

Chasing Falling Snow: Traveling Through the Borders in *La Jaula de Oro*

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Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é oferecer uma análise fílmica de cenas específicas do filme *La Jaula de Oro* que representam a caracterização da fronteira como um local de violência e marginalização em busca do sonho americano. A fronteira neste caso funciona como um lugar imaginário de possível transformação de vida. As diferentes representações de geografia e segurança tecnológica da fronteira entre a Guatemala e o México e da fronteira entre o México e os Estados Unidos são enfatizadas neste artigo. O ponto de vista dos personagens imigrantes torna-se o focalizador da narrativa de sobrevivência nas fronteiras.

Palavras-chave: *La Jaula de Oro*. Fronteiras. Cinema.

Abstract: The aim of this article is to cinematically analyze selected scenes from the film *La Jaula de Oro* that represent the depiction of the border as a place of violence and marginalization in the pursuit of the American dream in which the border functions as an imagined site of possible life transformation. The distinct geographical and technological surveillance depictions of the Guatemala-Mexico border and the Mexico-U.S. border

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are highlighted in this article. The viewpoint of the immigrant characters becomes the focalizer of the narrative of survival in the borderlands.

Keywords: *La Jaula de Oro*. Borderlands. Cinema.

Far from being the typical teenage coming of age film that features the adventures of a traveling film, *La Jaula de Oro* (2013), directed by Diego Quemada-Díez, presents the issue of immigration in a raw and emotionally devastating manner, as a group of teenagers attempt to illegally enter the United States, starting their trip from Guatemala. The only vulnerable possessions they own are backpacks and some money in what is portrayed in the film as a life changing experience characterized by overwhelmingly menacing situations that might cost their lives at any time. The clashing of cultures in their transnational trip, and even amongst themselves in the group, becomes part of the scenario of immigration and crossing of borders in search of a more prosperous life. The aim of this article is to cinematically analyze selected scenes from the film *La Jaula de Oro* that represent the depiction of the border as a place of violence and marginalization in the pursuit of the American dream in which the border functions as an imagined site of possible life transformation.

Regarding the critical reception of the film, *La Jaula de Oro* was praised for its down to earth portrayal of the point of view of the Latin American characters. Although the movie hardly rely on long sequences of dialogues or voice over explanation of the inner feelings of the teenagers, the focus on their facial and bodily expressions as they go through experiences reveals a care and importance attached to their viewpoint as the events develop. Mark Kermode (2014) in his review for the online edition of *The Guardian* comments that “Quemada-Díez meets his young charges on equal terms, viewing the world through their eyes, seeing its strange wonder even as they

gaze unflinchingly at an unforgiving future” (KERMODE, 2014). Peter Bradshaw (2013), also for the online edition of *The Guardian*, highlights the “tough, absorbing” nature of the film as it exposes the viewer to the “desperate courage” shown by the juvenile characters as “these vulnerable teenagers face danger and almost certain death from predatory criminals to whom their lives are worth less than zero” (BRADSHAW, 2013).

The young characters and their socioeconomic context are introduced in the opening shots of the film through the portrayal of the poor conditions in which they live in Guatemala. The motivation for their endurance of such a strenuous trip is laid out in the first moments of the film. The arresting mise-en-scene of poverty is captured as Juan (Brandon López) walks through the narrow alleys of patched up houses, some even made of cardboard, and collects few of his possessions, including an amount of money which he sews into his pants. Sara (Karen Martínez) enters a somehow rustic and decadent restroom in which she cuts her own hair and binds her breasts in an attempt to look like a boy and suffer less difficulties along the journey as a female. The last teenager of this group of friends offers an image of utter impoverishment: Samuel (Carlos Chajon) works at a dump in which the heaps of trash blend in the mountainous landscape as if it were a natural extension. People, trash, and vultures, both on the ground and circling above them, are mixed into the same environment, which portrays a dismal source of labor for the population of the area.

