

Young Undocumented Migrants In Contemporary Fiction Films: *Guten Tag, Ramón* and *Ya no estoy aquí* Los migrantes indocumentados jóvenes en películas contemporáneas de ficción: *Guten Tag, Ramón* y *Ya no estoy aquí*

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ABSTRACT

The last fifteen years have seen a rise in critically-acclaimed fiction films depicting undocumented migration from and through Mexico. By analyzing two illustrative examples, *Guten Tag, Ramón* (Good Day, Ramón) (2013) and *Ya no estoy aquí* (I'm No Longer Here) (2019), this article uses the framework of the coming-of-age genre to dissect the characteristics of this kind of contemporary cinematography, thus pondering its inner-workings and appeal. Moreover, the author contrasts different aspects of the critical reception of these films in order to examine why they are met with both punitive disdain and enthusiastic celebration. The two films' differences in tone show how the themes of migration, poverty, and violence can be interpreted in various ways to call attention to their urgency. From the lighthearted humor of *Good Day, Ramón* to the poignant solemnity of *I'm No Longer Here*, the cinematographic genre, so close to the archetypal plot of coming-of-age narratives, denounces both the indifference of the Mexican middle class and the xenophobia that seeks to undermine the right to migrate.

Key words: Mexico-U.S., Mexico-Germany, undocumented migration, migration film, contemporary film.

RESUMEN

En los últimos quince años se ha observado que cada vez hay más películas de ficción reconocidas por la crítica que describen la migración indocumentada desde y a través de México. Por medio del estudio de dos casos ilustrativos (*Guten Tag, Ramón* –2013– y *Ya no estoy aquí* –2019–), este artículo utiliza el marco de referencia del género *coming of age* para analizar las características de este tipo de cine contemporáneo, y así revisar su funcionamiento interno y su atractivo. Además, el estudio contrasta diferentes aspectos de la recepción crítica de estas cintas, con el fin de examinar por qué son objeto tanto de desdén punitivo como de celebraciones entusiastas. Las diferencias de tono entre estos dos filmes muestran cómo los temas de la migración, la

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pobreza y la violencia pueden interpretarse de diversas formas que sirven para llamar la atención sobre la urgencia de atenderlos. Desde el humor desenfadado de *Guten Tag, Ramón* hasta la conmovedora solemnidad de *Ya no estoy aquí*, este género cinematográfico, tan cercano a la trama arquetípica de las narrativas del mencionado *coming of age*, denuncia tanto la indiferencia de la clase media mexicana como los escenarios xenófobos que buscan socavar el derecho a migrar.

Palabras clave: México-Estados Unidos, México-Alemania, migración indocumentada, película migratoria, película contemporánea.

INTRODUCTION

The last fifteen years have seen a rise in critically-acclaimed fiction films that depict young undocumented migrants who journey from and through Mexico to –but not exclusively to– the United States. These films range in tone from comedies like *La misma luna* (*Under the Same Moon*) (Riggen, 2007) and *Guten Tag, Ramón* (*Good Day, Ramón*) (Ramírez Suárez, 2013), and drama/thrillers such as *Padre Nuestro* (*Our Father*) (Zalla, 2007) and *Sin nombre* (*Nameless*) (Fukunaga, 2009), to art films that aim to create a sense of realism like *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Dream*) (2013) and *Ya no estoy aquí* (*I'm No Longer Here*) (Frias, 2019).¹ Employing elements of solemn documentaries that precede –and supplement– them (such as Arturo Pérez Torres's 2005 *Wetback: The Undocumented Documentary* and Rebecca Cammisa's 2009 *Which Way Home*)² and canonical fictions like Gregory Nava's 1983 *El Norte*, fiction films about young, undocumented migrants negotiating their passage into adulthood have achieved both box-office success and high praise from critics. This article studies two illustrative examples of the current cinematographic coming-of-age genre, Jorge Ramírez-Suárez's *Good Day, Ramón* and Fernando Frías's *I'm No Longer Here*, in order to evaluate how formative processes are currently used to depict, explore, and ponder difficult journeys of growing up displaced, undocumented, and away from home. I argue that because there are no clear paths to adulthood for the exceptionally moral protagonists, both Ramón and Ulises reject opportunities to join workforces

¹ *Padre Nuestro* (*Our Father*) is also known as *Sangre de mi sangre* (*Blood of My Blood*). Other films of the genre include, but are not limited to, Alejandro Chomski's *A Beautiful Life* (2008) (one of the few films in the genre to be overwhelmingly disliked), Chris Weitz's *A Better Life* (2011), and Rafi Pitts's *Soy Nero* (*I'm Nero*) (2016). Because they are nonfiction documentaries, this list excludes films such as Marco Williams's *The Undocumented* (2013) and Javier García's *La cocina de las patronas* (*The Boss Lady's Kitchen*) (2016).

² *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Cage*) (2013) is an illustrative example of the monumental effort to represent factual experiences, despite being fiction. Landa Vargas explains of the film, "Diego Quemada-Díez did research like that done for a documentary film, which can be seen in two central aspects: his diligent field research and the filming in real locations using non-professional characters/actors" (2020: 59).

characterized by criminality in Mexico, are unable to adapt to international settings because of xenophobia and their own immaturity, and are thus depicted as infantilized young men incapable of commenting on or affecting their political and material realities. I selected these two films because the scaffoldings of their plotlines are quite similar. Yet their aesthetics and tones are starkly different, thus enabling a comparison of their distinctive protagonists, ideologies, and how they comment on migration and violence.

