

Review - Lupe Under the Sun

Written by Francisco Laguna-Correa

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FRANCISCO LAGUNA-CORREA, NOV 15 2017

Lupe bajo el sol/Lupe Under the Sun
Directed by Rodrigo Reyes, 2016

In recent years, films portraying immigrant life in the United States have begun to create a small but diligent spectatorship among those people eager to engage in discussions on immigration, labour alienation, and tropes of national belonging. For instance, from an ethnographic approach, films such as Ramin Bahrani's *Man Push Cart* (2005) and *Chop Shop* (2007) explore the intricate social manoeuvres that south Asian immigrants – *Man Push Cart* – and first generation young Latinx – *Chop Shop* – deploy while attempting to exist in a hostile cultural environment dominated by Anglo-American values. Furthermore, the Hollywood film *A Better Life* (2011) and the TV series *The Bridge* (2013-2014), both starring Mexican actor Demián Bichir, or *Desierto* (2015) featuring Gael García Bernal, have positioned the border and Mexican rural migrations to the United States in mainstream channels of public discussion. Regardless of these filmic efforts, the portrayal of immigrants on television and in the media continue to rely on nefarious stereotypes that both criminalise and trivialise the positive impact of immigration, including beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. The recent study *Immigrants and Immigration: A Guide for Entertainment Professionals* shows that Latino and Middle Eastern immigrants are overrepresented in American mainstream media as criminals or engaging in criminal activities.

Perhaps because our times have been militarized to such a radical extent, bringing along an unprecedented proliferation of borders in many forms – walls, biometric measures, restrictions to the cybernetic privacy and freedom of “unwanted” visitors/travellers, among many others -, the common American has forgotten a time when the U.S. government promoted and imposed the flow of rural Mexican migration to U.S. fields. In 1942, the Bracero Program began as a temporal agreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments to provide skilled labour in the form of rural Mexican males to the U.S. agricultural industry. This labour drain was conceived to support American farms that had lost their Mexican labourers due to U.S. military recruitment during World War II.

The first braceros were sent to a sugar factory in Stockton, California, but braceros rapidly arrived to farms across the United States. Despite the fact that Mexican workers had been emigrating – or had been present – north of the Rio Grande before and after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the bracero program gave a face, a body, and a purpose, at least in official national discourses, to lonely Mexican men living in the United States in agricultural settings. *Lupe bajo el sol/Lupe Under the Sun* (2016) by young Mexican filmmaker Rodrigo Reyes articulates the everyday life of a bracero by focusing on ontological and ethnographic issues regarding undocumented migrations that are not often discussed in public spaces.

The 85-minute film is a realist yet dreamlike exploration of the vicissitudes of an aging undocumented farm worker who rummages his time through a cyclic and tedious series of everyday activities. He begins his day at 4am, when he wakes up and prepares for work at a peach farm where both manual labour and repetition emphasise his alienating human condition. The pace of the film is purposely slow to introduce the audience to the everyday rhythms of the aging undocumented experience, a life that is rendered in the film with minimal dialogue, a device that Rodrigo Reyes deploys in a masterful way to portray the unknown inner life that all humans have the right to possess, even “undocumented human beings” (*sic*). In the film, speed is framed as a metaphor for social mobility; Lupe works on

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his feet and rides a tricycle as his means of transportation, in contrast with the very few Anglo people we see in the film, whose jobs and everyday lives are transported on four wheels and consequentially at a faster pace.

In a review of *Lupe bajo el sol* featured in *The Hollywood Reporter*, Jonathan Holland points out – struggling to fathom the ethnographic content of the film – that: “Dialogue is limited, which is frustrating at some points – why does Lupe so steadfastly refuse to engage in real conversation with Gloria, while he seems happy to do so in one scene with his card-playing buddies?” Holland attempts to problematise an anthropological complexity with origins departing from questions of belonging, *homeness*, and memory as a gender issue. The first scene that Holland describes is one that portrays Lupe and his partner Gloria at the table, each with a plate of *frijoles de la olla* in front, a trope deployed by Reyes to invoke a working-class Mexican home suddenly re-territorialised in northern California.