Their motivation to embark in such perilous trip is then established, and the movie focuses on their traveling from Guatemala, across Mexico, and into the United States in the pursuit of a better life. James Clifford (1997) points out that travelers “move about under strong cultural, political, and economic compulsions and that certain travelers are materially privileged, others oppressed”

(CLIFFORD, 1997, p. 35). Many of the hardships encountered by the teenagers are related to their lack of food, shelter, and even shoes. They sleep on the streets, inside abandoned train wagons and sewage pipes. In order to survive under harrowing circumstances, they steal a chicken, a pair of boots, and take up exploitative and possibly dangerous jobs such as burning and cutting sugar cane. The impact of the environment in the characters' attitudes can be seen in their ability to fend for themselves as adults in terms of finding what to eat and where to sleep. However, at times the movie also portrays them with the usual characteristics of teenagers who fool around and joke with each other.

The inclusion of a fourth traveler, a Guatemalan Indian named Chauk (Rodolfo Domínguez), changes the dynamic of the group. Chauk does not speak Spanish, but somehow his intentions can be understood, especially by Sara, who seems to form a deeper bond with him. On the other hand, Juan at first has a hard time accepting Chauk's presence in the group and leads to the marginalization of the latter through the initial part of the journey. The clash of their cultures, especially signaled by the language barrier, forms a layer within a greater process of social marginalization suffered by the whole group. They are neglected and maltreated by the Mexican police, traffickers select them for criminal purposes, and coyotes leave them stranded in the American desert.

In the midst of such harsh scenario of survival during the journey, the idea of the American dream starts delineating itself through the image of the falling snow. There is a recurrent pattern which shows Chauk sleeping and the next image is a straight-on angle shot of the softly falling snow in a black background (see fig. 1). The motif of the snow follows the character when the group takes pictures in front of painted settings, and Chauk's photo is the only one that displays a wintry and snowy landscape as he poses

wearing a Native American headdress, necklace, and staff (see fig. 2). Another moment that features the theme of snow is during an attempt of conversation with Sara in which Chauk says in his native language the word *taiv* and makes gestures of the falling snow only to be misunderstood by her. Later on, with Juan, while watching a display of a toy train in the snow, Chauk says *taiv* again and the word is finally understood. His connection with snow can be seen as a shared desire by all characters to finally reach the United States for a better chance in life, that is, the snow is an association with a foreign place that features a distinct weather condition that can possibly provide opportunities unlike any in their homeland. The image of the falling snow therefore stands for the American dream of life improvement, happiness, and fulfillment.

In the path of their journey, the teenagers encounter two major border divisions: the border between Guatemala and Mexico, and the border between Mexico and the United States. Both these representations stand as significant instances that can be connected to the tribulations that illegal immigrants suffer when attempting to cross territories. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) discusses the issue of borders by arguing that:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants (ANZALDÚA, 1987, p. 3).

Anzaldúa comments on borderland as the geographical division of territories, but also as the emotive and transitional state of imbalance that surrounds people. According to Denise Segura and Patricia Zavella (2007), the concept of borderland includes:

how subjects cope with social inequalities based on racial, gender, class, and/or sexual differences, as well as with

spiritual transformation and psychic processes of exclusion and identification [...]. And borderlands are spaces where the marginalized voice their identities and resistance. All of these social, political, spiritual, and emotional transitions transcend geopolitical space (SEGURA; ZAVELLA, 2007, p. 4).

In the film, the portrayal of the border between Guatemala and Mexico displays an outdoor quality that is complemented by the lack of heavy security in terms of police force and protective walls surrounding the territory. The sequence that displays the group's crossing over starts with the camera on top of the train in movement in a low angle shot showing the tall trees that intertwine their branches from side to side, forming a kind of natural tunnel through which the train passes through. Soon the camera tilts down to a straight-on angle and then a slight high angle that frames the immigrants on the center of the shot. The roof of the train is absolutely crowded with people sitting down and others lying on top of their belongings (see fig. 3). The accumulation of people in this shot goes as far as eye can see, enhancing the feeling of the innumerable train wagons and calling attention to the high demand of people trying to cross the border. The next shots single out a few passengers in medium shots and medium close-ups. The camera is fixed on the roof and dryly vibrates with the bumps and shaking of the train ride and demonstrates how uncomfortable it can be for someone traveling in a precarious and life threatening way. It is such an inadequate way of moving around that at some point a substantial amount of branches brush by the passengers who can do nothing but try to secure themselves where they are sitting down.