Before dissecting the characteristics of plot and content of *Good Day, Ramón* and *I'm No Longer Here*, it is vital to outline the societal context in which the films take place. A brief description of the context is necessary because, as Martínez-Zalce argues, migration films contain an “interpretation that the creator made about border crossing and international migration, a practice that enables access to migration as a complex social process, the result and producer of meaning” (2020: 9).³ As such, fictional films about migration should not be understood as mere “neutral reflections of their environments,” but rather as a “result of criticism, exaltation, questioning, [and] subjective description of lived experience” (Martínez-Zalce, 2020: 8).

It is thus a conscious and interpretative decision that both films depict a type of migration motivated not, as it is often the case, by political or religious conflict or natural disasters, but, rather, by the particular forms of violence in their social settings: drug cartels in the case of Ramón and gang violence in the case of Ulises. While these characters should be considered economic migrants insofar as they dwell in settings where economic hardship produce the conditions for them to migrate –and why they intend to “be engaged . . . in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national” (United Nations, 1990)– the violent events that cause their departures underscore the involuntary nature of their displacement. The question of motivation is key in the ways that the U.S. (and other countries) handle migrants’ asylum petitions, apprehensions, and deportation proceedings.⁴ As economic migrants fleeing drug- and gang-related violence, Ramón and Ulises face complex conditions in which experiences of poverty are only one motivation for flight.⁵ The urgency of their situations forces them to voyage undocumented: Ramón’s situation is dire because of his family’s serious need for unavailable medical attention and the

³ Translations from Spanish are the author’s.

⁴ In particular reference to Central American migrants in the U.S., “Department of State and the Department of Justice have maintained that Salvadorans and Guatemalans who come here are merely economic migrants in search of a better life, and that as such, they are ineligible for any special treatment under U.S. immigration law” (Stanley, 1987: 132).

⁵ In the case of Ramón, who goes to Germany, the term “*Flüchtling*” could be applied. While *Flüchtling* is often given as a simple translation of “refugee,” it comes from the verb “*flüchten*,” to flee, which calls attention not to the search for refuge, as in English, but to the urgency of the action to leave a setting due to immediate danger.

drug cartels that seek to recruit him and Ulises's because of his accidental –yet inevitable– involvement in gang rivalries. Despite the difference in their initial social milieus, and while Ramón departs from a rural setting and Ulises from an urban one, they are tragic characters whose “calls to adventure” –per the Joseph Campbell hero's journey– are forced on them by the precarity of their living conditions. In spite of the particularities of their cases, Ramón and Ulises are symptomatic of a larger migratory movement rooted, on the one hand, in the economic integration of two disparate national markets expedited by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), creating a salary gap (Vázquez Ruiz, 2015: 104),⁶ and, on the other hand, in the exploitation of the Mexican economy described by Juan González: “A disturbing portion of its national wealth flows outside its borders each day and into the pockets of Wall Street shareholders. So much of that wealth has been siphoned off in recent years that the Mexican economy finds it increasingly difficult to feed and clothe its population. If these conditions do not change, Mexico will remain an inexhaustible source of migrants to the United States” (González, 2011: 97).

Ramón and Ulises are two fictional characters who represent the real situation of a large number of young Mexicans displaced into the United States. According to the data recorded by Peña López and Ocampo Figueroa in their recent study of youth migration from Latin America to the U.S., 2.6 million young Mexicans between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine migrated there in 2013 (2018: 302). Recent data counts 11.8 million Mexicans in U.S. territory, of whom 52.2 percent migrated undocumented (Peña López and Ocampo Figueroa, 2018: 305). Moreover, Levine, Núñez García, and Vereá note that in 2014, 5.6 million undocumented migrants of Mexican origin were living in the United States but, partly because of deportations, the number has decreased year after year since 2007, the peak year when 7.7 million undocumented Mexican migrants resided there (2016: 15). Importantly for Ramón, after several unsuccessful attempts to migrate to the U.S., which almost end in his death, he is pressured to try his luck in Germany, where he enters with a three-month permit available to Mexicans travelling to the European Union.⁷ His migration to Germany, although

⁶ The creation of a free trade zone between disparate economies has caused a wage gap that fuels migration like a fire; in the words of Vázquez Ruiz: “Migratory flows have as their main –although not sole– cause the wage gap created between a country with a lack of capital but a large workforce and another where there is abundant capital but a high demand for labor. In the countries where there is little capital and a large workforce, wages tend to decrease; while in those with a great deal of capital and relatively less labor, wages tend to increase. This is complemented by microeconomic aspects of migration, in the sense that migrants behave rationally, subtracting the cost of going to the destination country (transportation, housing, and food costs, payment to extortionists, to mention the most common expenses) from their net benefit (income), the product of the wage differential with their country of origin” (2015: 104)

⁷ “As of late 2022, Mexican travelers who wish to visit Europe will need to apply for a new European visa waiver from the European Travel Information and Authorisation System or ETIAS” (ETIAS, 2020).

not the same as his failed attempts to cross the border into the U.S., can be characterized as undocumented since Ramón has no intention of leaving within the period allowed, as evidenced by the fact that he buys a return ticket only to trick the authorities into letting him enter. Because it comes after a string of five perilous attempts at crossing the border with the U.S., in Ramón's story, his migration to Germany is an extension of those efforts and a last resort.

