing all — perhaps even her life — to find her son who went missing near the border. Valadez's film is a mournful, plaintive plea, one that echoes from generation to generation and continues to remain unanswered. (Available to stream Friday at <https://www.roxie.com>)



KPFK Film Club Review: IDENTIFYING FEATURES (SIN SEÑAS PARTICULARES)

Screening Virtually at the Frida Cinema and the Laemmle Theaters' Virtual Cinema's thru Kino Lorber

In the wake of the country's new administration, Fernanda Valadez's dramatic thriller *IDENTIFYING FEATURES* becomes an even more important story as the debate regarding immigration reform once again rises to a pitch. Using dreamy and startling imagery, Valadez reminds us of the many who disappear as they seek a better life in a strange land. In some respects, it is as terrifying a tale as *APOLCALYPSE NOW* in its depiction of a mother's journey into the heart of darkness to discover what has befallen her missing son.

In a dreamlike scene at the film's start, young Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela) emerges out of the fog across a vast field to declare to his mother, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), that he is leaving with his best friend Rigo (Armando García.) They plan to make the trip from their home in Guanajuato, Mexico, to Arizona, where Rigo's uncle will help them find work. A week later his mother sadly assists the boy in packing a bag and sees him off with one last wave goodbye.

This opening scene sets the tone and deliberate pace of the film...a long mysterious journey initiated with sadness and a mother's fears, with a glimmer of hope for the journey's end.

It turns out we are watching Magdalena's recollection of the event to the police. She and Rigo's mother, Chuya (Laura Elena Ibarra), are filing a missing person's complaint as they've not heard from the boys for two months. The last info they had was that the boys were taking a bus to the border. The police, like most of the authorities in the film, are reluctant to help. They grudgingly provide the mothers with photographs of those recently found murdered, and Chuya retreats in despair upon seeing her son dead. His bus was ambushed on the way to the border. Jesús, however, is not among the victims, and Magdalena, with scarce resources but firm determination, embarks on a quest to trace his steps and find out what fate has befallen her son.

It is a desperate task, fraught with danger. Her travels take Magdalena to places where, by simply driving down a road or walking in a field, she can encounter Sicarios (gang hitmen), bandits, or even rogue police, seeking to randomly rob, kidnap, or kill. The scale of the problem is so huge, with so little remedy or success, that authorities are likely to be overworked and indifferent.

However, there are small helpful encounters Magdalena has along the way that help propel her along. Olivia (Ana Laura Rodriguez), another mother who'd been seeking her missing son for four years, has just tried to identify a burned body that is only 2 weeks deceased. She advises Magdalena not to officially accept her son's death—at a center where workers process hordes of body bags, that would give the authorities the excuse to stop searching.

A worker at a bus station won't give Magdalena any official assistance but, in the restroom, whispers to her the name of someone at a migrant shelter that might know something. At the shelter Magdalena is directed to the distant home of an older man in Ocampo who might have escaped the bus attack alive. On her way to see him Magdalena is on foot in the countryside when she has her most fateful friendly encounter. Miguel (David Illescas) is a young man that has recently been deported after four years in the U.S. He is on his way back to the home he long ago abandoned, and invites Magdalena to spend the approaching night there, with promises to help her the next day. The results of that chance meeting, between a prodigal son and a grieving mother, changes their lives forever.

IDENTIFYING FEATURES is not a political film as much as it is a humanistic and lyrical exploration of a little discussed aspect of the immigrant story. In 2018, news reports indicated that at least 4,000 migrants, on their way to the U.S., had died or gone missing in the previous four years. 2019 has been noted as one of the deadliest years on record. IDENTIFYING FEATURES is noteworthy in that it provides human perspective to those numbers, in a powerful, compelling way. It is a visually fascinating, well-deserved award-winning film that touches the heart deeply, and is highly recommended.

IDENTIFYING FEATURES is currently screening at the Laemmle Theaters' Virtual Cinema at: <https://www.laemmle.com/film/identifying-features>

It is also a Virtual Cinema feature film at the Frida Cinema at: <https://thefridacinema.org/identifying-features/>

More info can be had thru Kino Lober at: <https://www.kinolober.com/film/view/id/3905>

Experience the trailer here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79iznq_ERL0&feature=emb_logo

Film – IDENTIFYING FEATURES is an immigration story that you haven't seen before

Date: [January 23, 2021](#)

In immigration stories, which we all have seen many of, there are always victims and perpetrators. As far as stories at the US-Mexico border, we most often classify the victims as the ones trying to come in and the perpetrators as the ones wanting to keep them out. But immigration stories start long before the actual moment in which someone crosses the border. For a migrant, that moment is often preceded by many challenges, including walking and surviving areas controlled by drug cartels where victims and aggressors collide. Identifying Features, released this weekend, is a movie by first time director Fernanda Valadez that considers the goodness and the badness that exist within all humans and the vulnerable moments that determine in which of those sides we'll stand.

In Identifying Features, Magdalena (played by Mercedes Hernandez), is a mother in search of a son that disappeared en route to the US border. Traveling through various landscapes of northern Mexico, she meets Miguel (David Illescas), a young man recently deported from the US who is in search of his mother. They accompany one another as Magdalena continues to look for her son and Miguel returns to his hometown, a place that has become a dangerous area under cartel control.

This is not a happy story, nor is it the type that'll drive you to tears. It's shocking, a bit terrifying even, and not in a hugely graphic way, but mostly because it achieves the element of surprise. It makes you consider the unfortunate path faced by migrants even within their own country, riddled with the possibility of disappearance or perhaps of ending up in a mass grave at the hand of those who are actually their own.

Identifying Features is 94-minutes long, in Spanish with English subtitles. You can rent it now for \$12 from [KinoNow.com](#).

The Emory Wheel

Fernanda Valadez's 'Identifying Features' Is a Subtle Emotional Odyssey

by Rhett Hipp | Jan 22, 2021

When I started “Identifying Features,” a story of a mother searching for her missing son, I expected an overtly dramatic ride. However, what surprised me most was how much ground the film covers in an understated manner. Despite its heavy themes of grief, our desire for closure and the struggle for survival, the film rarely presents itself as the dark, gritty movie it could be, allowing the actors’ naturalistic performances and subtle cinematography to set an ambient yet haunting tone.

After her young son Jesús (Juan Jesús Varela) goes missing while leaving Mexico for a job in America, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) traces his thin trail to find him — dead or alive. The film simultaneously follows Miguel (David Illescas), a boy about Jesús’ age, after he fails to cross the border into the U.S. While Magdalena searches for her son, Miguel tries to make it home to his mother. Their parallel, and eventual convergent journeys, take the audience on a striking tour of chaotic cities, dangerous badlands and ambient nature in the Mexican countryside, made gorgeous by cinematographer Claudia Becerril Bulos.

The unobtrusive yet undeniably expressive approach of Bulos and director Fernanda Valadez’s visuals in “Identifying Features” is astounding. Most of the film takes place in medium or close-up shots, often leaving many characters as off-screen voices to focus on Hernandez’s performance and the complexity she brings to her character. Shallow focus in the shots makes the world around her a blur of grief and desperation. The static camera often centers on Hernandez in the middle of the frame to convey her sense of isolation. Thus, so much of the cinematography can be characterized as a conduit for her performance as well, yet the film’s style is not always as peaceful as it may seem when the film gets into darker territory.



