

Crossing borders: from indifference to empathy, stimulating a humanist perspective on the issue of illegal immigration through film.

Pedro J. Lopes
Lander University
Greenwood, South Carolina, U.S.A.

We live in an age where the mounting pressure of bad news from all angles inevitably causes us to become desensitized to certain issues that should be at the front and center of our focus. Other forces and tendencies tend to aggravate this state of affairs: as our youth fall prey to the ever hypnotizing gravitational force exerted by the phenomenon of social media and the idolatry of a disingenuous contingent of celebrities, they seem to become progressively alienated from the reality immediately surrounding them, constantly losing grasp of the nature, depth, or the mere existence of the issues that affect us all as human beings; in the meantime, the mainstream media of the land, never losing sight of its fundamental goal – ratings –, occasionally diverts our attention to the ideological *pillow fights* carried out by the ruling class, which likewise systemically ignores the real issues and even finds advantageous to simply render them void of any substance. All the while, an array of punditry inundate the public sphere engaging in the ridiculous discussion of the benefits of vaccination, or the legitimacy of climate change warnings, or even whether creationism should be taught in schools – a grotesque chattering spree that insults the very notion of “public debate”. The rest of the time, the airwaves are filled with either the so-called “Reality TV” or other similarly outlandish exploitation of human misery disguised as legitimate programming which we have grown to accept as “normal”.

At a time where the issue of illegal immigration makes an occasional appearance in the political rhetoric, it seems appropriate that our students develop, if not an empathy, at least an adequate awareness of a social problem to which no one should remain indifferent. Moreover, I find imperative that we promote the understanding that illegal immigration, before being a political, economic, and social problem, it's a major humanitarian concern – of the type that so often is missed in the reigning political narrative.

It is thus fundamental that establishments of higher education step in to fill this gap. And what a better venue to reach out and to engage students in this conversation than in the context of film courses?

When teaching this type of courses, instructors play a pivotal role in guiding the discussion in the right direction, given the strong feelings and ideological predispositions with which some students may present themselves in class. Depending on class demographics, the instructor may want to adopt a position of neutrality as to avoid antagonizing some students. Class discussions should therefore follow the typical approach used on any other course on film studies, thus focusing on filmic technique, discourse, characters, symbols, etc. Regardless of which aspects of film criticism are emphasized in any particular class or course, maintaining the rigor of analysis is essential as to encourage critical thinking independently of the quality and scope of each film – which will naturally vary greatly.

In terms of selection, the myriad of films made on the theme of illegal immigration in general makes it difficult to decide what to leave out. For the purposes of this work, and while my main

concern is not to be exhaustive, I will mention a representative repertoire which includes not only full-feature films, but also short films, and documentaries.

El Norte, from 1983, is arguably the first iconic film dealing with the perils of illegal border crossing and presenting the dual sense of hope and vulnerability felt by those living in the United States illegally. Directed by Gregory Nava, *El Norte* tells the story of a brother and sister who escape the violence brought about by a military coup in their native Guatemala in 1982. The journey of these two Mayan peasants takes them not only across the Mexican-American border, but also across Mexico to get there. It is in this foreign land where they feel first-hand the threats linked to their status of illegal immigrants, as well as experience a cultural shock not very different from what they would find farther north in Los Angeles.

There are a few other sub-themes introduced in this film that are explored further in more recent films. While the crossing of the border is a dramatic episode which many immigrants can certainly relate to, it is not the last obstacle the siblings have to face in their new life. Even though the language barriers are softened with the help of other more experienced immigrants, periods of disenchantment, especially felt by Rosa, the sister, often put a damper on the optimism most often shown by her brother Enrique, who seems more eager to learn the new language, and adapt to the new set of circumstances. When an envious co-worker, a *pocho* (one of the sub-themes I allude to) reports him to the immigration services, Enrique is forced to precipitate the decision to accept a position in Chicago, where he had been offered a job as a foreman. But as Rosa becomes gravely ill with typhus, which she had been incubating since the treacherous border crossing, Enrique is forced to forfeit the opportunity for a better life, choosing to stay

behind for his sister. In the end, Rosa succumbs to the disease and Enrique resiliently joins the crowds of day-laborers who wait to be picked up onto the back of trucks and driven to job sites of diverse nature on a per-need basis. Rosa's body has perished, but Enrique's soul is not in much better shape, as the last frames of the film portray his attention drawn away, both to his homeland and to the memory of his deceased sister's shattered dreams of a better life.