The migratory relationship between Mexico and the U.S. has garnered ample attention from scholars. Conversely, Mexican migration to Germany is studied less frequently. Like the U.S., Germany is a "nation of immigrants" in its own right.⁸ At least twenty million Germans had *Migrationshintergrund* (migration background) and eleven million people made up Germany's *Ausländische Bevölkerung* (foreign population) in 2018 (Destatis, 2020). A great influx of foreign workers during the 1950s and 1960s changed Germany's body politic: "Temporary guest workers recruited to work in West Germany between 1955 and 1973 became *de facto* immigrants, thus transforming the Federal Republic of Germany into an immigration country" (Triadafilos, 2013: 1). Klusmeyer and Papademetriou likewise assert that "between 1950 and 1994, approximately 80 percent of the increase in the West German population resulted from migration" (2009: 12). Most of the migration to Germany in past years—and at present—comes from Eastern Europe, particularly Turkey. However, a large and growing community of Mexicans exists in different parts of Germany, concentrating mainly in Berlin, Bavaria, and Baden-Württemberg. In 2019, Germany's Federal Statistical Office reported a total population of 18,015 Mexicans, up from 17,070 in 2018 and 15,815 in 2017. The growing appeal of Germany to Mexican migrants comes in the context Spain's slowing economy, with one of the highest unemployment rates in the OECD countries, (OECD, 2020) and what Vázquez Ruiz calls "golden migration": "This is the name given to the flow of middle- and upper-class people who, for several reasons (among them, violence and threats to their safety), leave the country" (2015: 111). While Ramón is certainly not part of a *golden* migration, he arrives in Germany in search of work and to a social setting accustomed to migration, where both multicultural and xenophobic attitudes are well-established.

In addition to being part of larger migratory movements, Ramón and Ulises are also part of a recent phenomenon of return migration, which, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, has caught the attention of "an important number of international migration scholars" (Levine, Núñez García, and Vereá, 2016: 9). Both characters experience what Levine, Núñez García, and Vereá identify as forced return:

⁸ John F. Kennedy famously imagined the U.S., quoting Tocqueville, as a "nation of immigrants," thus underlining its multicultural composition.

“Forced return [is] currently the most common; most cases are undocumented people and/or individuals whose petitions for refuge or asylum were rejected” (2016: 13).⁹ Ramón plans to spend an indefinite time in Germany to work and send money to his family. Ulises is aimless, his migration is a compulsory escape and, therefore, he has no premeditated notion of staying or returning. Rather than driven by a clear objective, Ulises misses his family and friends and insists on coming back despite his mother’s view that if he were to return to Monterrey, she would not have a son, because he would be killed immediately. While returning is often imagined as the “end of the migratory cycle” (Levine, Núñez García, and Vereá, 2016: 22), in the cases of Ramón and Ulises it is an imposed end to their formative processes that thwarts their passage into adulthood.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The two films were met with both punitive disdain and enthusiastic celebration.¹⁰ While there is much to applaud in their cinematographic innovations and social importance, *Good Day, Ramón* has been singled out for the infantilization of its protagonist, while *I’m No Longer Here* has garnered harsh criticism for showing “the persistence of forms of poverty commodification as marketing and representation strategies,” thus using and reproducing “the nineteenth-century anthropological view imposed on colonized peoples, who were transformed into objects of knowledge and curiosity for Western science” (Emmelhainz, Sánchez Prado, and Zavala, 2020).

Good Day, Ramón was widely praised for setting the migration trope against a European backdrop. Mexican critics enjoyed its lighthearted nature, one describing the film as a “well-told comedy with kind and optimist characters” (Solórzano, 2014), and a much-needed respite from crude stories of violence and poverty. In the U.S.,

⁹ The Pew Research Center publishes a detailed yearly report of deportation statistics. In 2013, when *Good Day, Ramón* was released, 438,421 deportations of unauthorized immigrants were logged, a record high that earned Obama the nickname of “deporter-in-chief” (González-Barrera, and Krogstad, 2014). 2018, one year before *I’m No Longer Here*, was released, reported “337,287 removals of unauthorized immigrants, a 17-percent increase from the previous year,” this despite a “lack of cooperation from an increasing number of jurisdictions nationwide . . . [and] sanctuary cities that have policies in place to limit cooperation with federal immigration enforcement authorities” (Gramlich, 2020).

¹⁰ As of October 5, 2020, both films have the prestigious accolade of a 100-percent critic rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Together, they have won twenty-three national and international prizes, including best picture at the Mexican Ariel awards (*Good Day, Ramón* in 2015; *I’m No Longer Here* in 2020), and multiple awards at the Diosa de Plata, the Morelia International Film Festival, the Cairo International Film Festival, the Ashland Independent Film Festival, etc. Importantly, *Good Day* was partially produced with funds from Mexico’s Cinema Investment and Stimuli Fund (Fidecine) and *I’m No Longer Here* is a Netflix production. Both were also funded by the Fiscal Stimulus for Investment Projects in Film Production (Eficine).

the representative *LA Times* review celebrates Ramón's "big-hearted" nature and recommends it as a "charming, involving excursion" (Goldstein, 2015). However, it is exactly the film's blithe tone that comes under fire in academia. Veronique Pugibet Ussel explains that the success of the film is "based precisely on national stereotypes and even auto-stereotypes" that the film uses to provoke laughter: "Their auto-stereotype is a comedy tool because the Mexican viewer –though not from Durango, not living on a farm, not an emigrant, etc.– 'recognizes' the manners, the kindness, the mannerisms, and more" (Pugibet Ussel, 2018). Pugibet Ussel points out that the Mexican audience is socio-economically far from the protagonist: it is wealthier and urban, yet similar enough to recognize his caricatured mannerisms as stereotypically Mexican, but set in a foreign social milieu where they become ridiculous and thus laughable. In several moments of the film, Ramón is depicted as a scared, innocent child in need of rescue; as Alonso Díaz de la Vega argues, he is "a diminutive element of the immense landscape, disillusioned and dwarfed in the face of an enormous world" (2014). When his German fairy godmother Ruth (further described in the following section) gives him a winter coat, it is an old women's garment that identifies his body as smaller, more feminine, thus unable to assimilate to or correctly act out the masculinity of the German setting. The characteristics of his jarring body are played for laughs, as is his desire to find ingredients to cook a burrito. The film is funny *because* it presents Ramón as an infantile performer of stereotypes.