With such a consistent visual approach, Becerril and Valadez have made the effects of any change in style that much more palpable. When characters who have been close to the camera are suddenly photographed in long shots there is immediate a sense of awe in nature; when Magdalena floats down an immense river embanked by skyscraping trees she pales in comparison to the size and majesty of the landscape. When the mostly static camera becomes active as Miguel snakes through crowds at the border, for example, the movement feels immensely purposeful and important. As Magdalena nears her ultimate goal, the film keeps managing to pull out surprises, visual and otherwise, keeping the audience on their toes all while maintaining an ambient quality.

It is through these two powerful tools, Hernandez's performance and the cinematography, that the film explores its most interesting themes. As Magdalena travels cross country, the audience sees her struggle and questions whether she should succumb to grief or keep her hope alive. Though hardly sorrowful, Magdalena is mentally struggling — she projects her son's image onto Miguel in desperate longing for closure. But while "Identifying Features" delivers on strong central themes, not every idea sticks. Characters, including another grieving mother, key witnesses and others, often come and go without necessarily contributing to the overall film in a thematically cohesive way. Magdalena is the focus, but not every character fits neatly into her odyssey. Early on, we see Magdalena talking with people from her hometown that don't play heavily into the ideas prevalent later in the film, and while this far from ruins it, it does hold the story back.

It is nonetheless admirable that this is the feature debut of director Fernanda Valadez. The concept of the movie, while simple, is brought to such surprising heights by strong directorial decisions. This is hopefully a sign of much more to come in Valadez's career, as "Identifying Features" is bound to leave audience members with ideas on which to reflect, from the performances to the crushing themes, to something as down to earth as the world's natural beauty. It is a journey through and through, one across a country, emotions, themes and nature. It is a lot to think through in whatever way you do, but a film well worth following, wherever it may take you.

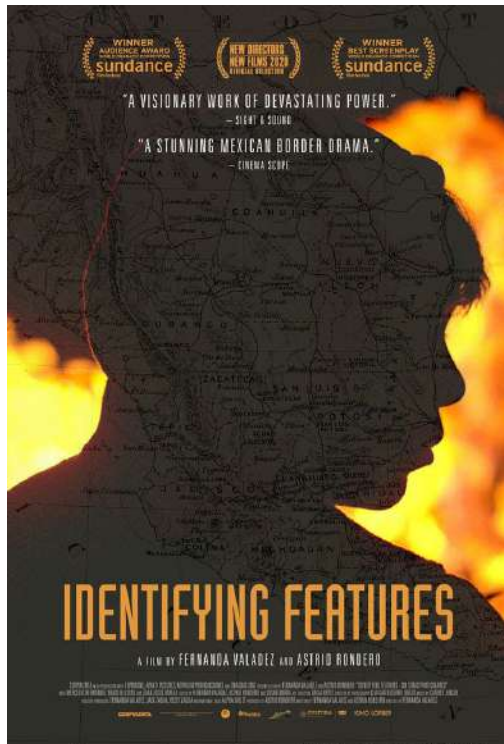
REEL NEWS DAILY

Review: 'Identifying Features' is devastating and captivating.

Posted on [January 25, 2021](#) by [Liz Whittemore](#)

KINO LORBER

IDENTIFYING FEATURES



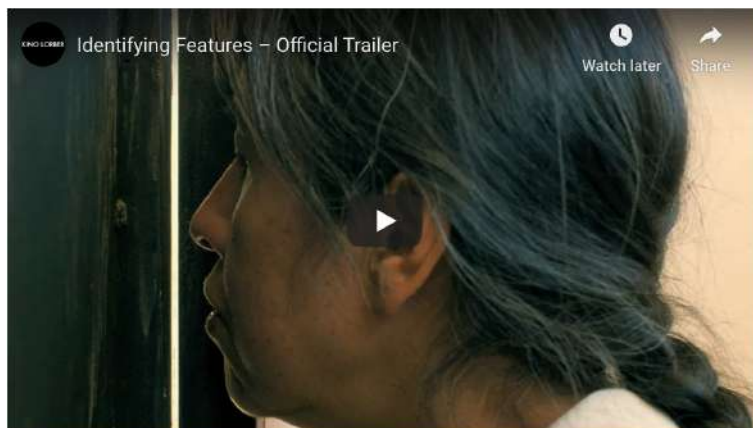
Directed by Fernanda Valadez

Written by Fernanda Valadez & Astrid Rondero

Middle-aged Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the U.S., hopeful to find work. Desperate to find out what happened to him—and to know whether or not he's even

alive—she embarks on an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous journey to discover the truth. At the same time, a young man named Miguel (David Illescas) has returned to Mexico after being deported from the U.S., and eventually, his path converges with Magdalena's. From this simple but urgent premise, director Fernanda Valadez has crafted a lyrical, suspenseful slow burn, equally constructed of moments of beauty and horror, and which leads to a startling, shattering conclusion. Winner of the World Cinema Dramatic Audience and Screenplay Awards at the Sundance Film Festival.

Every once in a blue moon a film comes along that pushes you past your own emotional boundaries. The heaviness of the stories in **Identifying Features** swallows you whole. You are forced to confront the realities that are far too often swept under the political rug here in the US and are dreaded in Mexico. With a score that vibrates your already unsettled soul, the handheld cinematography puts you in the shoes of any one of these individuals getting shoved back across the border... And those who don't ever make it. The alternating scenes from a mother to a son build up a visceral tension to an ending that is beyond shocking. The intimacy of the sound editing and long lingering beautifully shot close-ups force you to remain engaged no matter how badly you'd like to look away. **Identifying Features** is brilliant in its unyielding honesty. You will sink so far into the depths of these families' grief, digging out will take more time than you'll realize. It's nothing short of captivating.



This film is now playing in virtual cinemas. [Click here](#) to find a Kino Marquee virtual cinema supporting a theater near you.

Mexico /In Spanish with English subtitles / 94 min



“Identifying Features” Director Fernanda Valadez on Conveying the Impact of the Humanitarian Crisis in Mexico

BY RICARDO GALLEGOS

January 24, 2021

In her award-winning feature film debut “Identifying Features,” filmmaker Fernanda Valadez puts us in the shoes of a Mexican mother desperately searching for her son, who disappeared on his way to the border. It’s a story rooted in the bleak and violent reality of Mexico and an homage to the relatives of the victims of enforced disappearances in the country.

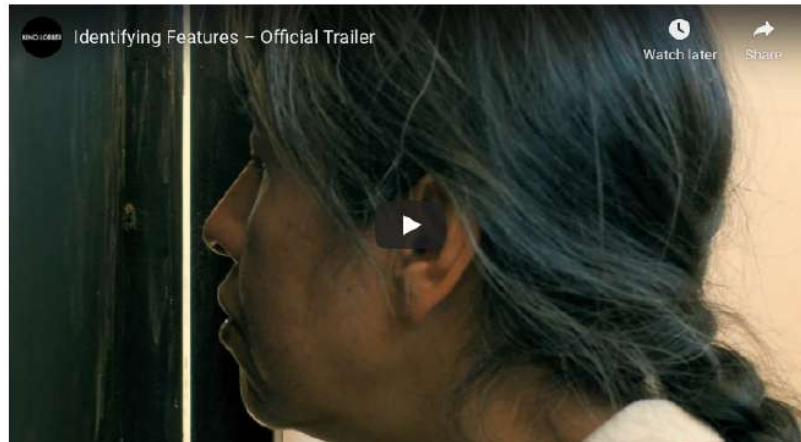
Along with co-writer Astrid Rondero, Valadez aimed to convey the humanitarian crisis happening in Mexico. “It’s not exclusive to a social class, nor to just migrants. It’s something that is happening across the entire social body of the country,” Valadez told us.