The fact that Rosa dies due to a border-crossing-related incident is not void of significance. It is indeed the contact with the rats in the tunnel that eventually kills Rosa, and that only delays what seemed inevitable. This is not as much a portrayal of a far-too-common reality unfolding along the southwest border as a premonition of what was to come. According to a *United States Government Accountability Office* report dated from August of 2006, the number of border-crossing deaths doubled in the 10 years between 1995 and 2005, the latter of which representing a peak year. 2012 comes at a close second registering 463 deaths, according to the *Washington Office on Latin America*. According to the same organization, in spite of the similar number of deaths among migrants crossing the border illegally both in 2005 and in 2012, it is worth noting that the number of attempts to make such cross was significantly lower in 2012 than in it had been in 2005. Moreover, fewer migrants seemed to originate from Mexico than from Central American countries. Like Rosa and Enrique.

The disparity between figures and the significance of these statistics is open to interpretation. But the amplitude in the number of victims leaves no doubt as to the degree of seriousness of the problem and the humanitarian crisis it represents.

Therefore, it is expected that several other films focus on the serious and dangerous challenge posed by illegal border-crossing. And they have over the years.

Most recently, in 2012, *Smuggled* tells the story of Miguel, a 9-year-old boy, and his mother as they attempt to illegally cross the border into the United States hidden in a secret compartment underneath a tour bus. Its director Ramón Hamilton tells of the drama, sacrifice, and eventually tragedy by accompanying this mother and son without ever leaving the narrow compartment in which they are smuggled across the border.

In the short film *Camión de Carga*, mother and son are also the protagonists of a similar narrative, one which leads to similar results – a mother making the ultimate sacrifice for the future of her child. Knowing to be terminally ill, this mother makes arrangements to travel in a concealed chamber installed in the back of a truck and be smuggled across the border into the United States. While her sister waits on the other side, she knows she does not have enough money to pay the *coyote* for both mother and son to be taken to a safe haven across the border. She then decides to stay behind with the *coyote*, presumably to be taken back South, while allowing her son to continue his journey to safety.

The sense of claustrophobia and powerlessness is in fact reminiscent of similar depictions. *Victoria para Chino* is a short film from 2004 directed by Cary Fukunaga that recounts the real story of 80 Mexican migrants who, in May of 2003, are loaded into an eighteen-wheeler to seek a better life north of the border. When the semi-trailer is found abandoned by its driver near Victoria, Texas, local authorities recover the bodies of 19 men, women, and children who had died of asphyxiation, dehydration, and hyperthermia.

In *La Misma Luna*, Carlitos is also subjected to confined spaces, in his case a secret compartment under the back seats of a minivan in which his smugglers take him across the border. In spite of his young age, Carlitos endures the pressing heat, the lack of oxygen, and, above all, the imperative need to avoid making any noise, including that produced by his own gasping for air.

Carlitos' precocious resolve is one of the aspects that granted *La Misma Luna* (or *Under the Same Moon*) a popularity not commonly boasted by immigration dramas – along with its *hollywoodesque* approach, humor, and, of course, the happy ending which American audiences largely favor. But regardless the rather commercial architecture of the film and the audience-captivating traits it adopts, *La Misma Luna* delivers an otherwise realistic and broad set of features that vividly characterize the illegal immigrant experience in the United States today. These include the infamous raids lead by the authorities in workplaces known to illegally hiring undocumented migrants; the solidarity among migrants; the helplessness felt by undocumented workers in the face of injustice; the strong family ties; the persevering work ethic; the overall sense of insecurity and vulnerability felt by most undocumented citizens.

The challenges of illegal border crossing are not limited to distresses associated with tight spaces and the constant threat of being discovered by the American immigration services. That is the case of those migrants who have the added disadvantage of having to cross Mexico as illegal citizens in that country too. Thousands of Hondurans, Nicaraguans, Salvadorians, and Guatemalans, male and female, old and young, risk their lives in this treacherous journey – as many as half a million a year, according to the Migrant Policy Institute. While reaching the border of Guatemala with Mexico seems relatively easy and uneventful, crossing this latter, a

large and culturally distinct territory, is no easy feat. Riding atop cargo trains through Mexico is the only option for the poorest among the poor, who are unable to buy from smugglers a relatively safer itinerary by road. “*La Bestia*” is the name given to the massive train compositions that transport mainly industrial commodities across Mexico headed north, some even across the border into the United States. Central Americans typically board these trains in the Mexican southern states of Chiapas or Tabasco, a mere couple of hundreds of kilometers from the Guatemalan border, and endure the 1000-kilometer journey to central Mexico, where the network bifurcates and different routes take the cargo to distinct points of entry into the US border. The discomfort of the ride and the inconvenience of having to change train lines along the way is the very least of their concerns. In addition to the risks inherent to frequently getting on and off the *Beast* (many migrants have lost their arms, legs, or lives altogether in this process), these poor souls also have to endure the gangs of criminals who raid these trains along the way and proceed to rob, torture, rape, and kidnap these travelers. When it’s not the gangs, it’s the Mexican law enforcement officers, be that federal, state, municipal, or immigration agents who cross the line of their duties and do their part in beating and extorting these undocumented and defenseless passersby. Not to forget the rail freight companies own private security agents, who add to the regrettable roll of abuse of authority that all too often spawns brutality and theft. For good reason this is also known as the “*Train of Death*”.