The film's happy ending has been further criticized because of its unrealistic portrayal of return migration, most often an onerous process characterized by unemployment, difficult re-adaptations, and legal as well as social issues (Kline, 2016; Jiménez Díaz, 2016). From the German perspective, Judith Vera Retzlaff argues that the fairy tale vision of the film misrepresents "Germany's reality, where an increasing number of pensioners is no longer able to live off their allowances" when Ruth decides to wire her lifetime savings to Ramón and her "bank teller assuredly informs her that she will not necessitate her savings in the future since her monthly pension would cover all her expenses" (2017: 52). In conclusion, Díaz de la Vega finds the film and its ending extremely sentimental, a cliché resolved "like a sort of *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) for migrants," unoriginal and with nothing profound to offer (2014).

Similarly to Ramón's assessment, *I'm No Longer Here* has been criticized for the infantilization of its main character, but, unlike Ramón's, Ulises's portrayal as a fish out of water is not played for laughs, but rather to create "a 'pure' subject in the morally conservative sense who only operates according to his music and dance, like an ahistorical artistic ontology" (Emmelhainz, Sánchez Prado, and Zavala, 2020). According to Emmelhainz, Sánchez Prado, and Zavala, Ulises's "ontological innocence" (in particular, his lack of sexual desire, disinterest in consumerism, and refusal to express

himself in any other way than his music) “adduces an empty political position from the audience, which never comes from the same social stratum as the characters in today’s unequal cultural industries” (2020). Ulises passively experiences the hardships of his violent slum in the outskirts of Monterrey, Nuevo León, without expressing in action or word any criticism that could constitute him as a political being. Perhaps it is only at the very end, when Ulises turns off his music player, that he finally looks at the world around him.

In a similar observation to Emmelhainz, Sánchez Prado, and Zavala’s, Selene Muñoz Velázquez notes that the political context appears disconnected from the lived experience of Ulises and his gang, the “Terkos.” The film is set during the presidency of Felipe Calderón when, because of the war on drugs, “Mexico underwent a spiral of violence unlike anything seen before” (Muñoz Velázquez, 2021). However, Ulises and his friends focus only on their performance of style and dance, in rituals that Christy Lemire characterizes as a “primal mating dance” (2020). The “Terkos” are blissfully unaware of the context that Muñoz Velázquez highlights, invested instead only in their “joyously lazy” days (Lemire, 2020), aimless wandering, much like children, or, as Lemire’s use of the adjective “primal” poignantly suggests, like savages. The critics of both films expose innocent and childish characters, content with dancing, unable to ponder or denounce the injustices of their material realities, thus enabling the audience (fundamentally different from the characters in wealth and social class) to remain apathetic, callous, and politically neutral. The liberal middle-class audience craves an ethnographic *authenticity* that Emmelhainz, Sánchez Prado, and Zavala view as a fetishizing anthropological gaze characteristic of colonial relations.

Conversely, the rave review from the *New York Times* has nothing but applause, calling *I’m No Longer Here* a “thoughtful portrait of cultural identity” that “offers an authentic portrait of a boy adrift from home” (Winkelman, 2020). The films thus walk the line between well-meaning efforts to tell unvoiced stories of migration and the imposition of moralizing narratives that stereotype and simplify complex processes of migration and render infantilized protagonists.

COMING OF AGE ON THE MARGINS

Because of the depiction of the protagonists as youthful men transformed by their experiences of displacement, *Good Day, Ramón* and *I’m No Longer Here* reproduce many aspects of the coming-of-age novelistic genre.¹¹ Jerome Buckley proposed a set

¹¹ For a history of the *Bildungsroman* genre and its variations through three centuries of development, see Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo (2021).

formula for the most traditional iteration, the classic *Bildungsroman*, which these films both follow and subvert:

A sensitive child grows up in the provinces, where his lively imagination is frustrated by his neighbors' –and often by his family's– social prejudices and intellectual obtuseness. School and private reading stimulate his hopes for a different life away from home, and so he goes to the metropolis, where his transformative education begins. He has at least two love affairs, one good and one bad, which help him revalue his values. He makes some accommodation, as citizen and worker, with the industrial urban world, and after a time he perhaps revisits his old home to show folks how much he has grown. (1974: 18)

Ramón's plot largely follows this prescribed formula while Ulises's undermines it. Both characters are artists, specifically dancers, but in Ramón's case, his art enables him to work in Germany; in Ulises's case, it alienates him from the New York context. They both return: Ramón with riches, Ulises to die.

By definition, the coming-of-age genre depicts a young person negotiating his/her passage into adulthood in a specific social milieu. Often the path into adulthood, however sinuous, has specific markers of maturity that are agreed upon as social (and many times legal) conventions. We know people have come of age because they can drive, vote, get married, serve in the military, purchase alcohol, etc. These conventions of adulthood are often linked to legal rights and responsibilities ensured by citizenship, nationhood, and other forms of legal belonging to a community and nation. What happens when the protagonists of coming-of-age narratives cannot become fully adults and citizens because they cannot access certain rights or the place they inhabit does not recognize their legal existence or participation? In order to compare how the films use their protagonists' formative processes to evaluate the adulthoods available to Ramón and Ulises, in the following paragraphs, I outline the key elements of the films' plots, contrasting the two characters.

