The Golden Dream

Migration and Realism in Fictional Film

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Migration has been widely addressed throughout the history of Mexican cinema. In both dramas and documentary features, Mexican filmmakers have explored stories and characters involving this constant flow of people, mostly from Mexico into the United States, bringing forth changing perceptions and creating different perspectives about this complex phenomenon. Some examples of the various approaches to this in Mexican movies are fictional films by renowned directors, such as *Espaldas mojadas* (Wetbacks) (Alejandro Galindo, 1953), a classic crime thriller set in the border town of Ciudad Juárez; *La ilegal* (The Illegal Woman) (Arturo Ripstein, 1979), the melodramatic account of a woman's disappointments and struggles in California, starring soap opera diva Lucía Méndez; and *El jardín del Edén* (The Garden of Eden, María Novaro, Canada/France/Mexico, 1994), an almost mythical quest by a group of women for a promised land along the Mexico-U.S. border. Recent Mexican documentary films like *Mi vida dentro* (My Life Inside, Lucía Gajá, 2007), *La frontera infinita* (The Infinite Border, Juan Manuel Sepúlveda, 2007), and *Los que se quedan* (Those Who Remain, Juan Carlos Rulfo and Carlos Hagerman, 2008), focus on critically describing the plight of both Central Americans and Mexicans who migrate to the U.S., most of them lacking legal documentation, as well as on the manifold aspects and consequences of this specific kind of migration.

Through fictional and documentary narratives, these Mexican filmmakers have depicted the never-ending dangers of travelling north and then trying to safely cross the border without papers, coupled with the constant fear of deportation once in the United States. They have exposed the hardships and uncertainty faced by broken families as some family members choose to leave their hometowns while others have to stay behind; they have denounced human rights violations of those harassed by authorities and criminal organizations alike, mi-

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Photos of *The Golden Dream* courtesy of Machete Films.

grants who are even killed, enslaved, and forcibly disappeared along the treacherous road to the U.S.; and they have narrated the stories of the few who painfully make it *al otro lado* (to the other side), searching for the so-called American Dream given the poverty, desperation, and lack of opportunities in their places of origin, revealing how tough everyday life in a foreign country is for a migrant with no clear legal status and highlighting the cultural conflicts that migration entails.

Even comedies, like *A Day without a Mexican* (Sergio Arau, U.S./Mexico/Spain, 2004) and the mega blockbuster, both in Mexican and U.S. theatres, *Instructions Not Included* (*No se aceptan devoluciones*, Eugenio Derbez, 2013), touch on issues related to migration. The former uses parody to recount a raving mad tale showing the disastrous impact that the sudden, unexplained disappearance of all Mexican migrant workers has on U.S. Americans' daily life. The latter, through Derbez's characteristic slapstick humor, displays all kinds of zany sequences as Valentín (Eugenio Derbez himself), the clumsy Mexican main character, illegally migrates to the U.S. with his baby girl without major setbacks, and then slowly but surely succeeds in the Hollywood film industry as a stunt man. This kind of fictional success story contrasts sharply with more realistic narratives depicting a bleaker state of affairs: by watching the news and reading the papers, one can easily infer that this kind of success is the rare exception for large migrant populations rather than a proven rule.

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Given these examples of how Mexican filmmakers have represented migration in cinema, Spanish-born, Mexican director Diego Quemada-Diez's first feature film, *La jaula de oro* (The Golden Dream, Mexico, 2013), emerges as a unique approach to this topic because it describes in full, gritty, and sometimes unsettling detail, migrants' perilous experience, centering the whole story on the journey itself. Closer to documentary narrative and aesthetics than to fictional accounts, this drama delves into migration's all-too-real trials and tribulations, into different kinds of well-documented abuse that thousands of migrants are currently subjected to in their northbound voyage.

The Golden Dream follows three Guatemalan teenagers, Juan (Brandon López), Sara (Karen Martínez), posing as a boy by the name of Oswaldo, and Samuel (Carlos Chajón), as they cross into Mexico and plan to make their way toward the U.S. After entering Mexico, Juan, Sara, and Samuel are joined by Chauk (Rodolfo Domínguez), a Tzotzil teen who speaks no Spanish but quietly exhibits a keen understanding of

