

# El Norte

By Matthew Holtmeier

Charting the tragic epic of brother and sister Enrique (David Villalpando) and Rosa (Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez), “El Norte” (1983) reveals that behind every immigrant is an entire history of a people. Referred to by Roger Ebert as the “‘Grapes of Wrath’ of our time,”<sup>i</sup> “El Norte” follows suit by detailing the perilous pursuit of the American Dream, as refugees from the global south move north crossing national borders. The film follows two indigenous Guatemalans in three acts as they flee the military regime controlling their nation in the 1980’s, travel through Mexico, and finally arrive in Los Angeles, California with its promise of wealth.

Hailed by critics as the first ‘independent epic,’ the film was partially financed for television by the Public Broadcasting Service in the United States, but after its successful debut at the Telluride Film Festival in 1983 it received a theatrical release. Subsequently, filmmaker Gregory Nava and co-writer Anna Thomas received an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay, and went on to found the Independent Spirit Awards, which continue to celebrate independent films today.<sup>ii</sup> Whereas champions of independent cinema often point to Robert Redford and Sundance, “El Norte” marks Nava and Thomas out as contemporaneous pioneers of independent film in the United States. Indeed, while the film’s cinematography, editing, and sound merit awards as well for their poetic and deeply metaphorical design, the narrative itself heralded something new in the American film scene in 1983 by fully inhabiting the immigrant subject’s point of view, making “El Norte” an important early landmark of American independent film.

While written and directed by two Americans, “El Norte” is steeped in global history, starting with the organization of labor in Guatemala and its suggested connection to Che Guevara’s Guerilla Army of the Poor.<sup>iii</sup> This global perspective illustrates the perverse power of the American Dream in relation to harsh global realities. The film begins by espousing a political consciousness, with Enrique and Rosa’s fa-



*Rosa (Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez) helps her brother Enrique (David Villalpando) get ready for a job. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

ther (Ernesto Gómez Cruz) proclaiming, “The poor are only arms for the rich,” but subsequently acknowledges how populist struggles across Latin America met with extreme violence<sup>iv</sup> as Enrique’s father is brutally murdered and beheaded. Without detracting from the brutality of this act, Nava treats this material poetically through graphic matches whereby the father’s visage becomes the moon and then a funeral drum. The treatment of this murder sets a precedent for the magical realist aesthetic the rest of the film will employ, as his father’s death continues to haunt Enrique. Throughout the film, images and sounds interrupt the narrative unexpectedly, reminding Enrique of what he flees and driving the film beyond simple narrative realism.

Just as their father’s death haunts the narrative, however, so does the American Dream, starting the moment Rosa’s godmother reveals her stash of “Good Housekeeping” magazines. Upon arriving in Tijuana, dubbed by another traveler ‘the shit-hole of the world,’ coyotes sell the dream while Rosa and Enrique disembark their bus. A faded brown montage of Tijuana slums seamlessly cuts into a montage of California suburbs, with an emphasis on shiny red cars and sprinklers feeding green grass. This disjunctive montage lays bare Enrique and Rosa’s desire visually in a way that might communicate the unknowable experience of immigration to an audience situated in the global north. Despite the film’s critical focus on serious subjects such as military dictatorships, political murders, labor conditions,

and precarious travel, the film eschews a neo-realist approach for a magical realism well-suited to both cultural translation and a more authentic approach to the cultures of Guatemala and Mexico.

While the dual forces of violence pushing and dreams pulling them northward make up the first two sections of the film, the third lingers in two contradictory dimensions. One is the realization that California is unlike what Rosa and Enrique had previously imagined. Rosa's co-worker takes her to lunch in an area covered in signs written in Spanish, where she exclaims: "Where are all the gringos? Look at this street. It's just like Mexico City!" The other dimension consists of the lingering vestiges of the American Dream that overcome this apprehension of California's reality. This point is most powerfully made through Enrique misunderstanding his father's words from back in Guatemala, after he is promoted from sous-chef to server at his first job in the States. He rehearses the line, "the poor are only arms for the rich," while reflecting on how he has surpassed this reality, fulfilling his father's dreams that the world know him as "a man with a heart and a soul." His victory is dubious, however, as his work consists of serving a white-elite that likely have no thoughts regarding his heart and soul. This point is not made with ill-will towards either the immigrants or those that make use of their labor though, which reinforces the complicated nature of "El Norte"'s depiction of immigration in the United States.

Ultimately, the film begins with a rich history, embedded in global cultures and inspired by the structure of the Mayan *Popol Vuh*,<sup>v</sup> and ends with a lingering and dispassionate shot on the unreadable faces of South American immigrants clamoring for their daily work. Whereas the film begins by unearthing the passion of individuals that muster the will to make dangerous border crossings and give up their homelands for better opportunity, it ends with the camera inhabiting the conservative gaze that defines these immigrants purely as 'illegals.' The camera shifts from looking with to looking at the day laborers not to embrace this view, but to illustrate the loss of history

this dispassionate gaze renders. In a forceful coup-de-grâce, the film reverses its earlier sympathy to remind the viewer of how many citizens of the United States view immigrants today. The film's critical exposition of attitudes towards immigrants may have been powerful in the early 1980's, but its relevance today, over three decades later, illustrates the enduring quality of this film.

<sup>i</sup> Roger Ebert, "Great Movie: El Norte," *RoberEbert.com* (12 July 2015): <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-el-norte-1983>.

<sup>ii</sup> Nava and Thomas were co-founders of IFP/West, see timeline at: <http://www.spiritawards.com/history>.

<sup>iii</sup> Staffan Löfving, "Liberal emplacement: Violence, Home, and the Transforming Space of Popular Protest in Central America," *Focaal-European Journal of Anthropology* 49 (2007): 45-61.

<sup>iv</sup> Gilbert M. Joseph and Greg Grandin, *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War* (Duke University Press, 2010). See in particular the chapter by Carlota McAllister, "A Headlong Rush into the Future: Violence and Revolution in a Guatemalan Indigenous Village": 276-308.

<sup>v</sup> Susan Wiebe Drake, "Heroic Journeys: The Immigrant Experience as the Hero's Journey in *El Norte* and *La misma luna*," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, Vol. 31 (2013): 85-98.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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