Ramón and Ulises set out as extraordinarily moral people (as Emmelhainz, Sánchez Prado, and Zavala argue, so much so that they become caricatures of purity), often *forced* into violence to ensure their safety or the well-being of others more vulnerable than themselves. The setting, whether urban or rural, is characterized by cruelty, poverty, and a general lack of opportunity or successful role models. The lack of moral *and* prosperous adults to imitate thwarts their expectations of the future. The only adults are either moral and thus unable to join a workforce characterized by criminality (that is, drug dealers, gang members, *polleros*) or immoral workers. At the foyer of maturity (Ramón is 19; Ulises, 17), they are compelled to seek moral paths into adulthood elsewhere. Their involuntary displacement lands both characters

in situations of hardship worsened by hunger, humiliation, and loneliness that test their resolve and serve to demonstrate racism and xenophobia. At this point and in accordance with Buckley's plotline, protagonists often find a guide or mentor, usually an older migrant who has been there longer, or a white savior,¹² who feeds the protagonists and provides wisdom and shelter. This guide often does not speak Spanish, which leads to forms of non-verbal communication that prompt in the audience either laughter (*Good Day, Ramón*), commiseration (*I'm No Longer Here*), or a combination of both, depending on the tone of the film. In some instances, the most bigoted section of society, represented by one villainous character, sets state apparatuses in motion to force the protagonist out of the country. This character is depicted as a small section of the host society, not representative of the whole, in an effort to imagine the host society as generally celebratory of multiculturalism.

Good Day, Ramón's opening shot places the camera among a group of migrants hiding in a truck, crossing the border into the U.S. It shifts from shots of the crowd to close-ups and extreme close-ups of the children and older women in the group. They are soon abandoned and, when found days later by U.S. officers—the passing of time marked by wide shots of the desert around them—the children and women have died. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection reports 7,216 people died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border between 1998 and 2017 (U.S. Border Patrol, 2019). The film begins by establishing the stakes of crossing: it is both dangerous and a last resort that often involves opprobrious conditions and the death of the most vulnerable. Ramón survives, but barely. Upon his return to the state of Durango, Ramón's friend Güero encourages him to seek out the murderous *polleros*, or smugglers, but, instead, Ramón establishes his good-hearted non-violent character by taking no action. Ramón is thus proven, in Buckley's terms, a sensitive young man, albeit docile, whose moral character is better than the world around him: he is neither cruel like the *polleros*, nor vengeful like Güero, one of the few models of masculinity in his social milieu.

Rather than a desire to forge his character and expand his creative imagination, Ramón is motivated by his grandmother's illness. She pressures him to make money for the family, accusing him of being unable to cross the border because of cowardice. As a symbol and agent of the precariousness of their rural setting, Ramón's grandmother embodies a national trend that Peña López and Ocampo Figueroa identify in

¹² Matthew Hughey defines "white saviors" as a widespread cinematic trope in which "intercultural and interracial relations are often guided by a logic that racializes and separates people into those who are redeemers (whites) and those who are redeemed or in need of redemption (non-whites). Such imposing patronage enables an interpretation of non-white characters and culture as essentially broken, marginalized, and pathological, while whites can emerge as messianic characters that easily fix the non-white pariah with their superior moral and mental abilities" (Hughey, 2014: 2).

the treatment of Mexican youth for the past thirty years: “[Young people] are treated by capital as spare parts and disposable, but above all to first devalue them and then exploit them better, to extract more surplus value from their labor power” (Peña López and Ocampo Figueroa, 2016: 43). Ramón’s grandmother, as the setting’s spokesperson, lays out two options for Ramón: he either stays and works for “Chiquis,” a drug lord, or crosses successfully to the U.S. Yet working for Chiquis is not a viable option, as people who work for him end up decapitated, a prediction soon confirmed by Chiquis’s own violent death. Ramón confirms his preference for migration not out of a conviction that he will receive a formal education in the metropolis, but because he rejects the possibility of working for Chiquis: “That war is not for me. What I prefer is to leave.”¹³ Importantly, before he leaves, Ramón is established as an extraordinary dancer of *banda* –he dances to a song played in a party by Banda El Recodo–, a ballroom dance starkly different from Ulises’s performative, individual dance. Ramón’s decision to leave is praised by his grandmother who validates displacement as a societal measure of masculinity by stating “you do have balls after all.”

The first act of *I’m No Longer Here* lacks the optimism of *Good Day, Ramón*, but shares the depiction of the violent Mexican setting. Unlike Ramón’s village of unpaved streets, Ulises and his gang “Terkos” dwell in the impoverished outskirts of Monterrey. Geographically and aesthetically, the Terkos are on the margins of the city, with establishing shots showing them dancing in an abandoned building with a backdrop of Monterrey’s skyscrapers. Los Terkos’s distinctive look (baggy and colorful clothes and eccentric, dyed hair) demonstrates their otherness with respect to Monterrey and, simultaneously, belonging to their counterculture built around “kolombianas,” watered-down Colombian cumbias. Because the narrative is non-linear, jumping back and forth, the larger political setting is shown throughout the film as a backdrop that explains the degree of violence in the Terkos’s community, but that the characters never reflect on or ponder. Focused exclusively on dancing for each other and petty theft, the Terkos have constructed escapist realities in Monterrey that alienate them from their political world. And, although Ulises (17) is almost the same age as Ramón (19), he does not have to provide for his family. As such, his motive for going to the U.S. is his accidental involvement in gang violence, not his family’s urgent plight or a need to prove he is not a coward.