The sequence continues as the train approaches the location of the border, a moment signaled by the sound effects of the train breaking and the passengers' attention being called all in the same direction. The crossing starts as the camera captures the image from

the roof of the train in a high angle of a few people crossing a fence of barbed wire (see fig. 4). This fence symbolizes a very unguarded territorial barrier. The long shot shows people lowering themselves and going through the barbed wire into an area of dry vegetation, that is, a passage right in the middle of nature. However, the next shots reveal the presence of police forces on the ground who stop the train. The first display of the police portrays them with the camera on the ground, stationed right in the path of the tracks. The medium long shot shows them from the back, in a faceless manner, with the clear sign of a menacing attitude by the presence of rifles.

Now the sequence takes its most hectic and violent turn in terms of the confrontation between the immigrants and the police force. Panic takes hold of the people on the train who hurriedly get down from the roof and start running in varied directions. Through dry vegetation, the camera captures the immigrants descending from the train. Fast editing connects a series of shots of people running while some are taken by the police. The sounds that can be heard come from the footsteps on the dry ground and people yelling, accompanied by the shouting of the police officers. In this mixture of sounds and fast paced images, the use of police violence is visible. The images of people being grabbed, pulled, and hit by the police demonstrate the use of brute force and the lack of care for the lives of the immigrants. In a medium shot, a man is violently grabbed by two police officers and dragged away. In a rather disorganized and random manner, the Mexican police runs after certain people in order to arrest them while others, due to the precarious vigilance system, escape and hide. One of the images shows in a medium long shot a police officer chasing an immigrant and hitting him with what seems to be a white cane, which causes the man to fall on the ground. The camera continues panning to the right and shows many others running parallel to the fallen man without stopping to help, each person trying to save their own lives.

Besides the barbed wire fence featured early in this sequence, another territorial delimitation appears as a mark of separation between Guatemala and Mexico. A rudimentary half finished brick wall, filled with holes of varied shapes and sizes divides the land. The instability of the situation is portrayed through the position of the camera which at times is placed on the outside of the wall and at other times enters the new territory and captures the images from inside the wall. One example can be seen in relation to the moment in which the police officer almost catches Juan. At first the camera is stationed inside the territory guarded by the wall, and through a large hole it is possible to see Juan in the background contorting himself and trying not to be held by the police officer (see fig. 5). The camera then switches position and as it is lowered to ground level and placed through the bushes portrays the perspective from outside the wall. The outcome does not look positive to Juan and it seems as if he is almost caught and unable to enter the new territory. The next shot shows the resolution as the camera returns to inside the wall and depicts Juan, Sara, and Chauk being successful in passing over the wall.

The use of a mobile camera in this border sequence intensifies the abrupt movements of people running, and combined with a point-of-view shot, represents an immersion into the act of crossing the border. As people attempt to run away from the police, the movie depicts a hand-held shot that shows the subjective point of view of a person running amongst the crowd. It is possible to listen to the hurried footsteps and the nervous breathing as the bumpy frame shakes in all directions and highlights the sense of despair. This realistic device does not have only a stylistic purpose of, for instance, evoking an authenticity look to the images, but it is possibly connected with the fact that the movie attempts to depict the traveling and border events through the viewpoint of the ones who are experiencing it, that is, not the police officers or government

officials, but the immigrants themselves. The movie focuses on the daily struggles of those who go through hardships, lose their sole possessions and their loved ones while trying to reach what seems to be a more prosperous future for them.

The space of the border can be seen as a problematic site in which cultural, social, and economic status clash, especially in terms of the use of authority. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) uses the term "contact zone" to "refer to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (PRATT, 1992, p. 6). In the film, the encounter between the authoritative power of the Mexican police and the immigrants recalls the aforementioned concept in the sense that their coexistence is based on an asymmetrical relationship dominated by the use of violence and marginalization conveyed by the rough handling and maltreatment of the immigrants.

The depiction of the border between Mexico and the United States displays a much more delimited and heavily secured environment which causes the immigrants to elaborate more organized ways to cross it. The movie shows aerial shots that demonstrate the extension of the barrier that divides both countries. An extreme long shot portrays in a high angle the arid terrain in which the border is located and it is followed by other shots that highlight the long extension that the barrier covers. From another angle, the wall is depicted as if it were a subtle black line in the center of the frame, almost imperceptible. The separation of the two countries is now perceived through the presence of a dusty road with precariously piled up houses on the Mexican side as opposed to a large paved road and bare nature on the American side (see fig. 6). In this case, although the barrier is not clearly

visible, its presence can be perceived in terms of living conditions, for instance, the distinct conditions of the roads in each side. Also, the material that the wall is made of, some sort of metal plates, can be observed in a panning shot from inside the Mexican wall in which it is possible to notice the graffiti throughout its extension. Unlike barbed wire fences or brick walls with substantial holes in it, the solid nature of the metal plates points to a more definite separation between the countries and a higher degree of difficulty in crossing it illegally.