When Gloria tells Lupe that she is about to pay off the trailer where she lives, suggesting that between two people the burden of a debt would carry less weight, Lupe is unable to formulate a verbal answer, remaining focused on the *frijoles* on his plate. This exchange between Gloria and Lupe is not only about paying the debt of a trailer – for Lupe lives on his own in a small rented apartment in an impoverished neighbourhood –, but about belonging and the possibility of permanent transplantation to the United States, where Lupe has not found a home or a life yet. Thus we ought interpret Lupe’s silence as the inner denial to accept his fate of dying away from home; Lupe wishes to return to Mexico, even though at that point of the film he has not verbalised his wishes yet. Family is also invoked as a magnetic force that guides Lupe’s anxiety of belonging. We get to know that he left behind a wife, children, and even grandchildren in Mexico. Indeed, the first scene of the film introduces the voice of a girl, who tells the audience – rendering quite an early anagnorisis – that her grandfather went North towards *El Otro Lado* (The Other Side) because he was hired to paint the walls of a very big house with huge windows, and that such a job was going to take him a long time.

The inflection point in the narrative of the film emerges from Lupe’s visit to the doctor, where he finds out that due to his obesity his blood pressure is as high as the torch of the Statue of Liberty. After explaining to Lupe the risks of his blood pressure levels, the doctor asks him if he would like to undergo a treatment, a question to which Lupe responds with an inexorable “No.” I suggest that one should interpret Lupe’s denial to tackle his blood pressure as his own personal strategy to verbalize his lack of desire to stay in the United States, for a long-term treatment would keep Lupe anchored in his cyclic and alienating life north of the border. After hearing the news about his health, Lupe finally stops clinging to the shreds of his American life: he quits his job without notice and stops seeing Gloria because, even though she is his only real company, she is also determined to stay in the North under the promise of owning her trailer. Lupe decides to withdraw his savings from under the burners of his stove, where he keeps them covered in tinfoil. The audience may deem Lupe’s under-the-stove hiding spot for his savings nonsensical, but it was a conscious directional choice; Lupe only goes on to “burn” his savings – losing almost everything – by playing cards with other undocumented immigrants whose job is to collect and sell tin cans. He proceeds to sell all his belongings in the street, including his hat. It is only at this point in the film that we realize how minimal his possessions are or ever were, thus exposing the raw side of the materialist myths surrounding the so-called American Dream.

As a corollary, *Lupe Under the Sun* has encountered issues of distribution and to this date it is not possible to buy a copy or watch the film unless it is in a film festival. Rodrigo Reyes, currently a Guggenheim fellow, has taken over the mission of promoting his own work in festivals and private screenings, thus raising crucial questions about the obstacles that undocumented farm workers face from all fronts, including the ethnographic representation of their existence in the fields that feed and nurture the voracious appetite of suburban America, where people confine themselves inside houses with well-manicured lawns and huge windows, hiding, unlike Lupe, away from the sun.

About the author:

Francisco Laguna-Correa is a bilingual award-winning author of flash fictions, short stories, poetry, novels, academic articles, and creative nonfiction. He studied Literature at the National University of Mexico (UNAM),

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Philosophy and Immigration at the Autonomous University of Madrid, Hispanic Cultural Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill, and Creative Writing at the University of Pittsburgh. For his work promoting Latino culture, literature, and history in the Pittsburgh area, he was honoured in 2016 as one of the recipients of The Fuerza Award, a recognition granted by the Latin American Cultural Union (LACU), the City of Pittsburgh, and the collective Café con Leche. Currently, he is a college professor at High Point University, where he teaches interdisciplinary courses exploring the themes of immigration, violence, social justice, class, gender, and ontological issues.