The crisis, as well as the increasing volume of disappearances and violent occurrences in Mexico shaped the script of “Identifying Features.”

“The heart was always the story of a mother searching for her disappeared son,” said Valadez. “The rest of the elements, the secondary characters that helped us give amplitude and depth of what is transpiring in Mexico, were inspired by real events that happened during the writing process.”

In the film, cruelty and violence are portrayed with the aid of the figure of the devil. However, this wasn’t initially in the script.

“During the development of the script, we reached a point where the scenes of violence were not working. The more explicit it was and the more detail I tried to include, the less it worked. The violent details were distancing us from the emotional perspective of the character,” explained Valadez. “It was Astrid who had the idea of approaching it from a symbolic and metaphorical angle, to try to find an iconic image that could express brutality and misunderstanding, the feeling of having no words to convey what goes on during these moments of extreme violence. This is why we decided to use the shape of the devil.”



One of the many brilliant decisions of the film is to not explain the context of the story to the viewers. Rather than understand it, Valadez and Rondero wanted the viewer to experience the path of a person who is a victim of violence.

"We wanted to keep the perspective of a mother who sets out on a journey without understanding the phenomena that she is throwing herself into," said Valadez. "And that means, like most Mexican citizens, not quite being able to understand how intertwined all these incidents of violence are. Just like her, we Mexicans have gradually understood these incidents. We started with shock and surprise, and it has taken us more than a decade to understand how all these phenomena intersect."

The precursor of "Identifying Features" was "400 Bags," a 2014 Student Academy Award nominee short film with the same theme: the journey of a mother to the border in hopes of finding her missing son. But since then, many things have happened in Mexico.

"When '400 Maletas' was released in 2014, there was this feeling that the violent situation was behind us, which was probably due to the approval of laws that led the media to publishing less news about disappearances, drug trafficking and violence in general," Valadez explained. "For some months we were all asleep, but that changed after the events in Tlatlaya and, mainly, Ayotzinapa. That sucked us all Mexicans back into the harsh reality, and we started noticing again all the violence in México."

In the film, this reality is seen through the eyes of Magdalena, a 48-year-old mother portrayed by an outstanding Mercedes Hernández, who had previously worked with Valadez in "400 Bags."

"The work we did in the short film prepared the land for what we did in the feature film," said the director about her lead. "She did research on the experiences of the mothers and relatives of the missing people. She lost weight to play the character too. Her ability to improvise at any moment was very useful for me, because I was working mostly with non-professional actors in the other roles".

To work with the non-professional actors, Fernanda Valadez got a helping hand from Lizeth Rondero, an acting coach, actress, theater director and her co-writer's sister. Together they organized a workshop with the teenagers to awaken their imaginative part and prepare them for the film.

"Acting is almost a human right. It comes from something we all do as children, which is to personify situations and characters that are not us. As children we all play at being others. Trying to make a non-professional actor get in touch with that emotional imagination is what allows them to represent a character. That was the basis on which we worked," said Valadez.

Another big challenge for Valadez was the constraints of the budget. The film received half of the budget they had planned for, so the team had to redesign the entire production and budget scheme.

"We had to carefully think about what we were going to put in front of the camera, of what was going to be out of frame and of how to take advantage of the real spaces. We shot scenes in the migrant shelter and the border crossing almost like if they were for a documentary. We had this mix of semi-documentary and fiction filmmaking," explained Valadez.

In fact, the border crossing scene was quite the adventure. The team tried to get permits, but rejection led them to finding a new way of shooting. Along with director of photography Claudia Becerril and actor David Illescas, Fernanda filmed the scene with a small camera while going through the intersection.

"At the crossroads was Astrid in a car, ready to get us out of trouble with the aid of some papers in case they stopped us," told us Valadez. "We were able to shoot the entire scene until the camera had to go through the X-Ray reader. It was funny because Claudia is very small, skinny and sweet, so they didn't even think she was recording. They thought she was just carrying the camera."

The whole experience and the international success of the film has served as a reminder of the recent financial problems in Mexican cinema. Last year, the government shut down Foprocine, a fund created in the '90s to promote the film industry in Mexico, the same fund that supported the production of "Identifying Features."

"The wonderful thing about this fund was that the grants were decided by juries made up of rotating filmmakers from the community that had the intention of supporting socially relevant and financially viable films, as well as first features and films directed by women and underrepresented communities," explained Fernanda Valadez about the now extinct Foprocine. "This fund helped now-successful filmmakers such as Guillermo del Toro and Amat Escalante. Unfortunately, last year this fund was dissolved, leaving a very important void in Mexican cinema."

With the government's lackluster support to the film industry and the shutdown of theaters due to COVID-19, the landscape of Mexican cinema looks uncertain. "What we have to do as a community is to try to push public policies that defend culture. I truly believe that supporting culture and filmmaking is the democratization of the social conversation."

"The wonderful thing about cinema is that it allows us to put ourselves in the shoes of someone else, which is very important, especially in these polarized times: To be able to understand the perspective of the other is key," said Valadez. "It is our duty to try to communicate this to the general public, as well as the importance of financing culture and education."

"Identifying Features" is now [available on virtual cinemas](#) via its distributor, Kino Lorber. The film has won awards at the [Sundance Film Festival](#), San Sebastián Film Festival, Morelia Film Festival, Zurich Film Festival and most recently, it received the Best International Feature Award at the 30th Gotham Awards.



THE CRITERION COLLECTION

New Directors/New Films 2020

By David Hudson

THE DAILY — DEC 10, 2020



For nearly half a century now, [New Directors/New Films](#), copresented by Film at Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art, has “acted as a slightly chancier analog to the New York Film Festival,” as [Nick Pinkerton](#) put it in *Artforum* a few years ago. Each fall, the NYFF has cinema put its best foot forward, and in the spring, ND/NF shows us where it’s headed next. This year’s edition, the forty-ninth, was to have taken place in March, but of course, the pandemic has kicked it further down the calendar.

For twelve days through December 20, viewers across the nation will have an opportunity to remedy their cabin fever with a sort of worldwide tour offered by the twenty-four features and ten short films screening in FLC’s [virtual cinema](#). One could begin relatively close to home with *Anne at 13,000 Ft*, the latest feature from Canadian filmmaker Kazik Radwanski. Deragh Campbell plays a daycare supervisor given to severe mood swings. “Bresson is very important to me,” Radwanski told [Penelope Bartlett](#) in August. “He’s a filmmaker I have returned to again and again throughout my life.” Reviewing *Anne* for *Cinema Scope* last fall, [Josh Cabrita](#) detected “the staunchly materialist mode of Bresson” paired with “a certain school of

realism—often associated with the films of Cassavetes—which seeks to reveal supposedly knowable being through an interplay of signs that indicate “the truth of the moment.”



Heading further south, Mexican filmmaker Fernanda Valadez’s *Identifying Features*, winner of an audience and a screenplay award at Sundance, tells the story of a mother, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), desperately seeking her son who set out for the U.S. and has gone missing. “Subdued in tone and stoic in its approach to the dangers that can decimate an entire community, *Identifying Features* is admirable in its restraint, and all the more powerful because of it,” writes [Wendy Ide](#) in *Screen*. ND/NF’s second entry from Mexico, Carlos Lenin’s debut feature *The Dove and the Wolf*, is a love story centering on two factory workers, and it’s “an agitated, dark and bitter film,” writes Locarno programmer [Antoine Thirion](#), “glacial in tone and pace,” but “burning with an inner fire.”