The police force in the border between Mexico and the United States seems to have a disembodied presence as technology becomes more prominent and police officers less visible. In a long shot with low-angle framing, a helicopter is seen patrolling the area and its sound is often heard in the background. Surveillance cars and motorcycles suggest a routine of patrol that uses technology to secure the area as a way to be faster and more effective. Unlike the highly embodied police presence and physical contact in the Guatemala-Mexico border, human presence on the ground by the American police force is hardly seen in the film during the crossing of the Mexico-U.S. border, which hints to a more detached and strict attitude towards immigrants. The use of technology in coldly dealing with border issues is dealt towards the end of the film as one of the teenagers is shot, which will be commented later in this article.

In order to successfully cross the Mexico-U.S. border, Juan and Chauk have the guidance from coyotes who help the immigrants in the crossing by requiring them to carry in backpacks what probably looks like something illegal. The crossing of this border is done through sewage pipes which are dug under the level of the metal plates of the wall. It is a much more hidden and coordinated way since only a selected group of people go through these journeys

accompanied by the guides or coyotes. When they are about to leave the sewage pipes, they spot American surveillance cars and have to wait for the shift to change so they can have a better chance not to be seen. In this shot, one of the coyotes is on his knees inside the pipe and puts his head out to appraise the situation. The editing cuts from him to his point-of-view shot twice, one as he looks to the left of the frame and another as he turns his head to the right. He then contemplates the police car and hears both the sirens and the helicopter sounds. Once again, the viewpoint of the immigrants is highlighted through the choice of camera framing.

As the group waits for the shift to change, night falls, and in the dark they hurriedly move out in the open towards another sewage pipe. The passage between these two covered sewage pipes presents an aspect of outdoor vulnerability and danger since the helicopters keep patrolling the area. At a certain point in this sequence, as the group walks in the dark, the camera displays a mobile framing that emulates their movements. The hand-held camera gets down with the group and stays immobile as the helicopter illuminates the area and they take cover. After the danger is temporarily gone, and the guide tells the group to get up, the camera rises along and continues showing their bumpy path. This can be seen as another example in which the perspective of the immigrants during the journey is highlighted by the use of camera positioning.

As the end of the crossing of the border approaches, the theme of positive life transformation, ignited in the film by the image of the falling snow, is brought once again, this time by Juan's voice over as he awaits inside the sewage pipe. It is possible to have access to his inner thoughts in relation to the emotion of finally crossing the border to the United States, a dream conceived since the beginning of the film. The final resolution is at his fingertips as Juan mentions he feels that everything they will see on the other side will be

wonderful. He continues by saying that he is confident things will work out, and they will safely reach their destination. Even though the environment is filled with tension and imminent danger, Juan's attitude remains hopeful. In a somehow naive way, since he is pennilessly sitting in a dirty sewage pipe trying to illegally cross the border, he expects to have the chance for transformation and the opportunity to live the much yearned American dream of stability and happiness.

The theme of violence in the border between Mexico and the United States is represented in the scene in which Chauk is ruthlessly killed at a distance by a rifleman. As Juan and Chauk are left stranded in the American territory by the coyotes, they wander through the vast landscapes, being shown in a long shot which causes them to appear as small details in a canvas that almost absorbs their figures. The pace of the film slows down, as the natural *mise-en-scène* is prominent in the shots, with no civilization in sight. Suddenly, in a long shot that pans to the right accompanying their walking movement, Chauk is shot from a distance and falls back. The sound of the shot echoes in the vast landscape. The next image is a close-up of a sniper with a long range rifle on the right side of the frame. He is ready for another shot and looks through the gun sight. The fast editing switches from Juan to the sniper as the former tries to escape and the latter repeatedly attempts to hit his target with no results. This display of cold and lethal violence through technology from a distance can be associated to a desensitization of the act of killing. According to William Rothman (2001), in the case of shooting at a certain distance "a human being pulls the trigger, but a machine causes the violence, making it possible for the gunman, with no blood on his hands, to view, at a remove, effects that are, and are not, his doing" (ROTHMAN, 2001, p. 44). The immigrant's life in the border has little value and can be conveniently eliminated at a distance with no apparent blood on the shooter's hands.

