

Film Review

- *Manos limpias (Clean hands)*, directed by Michael Dominic. United States, 2019.¹

Although poverty in Nicaragua has slowly reduced in the last few years,² the country is still considered one of the poorest in the Americas. Historically, neither the social policies of the 1980s nor the neoliberal adjustments since the 1990s have ended the structural social-economic inequalities in the largest country of the Central American isthmus. In addition, the political culture, which is marked by clientelism, corruption, and paternalism, has further accelerated the mechanisms of poverty, unemployment, and violence. The ‘Direct Cinema’ documentary *Manos limpias* deals with these issues by zooming in on the daily life struggles of the López family at La Chureca, a garbage dump near Managua, the capital of Nicaragua.

For a period of eight years, from 2011 to 2018, US-American filmmaker Michael Dominic documented the López family, consisting of mother Blanca, father Javier, and their four children, Emmanuel, Francisco, Zulemita, and Edgar. They live near Central America’s largest garbage dump, where they try to survive of the things other people throw away. Due to Managua’s growing population since the mid-1990s, the city’s garbage has constantly increased as well. At first glance, the film’s story feels a bit like a fairy-tale: the poor López family is ‘rescued’ from La Chureca by a female philanthropist from the United States, providing them with a new house near Diriamba, a small city west from Managua. In contrast to the millions of plastic bottles, medical waste, and other dangerous materials, the large garden becomes the new playground for the children as well as a field to plant vegetables for self-supply and small-scale sale. The only condition their supporter has, is that the kids have to go to school. When they move to the house and settle in, everything seems fine. But, as the documentary shows, the reality is far more complex than it seems; the past experience of extreme poverty strongly determines the individual life experiences and decisions people make.

Manos limpias largely centres around Blanca and her difficulties to adapt to their new life – be it the tasks to oversee the children going to school or the best way to cope with her marriage. Blanca is often impatient with her chil-

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dren, which especially affects Zulemita. As a result, the two develop a complicated mother-daughter relationship. In comparison to her brothers, Zulemita has difficulties in school from the start. She is struggling in the still paternalist society, where *machismo* is commonplace and young girls have to fight many battles from the very beginning of their pre-adolescent years. The film also focuses on her as well as her brothers in an attempt to follow them growing up and capture their perspectives. An important gesture by the filmmaker at the end of the documentary is that he shows his footage of their earlier life at La Chureca to them. The children, now having 'clean hands', almost cannot believe how dirty they looked back then.

What becomes evident in the documentary is that La Chureca lies behind them, but that the trauma of the past, and the trauma of having grown up in extreme poverty, are still very much present. For example, Blanca has to face the effects of a rape endured years ago, which makes her psychologically unstable. Often, she 'flees' to Managua, leaving her family for weeks. In addition, Dominic has captured moments where the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the other family members come to light. Javier, for example, is trying to cope with Blanca leaving him and the children from time to time. He remains at her side, even when Blanca flirts openly with other men. A significant stylistic element used in the film is the music of Canadian cellist Zoë Keating. Her play often creates the effect of a wave-like movement, which is mirroring as the ups-and-downs of the López family. It sets a calm background to the social realist images that Dominic has captured with great camera detail. At the end, the audience is left with the task to reflect upon each family member and his or her decisions.

One of the great values of the documentary is the fact that Dominic has repeatedly come back to the family to participate in the developments of the individual family members. Often, projects from filmmakers coming from outside Central America trying to portray the life in the region, end up simplifying the complex social and cultural environment. Within this context, personal persistence, long-term relationships and overcoming language barriers are important factors, and Dominic has shown this commitment while making his documentary. The fact that the family has opened their house to Dominic to have him as a witness in, at times, personal conversations and intimate family situations, gives the audience a more or less unfiltered look of how the family members cope with their struggles and successes.

However, the opening of *Manos limpias*, where the US-American philanthropist sets forth the narrative of poverty and its various consequences, does raise some critical questions about the making of the film. Why did Dominic decide to focus on this 'rescued' family and not on one (or more) of the various other families (still) living at La Chureca? And why is the philanthropist – who Blanca refers to as *patrona* (patron) – coming from the Global North not problematized in the film, as it shows again the inequalities between the so-called centre and periphery? Does the initiative of the US-American woman not rep-

resent, yet again, a system of dependency from charity of the Global North? Within this context, the topic of waste management and garbage in Nicaragua is a still unsolved problem and the documentary does not explore this meta-level issue any further.

Still, overall, *Manos limpias* does not contain a narrative that patronizes the portrayed subjects. Instead, by putting one family in the centre of his documentary, Dominic gives the many people living in extreme poverty in Nicaragua a complex human face. The film is a snapshot of the lived reality of many urban poor in Nicaragua and successfully highlights the multifaceted issues of poverty and its enduring consequences.

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Notes

- 1 For information on screenings (and streamings) of the film, see the movie's official website at www.cleanhandsmovie.com.
- 2 Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (Nov. 30, 2020). Nicaragua: Perfil nacional sociodemográfico. https://estadisticas.cepal.org/cepalstat/Perfil_Nacional_Social.html