Sin Nombre (2009) is a full-feature film directed by the same director of *Victoria para Chino*, Cary Fukunaga, and whose narrative highlights precisely the hazards of such railway journey. It tells the story of Sayra, a Honduran teenage girl traveling north with her father and uncle with

the goal of reuniting with family members in New Jersey, via Texas. As this family crosses paths with Willy, a member of the *Mara Salvatrucha* fallen in disgrace with the gang and fleeing for his life, they eventually join forces in facing the dangers posed by this treacherous quest.

De Nadie is a 2005 documentary that can actually provide the context and thus clarify some of the specifics depicted in *Sin Nombre*. In *De Nadie* (which is appropriately sub-titled as “*Morir Cruzando*” but oddly translated as “*Border Crossing*”), it’s director Tin Dirdamal interviews a few migrants staying at one of the few dozen non-profit, charity-driven, voluntary-run migrant shelters that can be found along the tracks travelled by the *Beast*, in the middle of their often ill-fated journeys. Through their stories of suffering and despair, we learn that the term “*Beast*” refers not as much to the size of the locomotives and their cars as to the fear it instills in its illegal passengers. *Hell Ride* would be a more fitting title, one that Quentin Tarantino applied to a biker film. A similar account is told in *María en Tierra de Nadie*, a documentary film directed by Marcela Zamora and which tells the story of two Salvadoran women who try to get to the United States without proper documentation.

Renowned Mexican actor Gael García Bernal (protagonist in *Amores Perros* and *Diarios de Motocicleta*, among others), who incidentally, but not coincidentally, is the executive producer of *Sin Nombre*, is also the producer and protagonist of the 2013 documentary “*Who is Dayani Cristal?*”

The two-word inscription “Dayani Cristal” tattooed across the chest of a man found dead in the desert in southern Arizona, just 20 minutes by car from Tucson, is the only distinctive trait that can possibly lead to the identification of the corpse. García Bernal retraces the journey that

showed this young man to his death, 58 days and 3.200 kilometers after having left his home in Honduras.

A substantial portion of the film is naturally dedicated to the train ride, as it's estimated that this Honduran took only two days to reach and cross the Guatemala-Mexico border, and almost two months grappling with the contingencies he most certainly faced along the Mexican railroad, on and off the *Beast*.

Fate decreed that this young man would survive the migrant trail through Mexico only to perish under a cicada tree in the Sorora Desert. He is a personification of many invisibles, a synecdoche for the thousands of nameless human beings who never reach their intended destination and become mere statistics of a human tragedy that is oblivious to most of us.

Dilcy Yohan Sandres Martínez was 29 years old, had a wife and three children. Dayani Cristal is the name of his beloved 2-year-old daughter.

While filming “*Who is Dayani Cristal?*”, García Bernal and director Marc Silver made four short similar documentary films for Amnesty International titled “The Invisibles” – a title that delves into the concept of anonymity suggested not only by “*Sin Nombre*” and “*De Nadie*”, but is also reflected by yet another epithet held by the Mexican cargo train system: *El tren de los desconocidos*.

One other film that deals with the high price of pursuing a better life in another country by means of attempting to enter it illegally is “*90 Millas*”. The title of this 2005 drama refers to the distance between the northern edge of Cuba and Florida, and portrays the hardships faced by a

Cuban family as they set out to cross the Florida Straits aboard a homemade raft. After being afflicted by dehydration, hunger, thirst, sunburns, shark attacks, and even drug traffickers, in the end a months-old baby is the only survivor in the entire group. The only borders these martyrs cross are those of the limits of human pain, agony, and resilience.

In a different context and under different circumstances, the often nameless victims depicted in these films would certainly be celebrated for their bravery and be called heroes, or freedom fighters.

But because we are human beings first and political beings second, we need to acknowledge their sacrifice with the dignity it deserves, for the pursuit of happiness and seeking to better provide for one's families are universal values that should be protected everywhere regardless of nationality or citizenship status. And in that respect, these films, among others, may provide an entry point to the issue and maybe encourage further research on such an important topic.