THE 35 BEST FILMS OF 2020 (SO FAR)

👤 Shikhar Verma / 🕒 January 18, 2021 / 💬 0 Comments / 👁 41.9k

2020 will be remembered as the year where we never went to the movies. Plagued by the Coronavirus threat, the entire world has been forced to watch movies on their home screens. While this has taken away the cinematic ecstasy that cinephiles crave, it has allowed some of the least accessible films from yesteryears to finally land a place online. For instance some of the festival films I saw back in 2018 that never saw the light of the day have now either come on VOD or some streaming services. It has kicked off a whole new market for indie filmmakers who wanted some much-needed attention towards their smaller films. The following list (which will be updated regularly [Last updated on 16th January]) consists of some of the best films of 2020 so far:

14. IDENTIFYING FEATURES



Debut director Fernanda Valadez's 'Identifying Features' purposely skims over the sentimentality associated with migrant dramas. The Mexican film is so assured about the steps it takes that you are left baffled at just how convincing yet otherworldly it feels.

Following the journey of a mother in search of a lost son who is supposed and announced dead by the authority whilst he tried to cross the border over to the US, the film seamlessly joins its narrative with a recently deported young man desperately in search of a lost identity. Scored to perfection and framed with meticulous precision, Valadez is an exciting voice to look forward to.

Tribuna Cultural

Posted on **January 22, 2021**

Desapariciones Forzadas

SIN SEÑAS PARTICULARES. México-España, 2020. Un film de Fernanda Valadez. 99 minutos. Disponible en la plataforma digital.tiff.net

Coincidiendo con el estreno de Las Niñas Bien en donde se ilustra a la clase opulenta de México, he aquí el otro lado de la medalla que se aprecia en Sin Señas Particulares. En esta ópera prima de Fernanda Valadez, se expone la situación vivida por un importante sector de la población tratando de emerger de la pobreza como así también la violencia manifestada en desapariciones forzadas donde en su mayoría las víctimas forman parte de los estratos más desfavorecidos de la sociedad.

En un breve prólogo la primera imagen presenta en un distante plano a dos muchachos mexicanos dirigiéndose hacia el Norte en procura del mítico sueño americano. Posteriormente, el guión de la realizadora escrito con Astrid Rondero introduce a dos madres preocupadas por saber acerca de sus hijos adolescentes que han dejado su hogar. La historia se centra en Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), una de ellas, que es una campesina de Guanajato cuyo hijo Jesús partió con un amigo varios meses atrás con destino a Estados Unidos sin haber recibido noticia alguna de él.

Después de efectuada la denuncia de su desaparición ante la policía sin obtener resultado, esta angustiada mujer impulsada por ciertas pistas emprende una larga peregrinación para poder ubicarlo; en ese accionar atraviesa diversos villorrios desolados tratando de llegar hasta la frontera americana donde allí supone que podrá obtener información más precisa sobre su paradero. En su camino se topa con Miguel (David Illescas), un noble muchacho recientemente deportado de Estados Unidos quien tratando de ubicar a su madre al poco tiempo constata que ya no está más donde solía habitar; el estrecho vínculo que se establece entre estas dos soledades motiva uno de los momentos más emotivos de este drama.



Evitando efectos sensacionalistas y con notable sagacidad, la directora deja intuir cómo la frontera mexicana con Estados Unidos adquiere el carácter de un territorio salvaje donde no impera la ley; eso permite que grupos armados y milicias enmascaradas encuentren el campo propicio para sembrar impunemente una desgarradora violencia en víctimas indefensas demostrando así que la vida humana carece de valor.

Con un enfoque cuasi documental y apelando a una narración en gran parte minimalista Valadez demuestra una singular madurez como novel realizadora en la exposición de esta triste historia que queda resaltada con la memorable interpretación de Hernández; en su caracterización de una madre coraje dispuesta a enfrentar cualquier tipo de peligros y amenazas con tal de dar con su primogénito, esta notable actriz transmite con su expresivo rostro el intenso dolor de su personaje viviendo en un mundo impiadoso.

Tanto la composición visual merced a la estupenda fotografía de Claudia Becerril Bulos así como la acertada música funcional de Clarice Jensen se asocian adecuadamente en la valorización de este penetrante drama.

Por sus indiscutibles méritos, el film obtuvo el premio al mejor guión y el del público en el festival de Sundance 2020. Jorge Gutman

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

New movies to stream this week: ‘Cowboys,’ ‘Spoor’ and more

By **Michael O'Sullivan**

Jan. 21, 2021 at 10:00 a.m. EST

“Queer contemporary outlaw western” may be a mouthful, but “**Cowboys**” — the story of a Montana father who takes off on a horse for the Canadian border with his trans son when the child’s mother refuses to accept the boy’s authentic self — goes down sweetly. That’s mostly thanks to Steve Zahn, who took the best actor prize at last year’s Tribeca Film Fest for his portrayal of Troy, a goofy, grown-up kid with a mood disorder who almost instantly accepts things when his tween Josie decides to become Joe. (Young actor Sasha Knight also took a prize at L.A. Outfest, in a debut performance that is affectingly natural and unforced.) Writer-director Anna Kerrigan’s gentle little film switches up stereotypes by not making the Dad the heavy, but “Cowboys” doesn’t exactly demonize Joe’s mother (Jillian Bell) either — at least not terribly, or for terribly long. “Cowboys,” which also features Ann Dowd as the detective pursuing Troy and Joe — acting accolades all around — isn’t a heavy-handed message movie. It takes things easy. It’s a character-driven tale about characters who are all complicated, as Troy puts it, and compelling to watch. *Unrated. Available at angelikaanywhere.com. 83 minutes.*

— **Michael O'Sullivan**

Also streaming

In the thriller “**Identifying Features**,” a worried Mexican mother (Mercedes Hernandez) seeks information about her son, who hasn’t been heard from since he left to find work in the U.S. [Variety](#) calls the film by Fernanda Valadez “compelling” but also “frustratingly cryptic.” *Unrated. Available at afisilver.afi.com, virtualavalon.org and sunscinema.com. In Spanish with subtitles. 95 minutes.*

The Boston Globe

HomeFront: Thrillers, mysteries, ‘Pixar Popcorn,’ and lots of takeout

By **Marie Morris** Globe Correspondent, Updated January 21, 2021

Welcome back to HomeFront, where we’re feeling lighthearted and well rested despite having engaged in a nonzero amount of day drinking this week. We needed a change, which the universe delivered in a shower of time-honored traditions and breathtaking fireworks. And by that of course I mean the ascension of meme king [Bernie Sanders](#), whose social-media presence shattered the boundaries of time and space, and pandemic overachiever [Amanda Gorman](#), who just since the first lockdowns has graduated from Harvard and written a poem people will be talking about for many, many years.

What, did something else happen Wednesday?

FILM: The coming-of-age story “[The White Tiger](#)” offers a “swirling, scalding portrait of India’s class war,” Globe film critic Ty Burr writes in a 3½-star review. Writer-director Ramin Bahrani, who adapted Aravind Adiga’s novel, is “working at a peak of confidence, conveying the intricacies and cruelties of this society through a head-spinning weave of image and sound.”

Set in Mexico, “[Identifying Features](#)” earns three stars from Burr with its “dovetailing odysseys” of a mother searching for her son and a son searching for his mother. First-time director Fernanda Valadez and co-writer Astrid Rondero “are interested in locating the humanity in a society bent on stamping it out, and they find it in the face of a tired old woman who won’t stop until she finds her son.”