adult life. Juan does not want to travel alongside Chauk: he shows a certain racism when he constantly dismisses Chauk for being an *indio*, and allows jealousy to seep in because Sara, his budding love interest, manages to befriend Chauk despite the language barrier. While in Chiapas, Juan, Chauk, and Samuel face their first obstacle as they are violently caught by policemen (presumably immigration officials) and are found to have no papers: their backpacks and shoes are stolen and they are forced back into Guatemala. After this unfortunate experience, Samuel decides to stay there, while Juan and Chauk resume their journey. They cross the border into Mexico for a second time to reunite with Sara and the threesome boards a train, known as *La Bestia* (The Beast), which will take them all the way north to the Mexican-U.S. border. When the train is stopped by soldiers in order to seize and later deport the travelling migrants, Juan, Sara, and Chauk manage to escape and find refuge in a sugarcane plantation, where they find a place to stay and jobs. Further down the road, the three teenagers are captured by several armed men —*narcos* in all likelihood—, who take Sara with them when they realize she is a girl and beat up Juan and Chauk as they try to prevent her abduction. After accepting that they cannot get Sara back, Chauk nurses Juan's injuries to continue with their journey. Together with several other migrants, Juan and Chauk are again captured by another group of armed men (most certainly linked to organized crime) who ask the kidnapped twosome for U.S. telephone numbers to carry out an extortion scheme. Juan is set free but returns to pay Chauk's ransom using his earnings from working in the cane fields. Juan and Chauk finally arrive in the border town of Mexicali and pass over into the United States with the help of human smugglers, colloquially known as *polleros*, who, after taking what is left of the teens' money for their so-called services, leave them all alone in the desert. Quite unexpectedly, Chauk becomes the target of a U.S. American hunter of undocumented immigrants when a bullet hits and instantly kills him.

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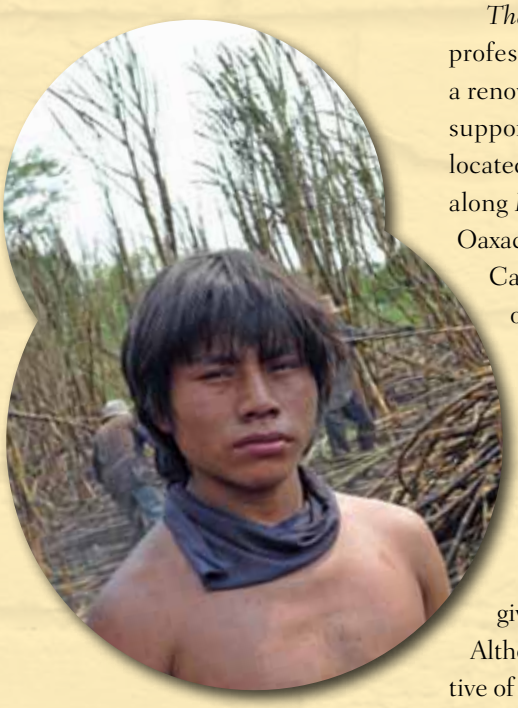
Once on U.S. soil, a forlorn Juan seemingly finds an end to his odyssey when he manages to get a menial job at a meat factory. Thus, the "golden dream" of the movie, the expectations of a better future that fuelled Juan's hellish journey and motivated him to flee from an impoverished and hopeless Guatemala for the U.S., a promised land of opportunities, is transformed into a "golden cage" upon Juan's arrival in California, a trap consisting of long factory hours, squalid working conditions, and the looming threat of deportation, suggested by the film's title in Spanish. That title was actually borrowed from the 1983 popular *corrido* "La jaula de oro" (The Golden Cage), by the *norteño* group Los Tigres del Norte. The nostalgic lyrics to the song are the voice of a homesick *mojado* ("wetback") lamenting the menacing prospect of being deported after 10 years of living and working in the U.S. and bemoaning the fact that he has become "a prisoner in this great nation" despite having achieved a much better life style for himself and for his family than the one they had back in Mexico.

Before *The Golden Dream*, Quemada-Diez had worked extensively in major motion pictures, including three films by distinguished British director Ken Loach (as a clapper loader in *Land and Freedom*; as an assistant camera operator in *Carla's Song*; and as a camera operator in *Bread and Roses*), as well as Alejandro González Iñárritu's *21 Grams* and Fernando Meirelles's *The Constant Gardener* (in both of which Quemada-Diez was a camera operator). His close connection to Loach's realistic filmmaking style, subject matter, and socially engaged and politically conscious storytelling certainly inspired Quemada-Diez to create a vivid account about migration, based on the director's own thorough research and interviews with migrants, the raw material for the script he co-wrote with Gibrán Portela and Lucía Carreras.



