

Film Review

- *The U Turn*, directed by Luis Argueta. Maya Media / Dos & Dos producciones, USA/Guatemala, 2017.

International migration, or the movement of people across national borders, is often explained in economic terms; the ‘push’ of difficult economic conditions in a home country and the ‘pull’ of promising economic prospects in a destination country. Indeed, it might be argued that “inequality of opportunity is driving the current migration crisis”.¹ This inequality is also clearly visible in the migration flows that have existed for decades, and still exist, from Mexico and Central America to the United States. While most studies in the field of (Latin American) Migration Studies focus on the push and pull factors on a macro-level, what it actually means on a micro-level for migrants and their children to live far away from home, particularly when they are undocumented, often remains unrecorded. With his ‘Immigration Trilogy’, Guatemalan film director Luis Argueta seeks to explore just this: the human causes and impacts of migration, mainly by listening to the migrants themselves. *The U Turn* is the third and final part of Argueta’s trilogy and can be seen as a follow-up of the first part, *AbUSed: The Postville Raid* (2011), and, though in a more indirect sense, the second part, *Abrazos* (2014).

Postville is a small town in rural Iowa, home to a big meatpacking plant called AgriProcessors. On 12 May 2008, the plant was raided by the US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and 389 illegal migrants, mostly from Guatemala and Mexico, were arrested. While legal and illegal immigration from Mexico to the United States still takes the lion’s share, the number of migrants from Central American countries is slowly but surely growing in the wake of the rising violence and insecurity in that region, particularly in the so-called Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador). Two months after the raid, Argueta, who has been living in the US since his college years, read about the matter in the *New York Times* and decided to travel to Iowa to make a documentary about it. *AbUSed* alternates images of the raid with interviews with, and quotes from, the migrants and their children, as well as of the interpreters, legal counsels and politicians that came to their assistance. The film reconstructs the event and its aftermath: the

ominous sound of helicopters approaching, the collective trial in a detention camp and the uncertainty of the relatives in the first days after the raid. All of this brought traumatic memories back, as expressed for example by college chaplain David Vásquez: “It reminded me of all the Guatemalan images of disappeared people.” The detainees were sentenced to five months in jail and subsequent deportation to Guatemala, and that is where the documentary ends.

Or does it? Enter *The U Turn*, which shows how these deported migrants could still re-enter the United States. In the US, foreigners are eligible for a so-called U visa if they are willing to testify in a criminal trial. And since the owners and management of the processing plant also faced charges (e.g. for several kinds of abuses and hiring child labor), some of the deported Guatemalans could come back to the US to serve as a witness, together with others who were still in Postville, awaiting a decision. This would give them the right to apply for the U visa and a work permit. Despite the eventual verdict of ‘not guilty’ on the charges against the AgriProcessors managers, many of those who mustered the courage to cooperate with the authorities obtained their visa and work permit. *The U Turn* has roughly the same format as *AbUSed*: landscape and town shots, interviews and quotes, and actual courtroom scenes. But there is a significant difference. The film is a *participatory documentary*, in which the director is included in the narrative and sometimes even influencing it. Argueta has several short appearances and helps shape the course of events - making phone calls and traveling to Guatemala to convince young deported to come back and testify. *The U Turn* is, therefore, among other things, a tale of his own support to the U visa resettlement project. The ‘cameo appearances’ of Argueta do not have all that much added value for the argument of *The U Turn*, but they show his engagement with the fate of his fellow countrymen, and allow the viewer to have, literally, a look behind the scenes.

In between both Postville films, Argueta made *Abrazos*, a documentary about a trip to Guatemala by a group of children of undocumented migrants living in Minnesota. The children traveled to be reunited for a few weeks with their grandparents and other family members. The grandparents (in Guatemala) and parents (in the US) talk about the pain of possibly not seeing each other ever again and about the ways they deal with their sadness.

In sum, Argueta’s trilogy offers a compelling image of the lives of both migrants and those they leave behind, and the hardships that both groups have to endure. While *AbUSed*, focuses on how (illegal) labor migrants are treated by their employers and the authorities in the USA, *Abrazos* shows the drama caused by long absences. *The U Turn* strikes a more positive note, showing that there is a way to escape deportation, but it has a less clear structure than the other two films. For example, the granting of the work permits to some women comes somewhat out of the blue and is less well-documented than the efforts to get young people to testify. At a more fundamental level, by focusing on this peculiar U visa and its technicalities, the film omits any discussion about the

structural conditions in the countries of both origin and destination. What about the development of Guatemala and the need to eradicate its poverty? This aspect is not explored, nor is the immigration policy in the United States regarding Central Americans, which is growing harsher and openly deterrent, as exemplified by the recent ending of the ‘Catch and release’ policy at the US-Mexican border. In conclusion, the trilogy makes an interesting contribution to the debate on migration, providing a human face to the inequality of opportunities. The three films reveal the factors that drive migration and, particularly, its human impacts – something academic literature is much less able to do.

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Notes

- 1 Michael Clemens: *Why Today's Migration Crisis Is an Issue of Global Economic Inequality*. August 2016, retrieved from <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/why-todays-migration-crisis-issue-global-economic-inequality>

Documentary details

Title: The U turn

Production: Maya Media Corp. and Dos & Dos producciones

Director: Luis Argueta

Genre: Documentary

Year: 2017

Country: USA/Guatemala

Duration: 56 minutes

Language: English with Spanish subtitles and vice versa

Website: <http://theuturnfilm.com/>

Can be seen at: selected film festivals, or to be bought online