San Antonio Express-News

Watch Tom Hanks' 'News of the World' Texas-set Western at home now on streaming services and cable on demand

Jim Kiest, Staff writer

Jan. 20, 2021 | Updated: Jan. 20, 2021 10:08 a.m.



Here's a look at what's new or notable in home video. Movies and TV series are available on streaming sites such as iTunes, Amazon and Vudu unless otherwise noted.

Also streaming

New movies

"Identifying Features": A mother searching for her son, who was last seen heading for the U.S. border, and a young man returning home to Mexico after being deported cross paths in this award-winning drama from Mexico. *Available to rent Friday via kinomarquee.com.*



Regional: Watch Films Competing For The Oscars' Best International Feature Award From Home

Jan. 22, 2021 | Updated: Jan. 22, 2021

By Randy Myers

While many of us miss the simple pleasure of entering a darkened theater so we can surrender ourselves over to a movie, one of the benefits of online screenings is the breadth of fine global filmmaking you can watch from the comfort of your couch.

Pass the Remote will be highlighting many of these films in the weeks ahead. Here are a few to add to your queue as well as an award-winning drama from Mexico that debuted last year at Sundance but didn't make it into the Oscars race.

"Identifying Features": Not part of the Rafael's "For Your Consideration: A Celebration of World Cinema" and overlooked by Mexico for Oscar consideration, this harrowing and uncompromising drama from Fernanda Valadez should be up there. It possesses a heavy heart in its outrage over the violent radicalization of those seeking to cross the border into the United States. Mercedes Hernandez will break your heart as Magdalena, a mother sacrificing all -- perhaps even her life -- to find her son who went missing near the border. Valadez's film is a mournful, plaintive plea, one that echoes from generation to generation and continues to remain unanswered. (Available to stream Friday at <https://www.roxie.com>)

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| THINGS TO DO |

Best Virtual Bets: Sundance Films, UFOs, and *The Apollo*

NATALIE DE LA GARZA | JANUARY 28, 2021

This Friday just happens to be [National Fun at Work Day](#). If you're lucky enough to be working from home this pandemic, we're about to provide you a whole list of best bets to enjoy "at work" this week. If not, you can still certainly enjoy them from the comforts of your couch (and in one case, the comfort of your car).

Look toward a new chapter in the history of Freedmen's Town on Thursday, January 28, at 6:30 p.m. when Zion Escobar, the executive director of the [Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy](#), joins Hesse McGraw, executive director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, to discuss their new creative partnership during **"Telling the Story of Freedom" in Freedmen's Town with Powerful Art and Civic Activation**. Dubbed the "Harlem of the South" through the 1930s, Freedmen's Town and Houston's Fourth Ward once boasted 95 percent of the city's Black-owned businesses and a third of the Black population. You can get a peek at what's to come for the historic area during the free livestream, which you can watch on the [CAMH YouTube page](#).

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston will turn their Virtual Cinema spotlight toward Mexican cinema this Friday, January 29, when they present the internationally acclaimed *Identifying Features* (see the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, 2021 Gotham Awards and many other international film festivals from Mexico to Switzerland). Fernanda Valadez and Astrid Rondero's **"unshakable drama tinged with thriller elements"** follows a mother on a desperate search to find her missing son, who left home to find work across the border in the U.S. The film **"wrestles with the very real atrocities from the sorrowful perspective of a middle-aged woman on a quest to find her missing son, dead or alive."** You can purchase a five-day pass for \$12 [here](#).



The Crandell Theatre presents 'Identifying Features'

Jan 21, 2021

Friday-Thursday, January 22-28 Identifying Features.

Hello, and welcome once again to your Crandell Theatre Wednesday weekly. This week in the Crandell's Virtual Screening Room, FilmColumbia co-artistic director and former senior film curator at MoMA is pleased to present one of the first films to win a major prize in this new Awards Season. Identifying Features, a debut film by Fernanda Valdez of Mexico, not only won the Gotham Award for Best International Feature on January 11th but a year ago, when it premiered at Sundance, Identifying Features took home both the Audience and Screenplay Awards for Best International Dramatic Film.

Your rental of Virtual Cinema films helps support the Crandell!

Please email us if you need tech support for streaming

Identifying Features

"Harrowing and compelling, Identifying Features follows a perilous trail that a mother takes to find her young son who has disappeared on his journey north to the United States.—Laurence Kardish,

Co-Artistic Director, FilmColumbia

"The film gives an intimacy and a human face to an ongoing tragedy which has reached almost epidemic levels in Mexico." — Beandrea July, The Hollywood Reporter

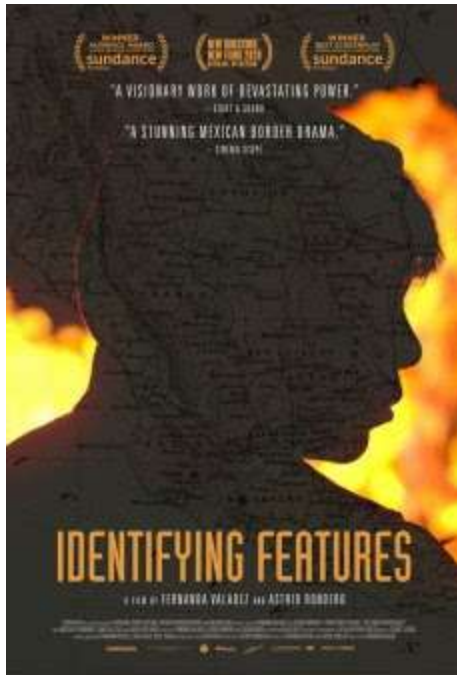
"A confident, accomplished and distinctive feature directorial debut..... impressive in many ways, from its strong naturalistic performances to the vivid sense of dislocation and vulnerability felt by the principal characters.— Dennis Harvey, Variety



‘Our Friend’, ‘Identifying Features’ And A Stack Of Oscar International Feature Contenders Make Their Debuts – Specialty Preview

January 23, 2021

Movies



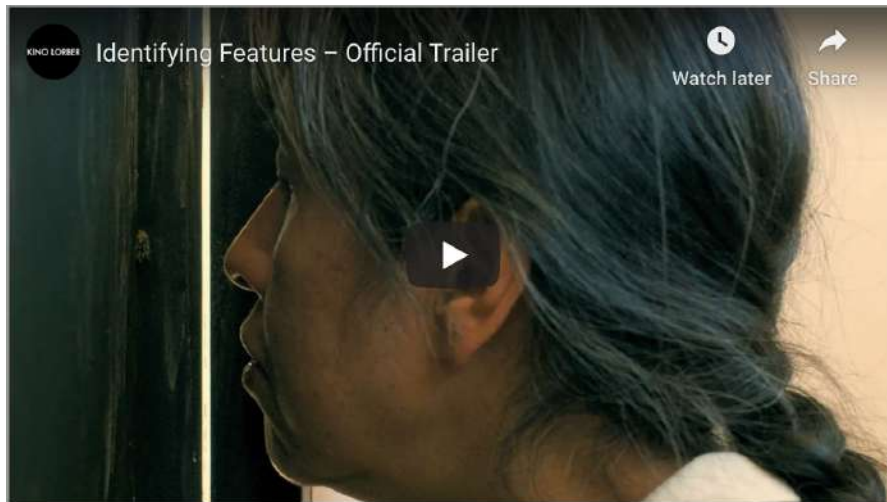
After winning the Gotham Award for Best International Feature, Fernanda Valadez's [*Identifying Features*](#) continues to ride the wave of acclaim it makes its North American virtual theatrical debut this weekend.