The Golden Dream's actuality is further anchored by the casting choice of non-professional actors and by the brief on-camera appearance of Alejandro Solalinde, a renowned Catholic priest and human rights activist who has tirelessly helped and supported migrants in his *Hermanos en el camino* (Brothers on the Road) shelter, located in Ixtepec, Oaxaca. This cameo, coupled with a careful selection of locations along *La Bestia*'s path (picturing different places in the Mexican states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Morelos, State of Mexico, Jalisco, Michoacán, Sonora, and Baja California), beautifully shot by cinematographer María Secco, and the featuring of authentic migrants on their way north, provides *The Golden Dream* with poignant realism, in no way softened or sweetened by the film's narrative. The protagonists' encounters with different abuses, from officials in all levels of authority to drug traffickers and other kinds of organized crime gangs, clearly display how migrants, under the pretext of being undocumented, are put into a place of constant vulnerability that results in mistreatment, intimidation, violence, exploitation, and, ultimately, death, as Chauk's fate shows.

Within this context of extreme vulnerability, females are specially targeted given the intensified sexual harassment and assaults that they endure on the road. Although Sara's fate is not explicitly made clear in *The Golden Dream*, it is indicative of how *narcos* routinely kidnap migrant women and girls to rape them and later on enslave them in prostitution rings. Needless to say, drug traffickers are not the sole perpetrators of violence against migrant women, as immigration personnel and other civil servants in several countries often demand sexual favors in exchange for safe passage. In short, Quemada-Diez's narrative is non-complacent, giving a truthful account of migration: the fact that only one out of four main characters makes it all the way on their journey from Guatemala to the U.S. points to the real-life appalling statistics that attest to the human catastrophe entailed in migration today.

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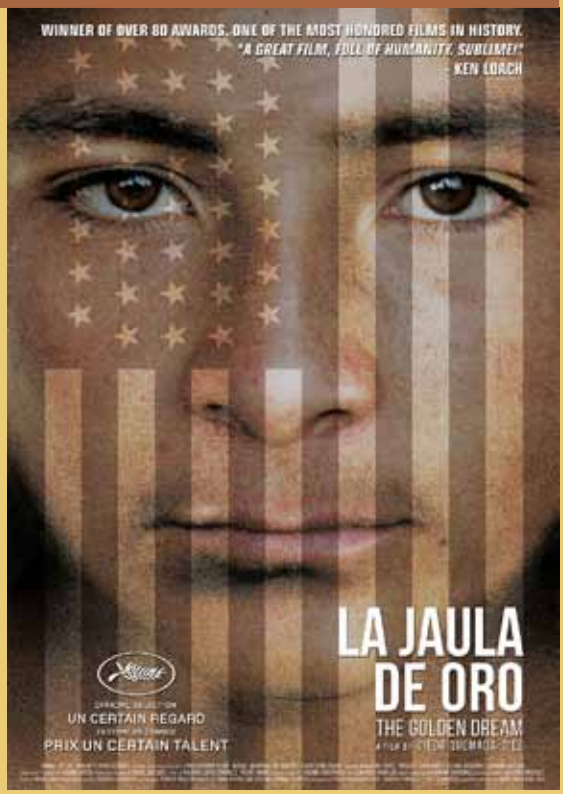

It is quite likely that this brutal honesty in the depiction of migration —albeit sensitive, restrained, aesthetically flawless, and certainly non-melodramatic— explains why *The Golden Dream* has gathered several awards and mostly positive reviews around the world. Quemada-Diez won the François Chalais Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013, where the ensemble cast was given due credit for their performances in the film with the "Un Certain Regard" prize; Quemada-Diez also received the Gold Hugo in the New Directors Competition at the Chicago International Film Festival held in 2013. In addition, he was awarded a Special Jury Prize for a First Work at the 2013 Havana Film Festival. In Mexico, *The Golden Dream* received most of the Ariel Awards —Mexico's Oscars— it was nominated for in 2014, including Best Picture, Best Screenplay, Best Sound, Best Editing, Best Score, and Best Cinematography, and it obtained the prize for Best First or Second Mexican Feature in the 2013 Morelia International Film Festival. All this makes *The Golden Dream* one of the most lauded and talked-about films in recent Mexican cinema history.

This is an unmistakably urgent film, just like the current situation of migrants not only in Mexico and the line that separates it from the U.S., but worldwide. *The Golden Dream* marries social concerns with both aesthetic and emotional insight, helping viewers get a brief glance at a reality that calls for further research in several academic fields and, most crucially, that demands that governments on both sides of every border take decisive action. VM