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Film Reviews

El Norte. Dir. Gregory Nava. Perf. David Villalpando, Zaide Silvia Gutierrez, Ernesto Gomez Cruz. American Playhouse, Channel Four Films, Independent Productions, 1983, Film.

Directed by Gregory Nava in 1983 as an independent film, *El Norte* is a melodramatic blockbuster. The film was nominated for Best Original Screenplay in 1985 and marked as the first American Indie film. In his interview with *New York Times* on *El Norte*, Nava criticizes the mainstream movies with stories that foreground Americans rather than Latin Americans. For Nava, mainstream films distort the Latin identity and experience. He says in the mainstream movies, "[...] all the major characters are American, you don't get to know the people to whom things are really happening down there" (Insdorf). Thus, *El Norte* attempts to zoom on the real Latin experience in an alternate way. The border issue — still creating hot debates between Mexico and the States — is narrated through the touchy journey of two teenage siblings Rosa (Zaide Silvia Gutierrez) and Enrique (David Villalpando) escaping from a Guatemalan town to *El Norte* — the US.

The movie has three episodes with interlocking stories following the characters' journey from the south to the north — from the local to the global. The first episode takes place in the local town of Guatemala. The first episode depicts the local colors of Guatemalan culture and tradition with clothing, bread making, or water carrying. In the first episode, the local conflicts in the hometown start to threaten the survival of peasant families. Rosa and Enrique become determined to flee from Guatemala after being terrorized by the armed forces, following the hanging of their father and retention of their mother. In the first episode, the characters dream about the life in the US in the after-dinner conversations. The US is built as the land of opportunities and welfare in the stories told by Rosa's godmother. The two siblings set their minds to reach *El Norte* and run away from their village under occupation with the false hope of freedom and equality.

The second part of the movie takes place in a border city — Tijuana, where all come with the dream of escaping their Latin American countries. In this episode, the director turns the objectives to the political issue of borders and the hardships that immigrants face with range from abuse and capture to theft. In addition, Enrique and Rosa need to disguise their Guatemalan identity and pretend to be Mexicans as their true ethnic background may hinder their escape. Thus, going up to the north, their ethnic background, as well as their class, becomes another obstacle to be dealt with. Through their attempts, the viewers see the challenges Latin Americans face in the border. For instance, their first attempt is stopped by the US border patrol while a coyote — a guide helping to pass the border — threatens them with a knife to steal their money. While being questioned by the patrols, Enrique tries to convince them that they are Mexicans in order not to be sent back to Guatemala. Eventually, the couple manages to pass through the border in an old sewer pipe full of rats, ending the second episode of the film.

The last episode of the movie begins with their arrival at El Norte. Los Angeles welcomes the two siblings with its glamorous city lights at night symbolizing the American dream. However, life is not as lively and shiny as the city lights for illegal immigrants in the city. Shortly after settling in a shabby rental room, the two become victims of the cheap labor force which is a common fate for illegal immigrants. Parallel to the first episode, class exploitation raises a global issue in this episode. As well as class exploitation, the last episode centralizes the rat race between the Latin refugees to work at low-paid jobs without any social insurance. Soon, the dream land turns out to be land of exploitation and alienation for the two siblings like many other illegal immigrants. Though both Enrique and Rosa work hard and try to integrate into American life, they cannot achieve social acceptance. Eventually, Rosa dies at the end of the movie as a result of contracting typhus from the sewage rats as she neglects going to the doctor because she dreads being found out and thrown out of the country. In the dark hospital room, the two realize that neither Guatemala nor the US recognize their individuality and they do not have a home anywhere. After the death of her sister, Enrique starts working as a construction worker under harsh conditions. The movie has a deterministic ending and leaves no hope for the future.

Technically speaking, as a low-budget independent film, the screen and sound quality of the movie look simple. However; the script succeeds to take the viewers to the world of Latin American immigrants by covering a journey from the Latin American village to San Francisco in 132 minutes. With the successful implementation of magical imagery to the main script, the director accomplishes to insert colors from local Guatemalan life. The illusionary images of brightly colored peacocks, flowers, and spiders represent Rosa's emotional state and signal an upcoming change in the first episode. The illusions that cut the life like scenes gives voice to Rosa's connection with her family, culture, and native land while she is in the US. The scenes of her mother baking tortilla and her father giving her a basket of flowers with a dead fish on the top echo her alienation in the American land in the last episode. Besides, the adaptation of traditional local music to the imagery scenes empowers the emotional transmission that connects the viewers with locality.

Overall, though the movie has a highly melodramatic structure, it succeeds to carry political messages without turning into agitation. Moving from the local to the global, the movie reflects how local conflicts, economic exploitation, and racial discrimination shape the lives of immigrants without stereotyping Latino identity and culture.

Works Cited

Insdorf, Annette. "El Norte on Screen and in Reality, a Story of Struggle." *New York Times,* 8 Jan. 1984. Web. 25 Jul. 2015.

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