The Mexican border thriller from Kino Lorber was written by Valadez and Astrid Rondero and included a largely female cast and crew. *Identifying Features* made its debut at the Sundance Film Festival where it won the Audience Award and the Best Screenplay prize in the World Cinema Dramatic category.

The film, which marks Valadez's feature directorial debut, follows Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez) who has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the U.S., hopeful to find work. Desperate to find out what happened to him — and to know whether or not he's even alive — she goes on a dangerous

journey to discover the truth. At the same time, a young man named Miguel (David Illescas) has returned to Mexico after being deported from the U.S., and eventually his path collides with Magdalena's.

Watch the trailer below.



This article was originally published by [Deadline.com](https://www.deadline.com). Read the [original article here](#).



PRESS PLAY WITH MADELEINE BRAND

'Psycho Goreman' is Spielberg meets Megadeth, says critic

Jan. 22, 2021 HOLLYWOOD



PODCAST



LISTEN
14 MIN



Critics review "Psycho Goreman," about two suburban kids who find a special gemstone that awakens an ancient, blood-soaked alien overlord, so turn him into their friend; "Identifying Features," which follows a mother searching for her son in Mexico after authorities say he died when trying to cross the border into America; "In and Of Itself," a documentary about magician Derek DelGaudio; "Our Friend," about a man who puts his life on hold to help his friends deal with a crisis.

Credits

[Amy Nicholson](#) - host of the podcast Unspooled and film reviewer for the NYT -
[@theAmyNicholson](#), [William Bibbiani](#) - film critic and co-host of the podcast “Canceled Too
Soon” and “Critically Acclaimed” - [@williambibbiani](#)

Host: [Madeleine Brand](#)

The Berkshire Eagle

Film clips: Warm up these chilly days or nights with a movie

The Berkshire Eagle Jan 22, 2021

Here's what's playing — Jan. 22-28 — at movie theaters and on virtual cinemas in the Berkshires and environs. Where films have been reviewed, the capsules include the name of film critic and the day the full review was posted on berkshireeagle.com. All reviews are by Associated Press critics.⁹

IDENTIFYING FEATURES

A woman tries to find her son's whereabouts after he leaves Mexico to find work in the United States. With Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela. Spanish, with English subtitles. 1 hour, 35 minutes. VC.

The Distancer

The Distancer: Saturday, January 23, 2021

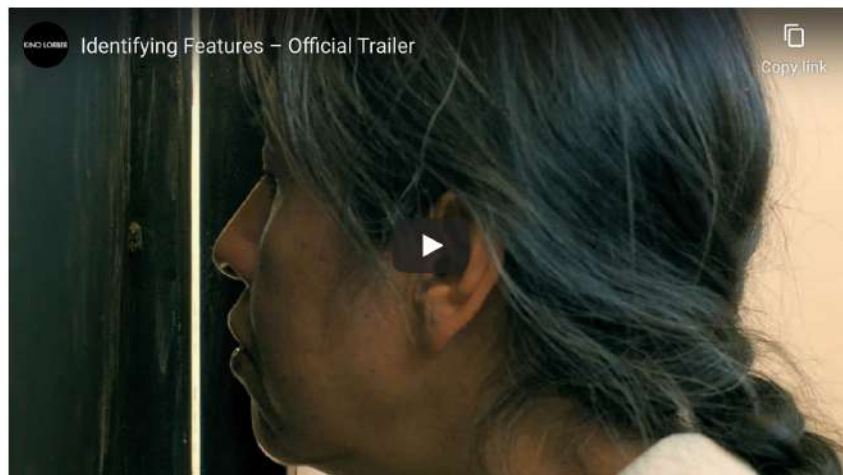
DAY 317: Erin Brockovich

Marshall Shaffer

Jan 23   

Happy Saturday, everyone!

In my post-margarita rush to get out yesterday's newsletter, I forgot to include an update about a fantastic new release definitely worth your time: *Identifying Features*, a stunning directorial debut that tells a border story from a very unique point of view. It's rooted in deep humanism rather than ripped-from-the-headlines faux urgency. You can [watch via KinoMarquee](#) to support an independent cinema now!



Be good to yourselves and to each other,
Marshall

Laramie Movie Scope: Identifying Features

by **Robert Roten**, Film Critic

February 11, 2021 – This Mexican film highlights an aspect of the immigration issue not generally covered in American media: The dangers of the immigrant journey south of the U.S. border and the missing, who never make it to the border.

Two young friends, Jesus (Juan Jesús Varela) and Rigo (Armando García) head off to America from Guanajuato in central Mexico. Two months later, the mothers of the two boys have not heard from them. They go to the authorities, who tell them there is not much that can be done, due to the large number of people who disappear every year on the dangerous road north.

The remains of Rigo are later identified. He was reportedly badly burned in a fire by men who attacked the bus in which he and Jesus were riding. Jesus is still missing. Police tell his mother, Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández) that he is probably dead because a backpack he was carrying was found at the site of the attack.

A chance meeting with another woman, Olivia (Ana Laura Rodríguez) who has come to identify the remains of her long lost son who died only recently, convinces Magdalena to continue the search for her own son. She hopes against hope to find him alive, but is afraid he is dead. This leads her on a long and dangerous journey.

Magdalena first goes to the bus company, where she gets the runaround, but a sympathetic employee tells her she might get some information from a woman at a nearby migrant shelter. At the shelter, Magdalena learns that a bus was attacked, and that the lone survivor of the attack, an old man, lives in a far away remote village in a dangerous area.

Since this may be the only person she may be able to talk to who may have seen what happened to her son on the night of the attack, she heads out to look for him. In a parallel story, Miguel (David Illescas) a young man deported from the United States heads back home to visit his parents and grandparents, which happen to live in the same area where Magdalena is going.

She meets Miguel near the home of his parents after a long, hard journey through land patrolled by armed drug gangs. Nobody wants to drive there, so both of them have to walk there. Suspense is their constant companion.

Miguel takes Magdalena to his parents home, but nobody is there. The house is deserted and the livestock has been killed. They stay there overnight, and the next day they head into town to see if Miguel's grandparents know what happened, but his grandparents have disappeared as well. Miguel, who has spent years away from home, is devastated. If anyone knows what happened to his family, they are not talking.

Magdalena travels on alone to find the old man who saw what happened on the night her son disappeared. After another long walk and getting a boat ride across a reservoir, she finally meets the old man. His tale comes from the very heart of darkness.

The old man tells her a surrealistic tale of a “devil” who killed the bus passengers, but the gang let him live for some reason. The tale is told against a backdrop of blazing fires and shadows. Magdalena discovers nothing specific about the fate of her son from this disheartening tale.

On the way back home, however, she discovers the truth about what happened the night the devil attacked the bus, and it is certainly not what she expected, or what the police thought happened that night.

Mercedes Hernández gives a rich and nuanced performance as the sad, determined mother on a quest for the truth, and there are some other excellent performances in the film as well. The story, which is kind of a road story, is compelling.

Unlike most road movies, which are about the characters which turn up on the trip. This movie is more about the effect that the words these people speak have on one character, Magdalena. In a number of scenes, this is emphasized by camera work.

The faces of people talking to Magdalena are not shown in many scenes. In several scenes we see very little of the people talking to her. Instead, the film focuses on Magdalena's face, and the effect their words have on her. The exceptions to this are a couple of other mothers whose sons have disappeared, and Miguel, who is on his own sad journey of discovery.


This is a powerful, spare film of desolate landscapes, danger, inhumanity and tragedy. It rates a B.