The first few scenes in New York, where Ulises will eventually live, show him unhappy, unable –and unwilling– to adapt to his community of undocumented workers.

¹³ The Mexican war on drugs is an ongoing low-intensity conflict between the Mexican armed forces and different drug cartels, officially started by Felipe Calderón in 2006. It is also referenced in *I’m No Longer Here* in the official announcements over the radio repeated throughout.

His performance of masculinity is purposely incorrect and separates him from the community that could help him. In New York, Ulises, like his Greek namesake, is drifting and unable to go back home.

In an initial scene set in New York, a clever metanarrative device comments on the cinematographic coming-of-age genre's popularity and reflects on the commodification of poverty and migration for liberal middle-class audiences. A white U.S. American with a camera photographs Ulises, telling him that he has "an awesome look," then explaining that he runs a "website where I go around photographing random people" much like Brandon Stanton's *Humans of New York* project.¹⁴ While the Anglo context this man represents is interested in Ulises as story and aesthetics, his material well-being is irrelevant. The film is thus aware and critical of the class difference between the audience and the ethnographic subject, reproducing the imbalance so that the audience can see itself in its complicit fetishization of the character's marginalization and suffering. Yet, as Emmelhainz, Sánchez Prado, and Zavala have argued, this depiction of a gaze reminiscent of nineteenth-century colonial anthropology, without a subject that challenges or explicitly recognizes this imbalance, results in an apolitical, ahistorical ontology. In terms of coming of age, the character's escapism thwarts his formative process. While *I'm No Longer Here* recognizes, but does not dismantle, the asymmetry of power, no such metanarrative device exists in *Good Day, Ramón*.

The subversion of the classic expectations of the coming-of-age genre—where a young person becomes a successful adult, citizen, and worker—highlights the socially inequitable circumstances Ramón and Ulises inhabit, which deprive them of opportunities for education, ethical work, and role models of adulthood. In an interview at the Festival Internacional de Cine de Morelia (Morelia International Film Festival, or FICM), director Fernando Frías explained that his intention was to depict the lack of opportunity and social mobility in Mexico that he observed in Northeastern Mexico (2019b). Ulises and the Terkos lack options: their role models die young—and violently. And despite Ulises's intention to be a kind mentor to the youngest Terkos and to avoid the violence of his community, he is forced into gang rivalries and then exile. The film is effective in conveying the impossibility of a joyful, ethical adulthood, despite the protagonist's desire to belong within his group and take care

¹⁴ Brandon Stanton describes HONY, as follows: "Humans of New York began as a photography project in 2010. The initial goal was to photograph 10,000 New Yorkers on the street, and create an exhaustive catalogue of the city's inhabitants. Somewhere along the way, I began to interview my subjects in addition to photographing them. And alongside their portraits, I'd include quotes and short stories from their lives. Taken together, these portraits and captions became the subject of a vibrant blog. HONY now has over twenty million followers on social media, and provides a worldwide audience with daily glimpses into the lives of strangers on the streets of New York City" (Stanton, 2020).

of its members, thus presenting a grim interpretation of the inescapability of poverty in Monterrey, rather than a mere commodification of its horrors.

After the decision to migrate is made, both films depict the border-crossing. Invariably, this is a tense moment. Ramón faces a German immigration officer seated above him, a visual literalization of his power over Ramón. *I'm No Longer Here* uses the moment to expand on its poignant reminder of class impermeability in Mexico. *Ulises* is hidden in the bottom of a passenger van full of young, light-skinned, middle-class women, the mother of one of them, and a teenager boy going on a shopping trip to McAllen, Texas. The image of this group establishes an intense contrast with *Ulises*: they have European features, their dialect and clothes show they are middle and upper class, crossing with passports in hand and the clear intention to shop in the outlets and then return. Their joyful path into adulthood is coded in their documented belonging to a social class that has no difficulties crossing the border. The van metaphorically illustrates Monterrey society, placing wealthy consumers on the top, freely allowed into the U.S., and the poor, darker-skinned young man on the bottom, hidden from view, both from the Mexican middle class, which would be horrified if it knew of his existence, and U.S. border officials.

According to Susanne Howe, the coming-of-age genre displays a series of obstacles and false starts.¹⁵ Ramón encounters obstacles when he arrives in Wiesbaden looking for Güero's aunt but finds that she has moved away, and he has no means to communicate with her or call back home. His misfortune results in his experiencing a limbo of sorts, where he is unable to return to Mexico for practical reasons (he does not have enough money to pay the date-change fee on his return ticket), but also because returning would imply yet another failure to prove his masculinity and capacity to take care of his family (as per his grandmother's world view). As the year draws to its end, the weather becomes colder, and Ramón's suffering is visualized in corporeal terms: he is hungry and cold, he trembles pathetically against a radiator in the train station and counts his cents to buy a bit of bread. The humiliations he undergoes are both inflicted by the host society and, importantly, another more-established migrant from an unspecified place who speaks German with a heavy accent. The clerk at the small deli where he buys bread expresses his contempt since Ramón does not look like a tourist and is not there to contribute to that industry, labelling him a dangerous outsider. Ramón then tries to beg for money but the other migrant

¹⁵ "The adolescent hero of the typical apprentice novel sets out on his way through the world, meets with reverses usually due to his own temperament, falls in with various guides and counsellors, makes many false starts in choosing his friends, his wife, and his life work, and finally adjusts himself in some way to the demands of his time and environment by finding a sphere of action in which he may work effectively" (Howe, 1930: 4).

steals from him and assaults him. In keeping with his previously established non-violent, childish nature, Ramón does not defend himself, and it is his mentor, an old German woman, Ruth, a fairy godmother type, who intervenes and saves him from the streets.