In conclusion, *La Jaula de Oro* presents the personal struggles of immigrants by focusing on their perspectives, and the physical and emotional hardships in crossing the hostile environment of borders. The film deals with the complex potential that can be attributed to the transnational journey the characters go through at such a young age, and also to the spaces of border in which issues of immigration, such as violence, marginalization, and hope are intertwined. Juan's final image brings a rather melancholic closure to the motif of falling snow. As he takes up a cleaning job at a meat factory, his position is not of cutting meat but collecting leftover pieces of fat from the floor. The subaltern tone of his work hints to the low level employment given to illegal immigrants in the United States. The final image of the film features the snow falling through a point-of-view shot, not in a straight-on angle, but in a low angle, enhancing the notion of his perspective, as the snow has a more palpable and present nature, and not only imagined.

The much yearned and apparent American dream comes to Juan in a solitary way, since all his initial friends have somehow detached themselves from the group. His emotional state and low working conditions can be linked to the title of the film in Spanish which means "the golden cage", standing for a beautiful dream that can also encapsulate a person in a socioeconomic reality of desolation. Therefore, there seems to be a theoretical achievement of geographically reaching the United States, but the reality of the living conditions and oppression suffered by the immigrants point to the still long way to go in terms of acceptance inside the American culture.

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Appendix

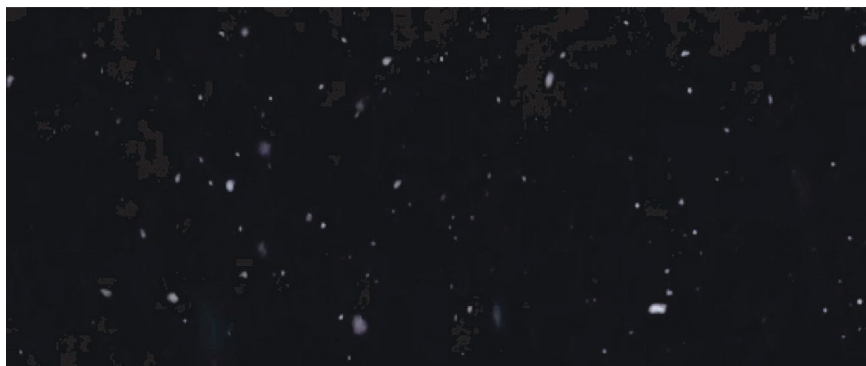


Figure 1 - The falling snow (QUEMADA-DÍEZ, 2013)



Figure 2 - Chauk and the wintry background (QUEMADA-DIÉZ, 2013)



Figure 3 - People traveling on the roof of the train (QUEMADA-DIÉZ, 2013)



Figure 4 - People crossing the fence (QUEMADA-DIÉZ, 2013)



Figure 5 - Perspective from inside the wall (QUEMADA-DIÉZ, 2013)

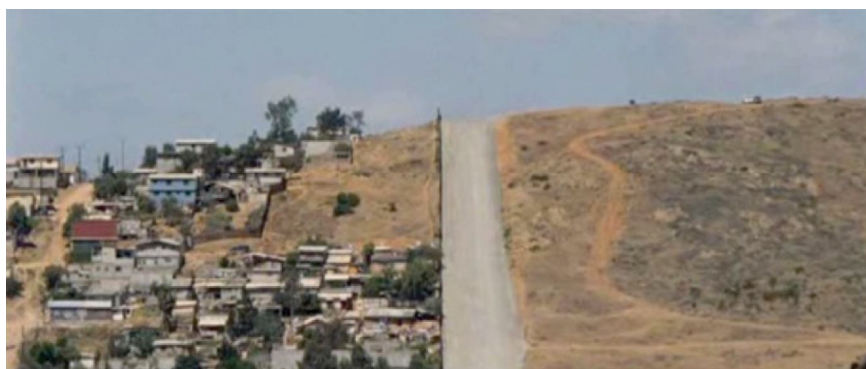


Figure 6 - The border dividing the territory (QUEMADA-DIÉZ, 2013)