ROBIN HOOD RADIO ON DEMAND AUDIO PAGE

David Sterritt with Films in Focus: Saint Maud; Identifying Features; Judas and the Black Messiah






BY EDITOR on FEBRUARY 18, 2021 • (0)

David Sterritt is a film critic, author, teacher and scholar. He is most notable for his work on Alfred Hitchcock and Jean-Luc Godard, and his many years as the Film Critic for The Christian Science Monitor, where, from 1968 until his retirement in 2005, he championed avant garde cinema, theater and music.

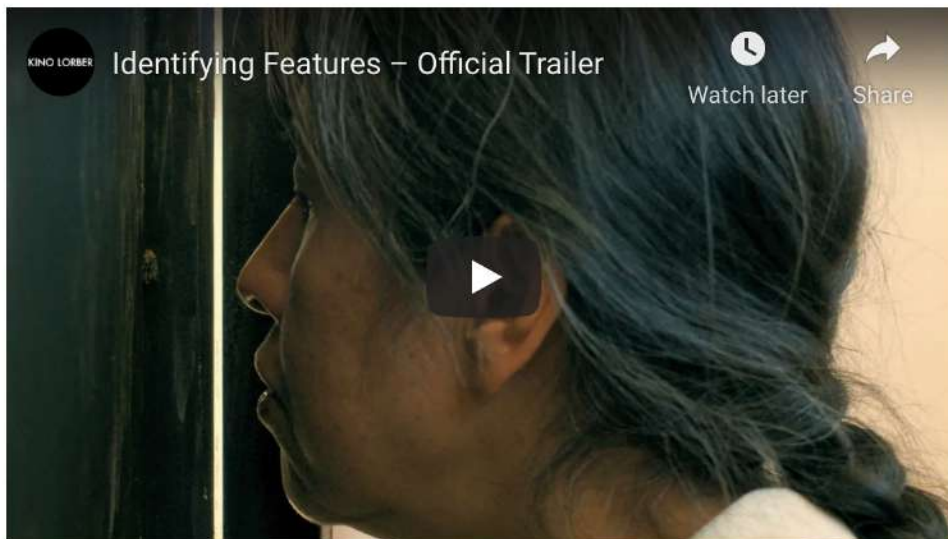


ROBIN HOOD RADIO ON DEMAND AUDIO

David Sterritt with Films in Focus: Saint Maud; Identifying Feature...

     00:00 / 00:15:23

[Download file](#) | [Play in new window](#) | Duration: 00:15:23 | Recorded on February 18, 2021



PROVIZION

Crece Informado

EL GANADOR DEL PREMIO GOTHAM IDENTIFYING FEATURES, UN EMOCIONANTE THRILLER FRONTERIZO MEXICANO, SE INAUGURA EN LOS CINES VIRTUALES EL 22 DE ENERO

Publicado el 17 enero, 2021



Kino Lorber anuncia el norteamericano Estreno en cines del apasionante thriller fronterizo mexicano CARACTERÍSTICAS IDENTIFICADORAS por Fernanda Valadez

El premio Gotham y el ganador de Sundance, Se abre en Kino Marquee y Virtual Cinemas en todo el país el viernes 22 de enero

Kino Lorber se enorgullece de anunciar el estreno virtual en cines norteamericanos del aclamado y apasionante thriller fronterizo mexicano Identifying Features (Sin señas particulares), dirigido y coescrito por Fernanda Valadez, coproducido y coescrito por Astrid Rondero, e incluye un elenco y un equipo mayoritariamente femeninos.

Ganadora del Premio Gotham a la Mejor Película Internacional, la película se estrena en Kino Marquee y cines virtuales en todo el país, incluidos Film at Lincoln Center y BAM en la ciudad de Nueva York, y los cines Laemmle en Los Ángeles, el viernes 22 de enero de 2021.

Ganador de los premios World Cinema Dramatic Audience and Screenplay en el Festival de Cine de Sundance, entre muchos otros reconocimientos en numerosos festivales de cine internacionales como Morelia, San Sebastián, Salónica, Zúrich y Estocolmo, *Identifying Features* cuenta la historia de Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), quien ha perdido el contacto con su hijo después de que se fue con un amigo de su pueblo de Guanajuato para cruzar la frontera hacia Estados Unidos, con la esperanza de encontrar trabajo. Desesperada por descubrir qué le sucedió, y por saber si está vivo o no, se embarca en un viaje en constante expansión y cada vez más peligroso para descubrir la verdad.

Al mismo tiempo, un joven llamado Miguel (David Illescas) ha regresado a México luego de ser deportado de Estados Unidos y finalmente su camino converge con el de Magdalena. A partir de esta premisa simple pero urgente, la directora Fernanda Valadez ha elaborado en su impactante largometraje de debut un ritmo lento, lleno de suspenso y lírico, construido a partes iguales por momentos de belleza y horror, y que conduce a una conclusión sorprendente y demoledora.

"Combina una cinematografía asombrosa, un diseño de sonido evocador y toques de realismo mágico para crear una obra visionaria de poder devastador". —Anjana Janardhan, *vista y sonido*

"En todos los niveles, este es un cine impresionante". —Wendy Ide, *Screen Daily*

"Un debut como director de largometraje seguro, logrado y distintivo". —Dennis Harvey, *Variedad*

CARACTERÍSTICAS IDENTIFICADORAS. Sin señas particulares, México, 2020, 94 min. En español con subtítulos en inglés. Directora: Fernanda Valadez; Escrito por: Fernanda Valadez y Astrid Rondero; Productores: Astrid Rondero, Fernanda Valadez, Jack Zagha y Yossy Zagha; Productora de línea: Diana Arcega; Dirección de fotografía: Claudia Becerril Bulos; Directora de arte: Dalia Reyes; Edición: Fernanda Valadez, Astrid Rondero, Susan Korda; Grabación de sonido: Misael Hernández; Diseño de sonido: Omar Juárez Espino; Música original: Clarice Jensen. Reparto: Mercedes Hernández, David Illescas, Juan Jesús Varela, Ana Laura Rodríguez, Laura Elena Ibarra, Xicoténcatl Ulloa. Un lanzamiento de Kino Lorber.

Fuente: Cinema Tropical

Viviré junto al cáncer.- Sakamoto

REFORMA / STAFF

Ryuichi Sakamoto, una de las leyendas vivas de la composición, fue diagnosticado con cáncer colorrectal, reportó The Guardian.

"La noticia fue desalentadora, pero gracias a los excelentes médicos que conocí, la cirugía a la que me sometí fue un éxito. Ahora estoy en tratamiento", escribió el ganador del Óscar, de 69 años, en su sitio web.

"Debido a estas circunstancias, viajar largas distancias por motivos de trabajo será difícil. Aún así, seguiré trabajando tanto como pueda durante el tratamiento... De ahora en adelante, viviré junto al cáncer. Pero, espero hacer música un poco más".

El compositor y músico japonés se hizo famoso con el grupo de pop electrónico Yellow Magic Orchestra a finales de la década de 1970. Tuvo una exitosa carrera en solitario al mismo

tiempo, lanzando 19 álbumes de estudio en solitario, hasta ahora, y ha colaborado con músicos como Brian Wilson, Iggy Pop y David Byrne.

Actuó junto a David Bowie en la película de 1983 **Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence** y compuso su famosa melodía, y ha escrito numerosas bandas sonoras para directores como Pedro Almodóvar (**Tacones Lejanos**) y Alejandro González Iñárritu (**El Renacido**). Sakamoto ganó premios Óscar, Globo de Oro y Grammy por el soundtrack de **El Último Emperador** (1987), del director Bernardo Bertolucci.