Ulises goes through a parallel process, but his mentors are strikingly unkind, subverting the expectation of fairy-tale saviors. In his first few weeks in New York, Ulises dwells in a community of undocumented Latin American construction workers. He is a pariah in this community, bullied and harassed by his peers: in the aforementioned scene with the white photographer, the other migrants comment that the photo shoot must be for Animal Planet since Ulises's hair resembles a chicken. Further, like Ramón's, Ulises's masculinity comes into question since he is coded as queer on three different occasions. In the train, when he stares at Black performers, his peers comment that he must like "black cocks." They then take him to a brothel where he shows his unwillingness to belong when they play him Mexican *norteña* music, which he dislikes, and then refuses to dance with Gladys, a middle-aged Colombian sex worker. Here, Ulises reinforces his non-belonging in mainstream Mexican culture by snubbing the same music that makes Ramón happy. Because Ulises rejects the dance, Gladys asks whether he is "shy or a fag" and his peers say he is both. In this scene, his otherness is reinforced by the parallel image of an Orthodox Jewish man whose *payot* represent a visual simile to Ulises's long sideburns. Unlike Ulises however, this man is flirting with a dark-skinned woman who, presumably, he will pay to have sex with. Ulises's conscious failure to perform the macho masculinity of his peers and his unwillingness to dance to *norteñas* or have sex eventually force him out of the community. The break happens when the other men he lives with initially have a party in the small apartment. Ulises, feeling vulnerable after the men mock his dancing, calls one of the men a "fag" and then mocks him because "you'd like to be Black but you can't even pull it off," thus stating his perception of the inauthenticity of his peers' social practices and behavior. Ulises's violent exile from the community forces him to find refuge on the rooftop of a Queens apartment building where he finds his "mentor," a revision of the white savior, in an Asian young woman (of high school age), Lin.

Ramón's mentor Ruth is a lonely old woman, a comment on Germany's observed societal failure to take care of the elderly. Ramón starts helping Ruth by doing odd jobs around her building. According to Peña López and Ocampo Figueroa, many vulnerable migrants like Ramón find manual work abroad because of the "theory of labor market segmentation," which, they explain,

proposes that advanced industrial economies have unstable, low-quality jobs because of the division of the economy into a labor-intensive, low-productivity primary sector and a

capital-intensive secondary sector, which generates labor market segmentation. National workers reject these jobs because they lack prestige and have low wages. (2018: 257)

Young, vulnerable, undocumented people go into low-wage, low-prestige jobs because they are more vulnerable to exploitation; yet, as Peña López and Ocampo Figueroa explain, they are able to make more money than in Mexico and send back remittances, which is the very first thing Ramón does after Ruth pays him.

Ramón's and Ruth's non-verbal communication, misunderstandings, and miming create humorous situations, for example, when Ramón is cooking but Ruth thinks he is masturbating, and she takes him to a sex parlor. The situation aims at causing laughter since Ramón does not quite understand what is happening until they bring him a sex worker, probably an Eastern European, and he reacts with fear. Although evidently a funny moment, there is a sense of unease at the sexualization of his body, an imposition of heterosexual desire that he had not expressed or mentioned to Ruth. Ramón is yet again a passive object of the circumstances, not seeking sex for himself, but rather having compulsory heterosexuality thrust upon him, compelling him to participate in an asymmetrical structure of power already in place in Germany, which pressures immigrant women to engage in sex work with German men. Indeed, the marginalization of immigrants regardless of their gender becomes painfully apparent when Ramón ends up selecting a sex worker who looks much like him: dark-skinned, short in stature, foreign, yet perhaps Middle-Eastern or Northern African. Although sex is often a marker of maturation and a key ritual of forging one's own sexuality, in the film it is an imposition that serves to further infantilize Ramón.

After a few weeks in the building, Ramón starts teaching Ruth and other Germans to dance *merengue*, so his dancing becomes a source of joy, cultural celebration, and income, as opposed to what will happen to Ulises. Ramón's and Ruth's linguistic difference has a heartfelt climax when Ruth invites Ramón to dinner. They both open up to each other about their fears and pain: Ruth tells Ramón about turning old and requiring care; Ramón tells her that he understands not her words but her intention; Ramón calls her a fairy godmother and guardian angel. The conversation turns to the German memory of World War II, whose deadly forms of bigotry and fascism find a veiled counterpart in the character of Schneider, the villain who eventually calls the immigration authorities that send Ramón back. Ruth's recollection of German history participates in a fantasy of German anti-Nazism that frames Hitler as an extreme outsider and most of German people as innocent bystanders, contradicting Hannah Arendt's assertion in *The Banality of Evil* that the Holocaust was made possible not by malice or a general anti-Semitic conviction, but rather, as in the case of Adolf Eichmann, because of "unquestioning obedience to the Führer's orders . . . ;

they had all been small cogs" (Arendt, 2006: 1228). Ruth's father's story of resistance against the Nazis by sheltering a Jewish family in his basement and her assertion that many Germans hated the Nazis aims to be representative of German openness to multiculturalism, but while this happened in some cases, it is a historically inaccurate, revisionist effort to imagine that most Germans resisted in this way.¹⁶ The idea of her father hiding a Jewish family in the basement mirrors Ruth offering Ramón to live in hers, thus completing the film's romanization of German conviviality.