En 2014, le diagnosticaron cáncer de garganta y se tomó un año libre para concentrarse en el tratamiento.

"Pasé el momento más duro y físicamente doloroso de mi vida. Casi no podía comer, o casi no podía tragar mi propia saliva", compartió entonces.



■ El músico japonés, diagnosticado con la enfermedad, compuso la banda sonora de cintas como "El Renacido".



Conquista crítica de EU

La película mexicana **Sin Señales Particulares** (2020), ópera prima de Fernanda Valadez, logra buenas críticas en Estados Unidos tras su lanzamiento el 22 de enero.

REFORMA / STAFF

■ "Hipnótica y desgarradora.

Sin Señales Particulares es un largometraje para maravillarte, pero sólo una vez que puedas sacudirte los escalofríos que emanan de la historia de la cineasta mexicana Fernanda Valadez sobre la búsqueda de una madre por su hijo desaparecido", escribió Robert Abele, crítico de Los Angeles Times.

■ La película, galardonada en el Festival de Cine de Sundance, acumula

86 puntos, de 100, en el portal Metacritic, en la que expertos del cine destacan la manera cruel en la que se plasma el drama de los indocumentados mexicanos.

■ La ópera prima de Fernanda Valadez sigue la historia de Magdalena, interpretada por Mercedes Hernández, quien emprende un viaje por México para encontrar a su hijo, quien, según las autoridades, había muerto intentando cruzar la frontera hacia Estados Unidos.

Viviré junto al cáncer.- Sakamoto

EL NORTE / STAFF

Ryuichi Sakamoto, una de las leyendas vivas de la composición, fue diagnosticado con cáncer colorectal, reportó The Guardian.

"La noticia fue desalentadora, pero gracias a los excelentes médicos que conocí, la cirugía a la que me sometí fue un éxito. Ahora estoy en tratamiento", escribió el ganador del Óscar, de 69 años, en su sitio web.

"Debido a estas circunstancias, viajar largas distancias por motivos de trabajo será difícil. Aún así, seguiré trabajando tanto como pueda durante el tratamiento... De ahora en adelante, viviré junto al cáncer. Pero, espero hacer música un poco más".

El compositor y músico japonés se hizo famoso con el grupo de pop electrónico Yellow Magic Orchestra a finales de la década de 1970. Tuvo una exitosa carrera en solitario al mismo

tiempo, lanzando 19 álbumes de estudio en solitario, hasta ahora, y ha colaborado con músicos como Brian Wilson, Iggy Pop y David Byrne.

Actuó junto a David Bowie en la película de 1983 **Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence** y compuso su famosa melodía, y ha escrito numerosas bandas sonoras para directores como Pedro Almodóvar (**Tacones Lejanos**) y Alejandro González Iñárritu (**El Renacido**). Sakamoto ganó premios Óscar, Globo de Oro y Grammy por el soundtrack de **El Último Emperador** (1987), del director Bernardo Bertolucci.

En 2014, le diagnosticaron cáncer de garganta y se tomó un año libre para concentrarse en el tratamiento.

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ESPECTÁCULOS

Alaba la crítica de EU a la cinta mexicana Sin señas particulares

▼ La cinta mexicana Sin señas particulares (2020) logra buenas críticas en Estados Unidos tras su lanzamiento el pasado 22 de enero. “Hipnótica y desgarradora. Sin señas particulares es un largometraje para maravillarte, pero sólo una vez que puedas sacudirte los escalofríos que emanan de la historia de la cineasta mexicana Fernanda Valadez sobre la búsqueda ... Continúa leyendo Alaba la crítica de EU a la cinta mexicana Sin señas particulares

Enero 25, 2021

La cinta mexicana Sin señas particulares (2020) logra buenas críticas en Estados Unidos tras su lanzamiento el pasado 22 de enero.

“Hipnótica y desgarradora. Sin señas particulares es un largometraje para maravillarte, pero sólo una vez que puedas sacudirte los escalofríos que emanan de la historia de la cineasta mexicana Fernanda Valadez sobre la búsqueda de una madre por su hijo desaparecido”, escribió Robert Abele de Los Ángeles Times. El filme, galardonado en el Festival de Cine de Sundance, acumula en total 86 puntos, de 100, en el portal Metacritic, en la que expertos del cine destacan la manera cruel en la que se plasma el drama de los indocumentados mexicanos.

La ópera prima de Valadez sigue a Magdalena (Mercedes Hernández), quien emprende un viaje por México para encontrar a su hijo, quien, según las autoridades, había muerto intentando cruzar la frontera hacia Estados Unidos. (Agencia Reforma / Ciudad de México).



Conquista a la crítica travesía migrante

La cinta Sin Señas Particulares, de Fernanda Valadez, ha logrado buenas reseñas en EU tras su lanzamiento el pasado 22 de enero



Sin Señas Particulares, de Fernanda Valadez, sigue a una mujer que emprende un viaje para encontrar a su hijo, quien habría muerto intentando cruzar la frontera a EU.

lunes, 25 de enero de 2021 · 00:00

AGENCIA REFORMA

Ciudad de México

La cinta mexicana Sin Señas Particulares (2020) logra buenas críticas en Estados Unidos tras su lanzamiento el pasado 22 de enero.

“Hipnótica y desgarradora. Sin Señas Particulares es un largometraje para maravillarte, pero sólo una vez que puedas sacudirte los escalofríos que emanan de la historia de la cineasta mexicana Fernanda Valadez sobre la búsqueda de una madre por su hijo desaparecido”, escribió Robert Abele de Los Angeles Times.

Viaje desgarrador

El filme, galardonado en el Festival de Cine de Sundance, acumula en total 86 puntos, de 100, en el portal Metacritic, en la que expertos del cine destacan la manera cruel en la que se plasma el drama de los indocumentados mexicanos.

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Mexican Film IDENTIFYING FEATURES Wins Gotham Award for Best International Feature

January 11, 2021



Mexican film *Identifying Features* / *Sin señas particulares*, the debut feature by Fernanda Valadez, was announced this evening as the winner of the inaugural Best International Feature Award at the 30th Annual Edition of the Gotham Awards presented by the Independent Filmmaker Project (IFP, soon to be renamed as the Gotham Film & Media Institute).

In her acceptance speech, director Valadez said that in “these crazy, difficult, dark times, for the whole world, for Mexico, for the United States, I think film is an amazing tool to help us understand each other, because it gives us the opportunity to live a little in someone else’s shoes.”

The acclaimed and gripping Mexican border thriller co-produced and co-written by Astrid Rondero was also the winner of the World Cinema Dramatic Audience and Screenplay awards at the Sundance Film Festival, where it had its world premiere a year ago, as well as a winner at numerous international film festivals including Morelia, San Sebastian, Thessaloniki, Zurich, Stockholm. The film opens in North American virtual cinemas next Friday, January 22.

Identifying Features tells the story of middle-aged Magdalena (Mercedes Hernandez), who has lost contact with her son after he took off with a friend from their town of Guanajuato to cross the border into the U.S., in hopes of finding work. Desperate to find out what happened to him—and to know whether or not he's even alive—she embarks on an ever-expanding and increasingly dangerous journey to discover the truth.

At the same time, a young man named Miguel (David Illescas) has returned to Mexico after being deported from the U.S., and eventually his path converges with Magdalena's. From this simple but urgent premise, director Fernanda Valadez has crafted in her striking debut feature a lyrical, suspenseful slow burn, constructed equally of moments of beauty and horror, and which leads to a startling, shattering conclusion.