Instead of this convivial vision of a host society, Ulises's encounter with guidance and mentorship show selfish characters curious about him but who make no real effort to *save* him in the way that Ruth saves Ramón. Ulises has two mentors: Gladys and Lin. Gladys, a middle-aged Colombian sex worker, has all the elements she would need to become Ulises's fairy godmother: she has been in New York for a long time and understands how to survive. However, she is the reversal of the trope. When she assists Ulises, it is only for one night, telling him she will do nothing more for him since "you're not the first and you won't be the last," and asks him to never seek her out again. Lin meets Ulises when he asks her grandfather for work. The linguistic difference between Lin's Chinese grandfather and Ulises denotes the multicultural character of Queens, since they are unable to communicate effectively. Ulises then squats on the grandfather's rooftop, having nowhere to go. Lin provides food and basic hygiene products and even tries to communicate with him through a Mexican-American friend, born in the United States of parents from Puebla. But rather than an interest in his story or struggle, Lin uses her relationship with Ulises to gain popularity among her school peers, taking him to a party in order to appear more interesting. Lin suggests the possibility of a sexual relationship, but her advances are met by Ulises's unwillingness to engage. In a reversal of Ramón's success as a *merengue* instructor, Ulises tries to perform his dance for money in the New York subway and then under a bridge, and both times he is violently removed: first by a Black homeless man who screams at him and then by a police officer asking for a permit. Ulises returns one more time to Lin's apartment after being rejected by Gladys, but Lin symbolically closes the door in his face, explaining to her grandfather in Mandarin that no one is at the door. Rather than one single character representing the bigotry and xenophobia of the New York environment, it is a combination of all the experiences of rejection that corner Ulises into a drug-induced bender, the symbolic refutation of his own identity and pride in otherness by means of cutting his hair, that ends in him getting caught and deported.

¹⁶ It is calculated that only between 3,000 and 20,000 people aided Jewish families in this way. Most Germans participated in the persecution of Jewish people, which resulted in a population decrease from 550,000 Jewish people before the war to 15,000 in 1945 (Hall, 2008).

Ramón and Ulises's return to Mexico is the final part of their shared plotline. But, while Ramón's is remarkably optimistic, Ulises's reiterates the lack of options for him and the people around him. Ramón feels initially defeated, having failed yet again, but his fortune quickly turns when Ruth wires him the better part of her savings, close to a million pesos. Pugibet Ussel describes this scene as Ramón winning the lottery: "The scene becomes comical, since it is based on the social auto-stereotype that a peasant can only be poor" (2018). But while Ramón is joyous and rewarded for his efforts and kind masculinity, Ulises receives no such prize. Ulises returns to a funeral: one of the members of his gang, Isaí, has died because he graduated from the non-violent gang of the Terkos (only involved in petty theft) to a violent one involved in the drug trade and celebratory of firearms. Ulises finds a different friend, Jeremy, who has joined an evangelical church. In the final scene, Ulises returns to dance in the abandoned building where he danced with his friends, against the backdrop of Monterrey's skyscrapers. His mp3-player battery runs down or he turns it off, and the diegetic music stops and is replaced by the sound of police sirens and a helicopter. An ending open to interpretation, perhaps Ulises's first impulse in Monterrey is to return to his life of escapism but, realizing his gang is dead or has moved on, he decides to finally see the world around him, implying in an act of adulthood, the possibility of becoming an agent of change or, at least, political awareness. Or perhaps the symbolic end of the music communicates that Ulises has returned to die, finding no possible accommodation in Monterrey or New York, no place for him to become an adult. In either case, Ulises's return is a denunciation of the cruelty of the world he inhabits, unable and unwilling to accommodate his artistic expression and desire to belong.

Despite the clear similarities of their plots, the interpretations that these films set forth of migration, poverty, and violence are unambiguously different. Their differences in tone show how these themes can undergo varied analyses that illustrate and call attention to their urgency. From the lighthearted comedy of *Good Day, Ramón* to the poignant solemnity of *I'm No Longer Here*, the cinematographic coming-of-age genre, so close to the archetypal plot of the *Bildungsroman*, enables diverse creators' interpretations of the complexity of migration with both pessimistic and optimistic outlooks that denounce the indifference of the Mexican middle class and the xenophobic settings that undermine the right to migrate. Banking on the perennial appeal of coming-of-age conventions, yet using the investigative methods of journalism and documentary film, the genre is far from slowing down, as global migratory movements continue to expand, compelling filmmakers and audiences alike to ponder migrants' experiences, motivations, and rights. These films use the narratives of struggling young migrants trying to find their way into adulthood to provide for

their family (in Ramón's case) and to simply exist away from violence (in Ulises's case) to ponder why it is so difficult to grow up displaced, undocumented, and away from home. In the end, they both depict childish men who have not effected change on their environments and remain far from prosperous adulthoods. The films' shared fatalistic view of the destinies of young Mexicans seeking –yet unable– to escape their destitute, violent settings persists despite Ramón's lucky and happy outcome. Ramón ends not a self-made man who has forged a path into adulthood that others can follow, but rather the recipient of a charitable donation, particularly unrealistic in Vera Retzlaff's view, who argues it would likely be impossible for an old German citizen to make such a donation. At the end, the films offer no clear paths to adulthood for the exceptionally moral protagonists, unable to adapt to international settings because of xenophobia and their own immaturity. Their unfinished formative processes result in infantilized, apolitical young men.

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