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## **Finding one's own voice as an indigenous filmmaker**

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## Chapter 2

### Indigenous Characters, Narrative Structure and Identification

As Naficy evaluates in *An Accented Cinema* (2001), Accented filmmakers not only address the tensions provoked by living and working in different cultural realms, but they also blend and combine narrative and aesthetic elements from different storytelling and filmic traditions, expressing thus an own 'Voice'. Cultural exchange owing to globalization provides an influence of mainstream narrative and aesthetic elements and mainstream production modes in World Cinema and thus also Indigenous Cinema. In this chapter I will analyse different films with important Indigenous characters, but which have a fairly traditional (mainstream) narrative structure and production mode. I will focus my analysis on *The Girl* (David Riker 2012) and *La jaula de oro* (Diego Quemada-Díez 2013). In *Decolonizing the Lens of Power* (2008), Knopf analyses the decolonizing aspect of different Native American films. Although *The Girl* and *La jaula de oro* were made by non-Indigenous directors, they do share several of the decolonizing elements mentioned by Knopf. In my analysis, I will explore the decolonizing aspects of these films. The analysis will, furthermore, focus on how these films employ narrative, *mise-en-scene* and *découpage* to create identification with the Indigenous characters.<sup>63</sup> This analysis arises from my own interest as a filmmaker into how narrative, *mise-en-scene* and *découpage* can be employed to provide a sense of identification and is therefore in line with the critical practice of film as proposed by Kydd (2011). In this analysis I am thus interested in how the script and different directorial choices create a sense of identification and at the same time have a decolonizing effect.

There are many books and manuals on traditional screenwriting. The most well-known are probably Syd Field's *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (1984) and Robert McKee's *Story Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997). The three act structure, the two turning points and the journey of the character are considered important elements in mainstream film narrative. Although varying in focus and approach, most other screenwriting handbooks maintain these as structuring narrative elements. In his book, *Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules* (2007) Dancyger explores the emergence of alternative narrative structures, mainly in the realm of independent cinema. Studies of Film Narrative, such as that of Bordwell and Thompson (2009), also distinguish the importance of the three act structure in the construction of

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<sup>63</sup> For an elaborate discussion of this terms see Kydd (2011).

narrative for film, as well as that of character development. Scriptwriting workshops tend to start out with the development of characters and depart from a classical narrative structure composed of three acts and eight sequences.<sup>64</sup> An important aspect of the narrative structure includes the character's so-called emotional journey. The character's transformation throughout the film involves a 180 degree turnaround. The character thus makes a dramatic shift from the beginning to the end of the film. A simple but clear example of this pattern is represented through the main characters in romantic comedy, who mostly start out uninterested in love in general, or on hostile terms with the character with whom they will eventually develop a romantic relationship.<sup>65</sup> This dramatic change in the character is valid in all the different genres of mainstream narrative cinema. Through the journey of the character, the main theme of the film comes to the fore. When writing a script it is therefore important to determine the starting point for the main characters and to have a general idea of where the journey of the character will lead to. As Dancyger shows, the choice for the ending conveys the vision of the film. As an author one can therefore think of the specific message or meaning one wishes to present when writing a film ending. In continuation I will analyse different films with respect to the dramatic journey of the character, the narrative structure and the chosen ending of the film.

### *Identification in The Girl*

*The Girl* (David Riker 2013) is a road movie and mainstream film with several Hollywood actors in the lead role, including Abbie Cornish and Will Patton. The film encourages the identification of the audience with Indigenous migrants through the perspective and focalization of a non-Indigenous character. The main character is Ashley, a single mother living in a trailer park in Texas. She has lost custody over her four year old son and is trying to regain that. Ashley was convicted for drink driving with her baby in the back of her car and therefore lost custody over her child. The boy is in foster care and Ashley will shortly have a court hearing in an attempt to regain custody. Ashley believes one of the reasons she will not get her boy back is because she does not have a good job, and does not have enough income for a proper house. The conditions for her regaining custody of the child dictate that

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<sup>64</sup> Examples are the Binger Filmlab in Amsterdam, the Cine Qua Non Lab in Morelia, Mexico, and The Babylon Workshop in Cannes.

<sup>65</sup> See Mernit (2001).

she should have enough income and a permanent address. The film begins by establishing Ashley's explicit disdain for Mexican migrants. In a discussion she has with her manager (who also has a Mexican last name and appearance) about her desire for a raise, Ashley ends up saying: "Why is it I always get the worst shift? I mean, everyone knows that you like Mexican girls best, the place is full of them". It is clear that as cheap labour force, Ashley sees Mexican immigrants as taking all the jobs. Later in the film Ashley finds out her father is smuggling Mexicans across the border in his truck. Ashley is nervous and appalled by that information. Nevertheless, when she finds out what kind of money is being paid for taking migrants across the border, she decides to try it as well. Ashley rounds up a dozen migrants. She will take them to the river where they will cross by swimming, and she will pick them up at the other side. But Ashley is not prepared for this venture. Most of the migrants do not know how to swim and want tires to hold on to when crossing the river. Ashley did not bring any tires and insists that they can cross easily as the river is low. She will drive to the other side and pick them up there. When Ashley arrives at the other side, only two men and a girl managed to cross. The others panicked when a helicopter with searchlights flew over them. One of the men was carrying the small girl, who consequently got separated from her mother.<sup>66</sup>

The two men leave on their own, and Ashley is left to wonder what to do with the small girl. The girl is called Rosa and blames Ashley for the whole situation. Rosa insists that they have to look for her mother. Ashley feels guilty and returns to the Mexican side of the border with Rosa to look for the girl's mother. Ashley would rather leave her, but Rosa is persistent and Ashley does not manage to get rid of her. Ashley goes to the police department to investigate if there is any news of Rosa's mother. The police suggest she looks at pictures of women who drowned recently in the river, while Rosa waits outside. Ashley recognizes a picture of Rosa's mother and prepares to leave. When the police understand that Rosa has been orphaned they decide to take the matters in their hands and send Rosa to a shelter. Up to this moment in the film Ashley has been trying to get rid of Rosa. But now that Rosa is taken to a shelter, Ashley feels bad. Ashley goes to the shelter in search for the girl. Ashley does not know Rosa's name and can only ask around for 'the new girl' in the shelter. Inside the shelter all the girls are dressed the same and have short hair. They are cleaning the courtyard or doing other household chores. The uniformity of the girls in the shelter is in stark contrast

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<sup>66</sup> Mixtec actress and director Ángeles Cruz plays the role of Rosa's mother.

with Rosa's character in the film.<sup>67</sup> Rosa has not yet been dressed in the uniform and Ashley seems relieved to find Rosa is still the same girl.

In a previous scene, Rosa told Ashley that she lived in a beautiful village in the south of Mexico and that she did not want to leave her village. She had wanted to stay with her grandmother, but her mother insisted on taking her with her to the United States. Ashley decides to take Rosa back to her grandmother in the South of Mexico. Ashley and Rosa consequently travel to Oaxaca. During the road trip the bond between Ashley and the girl grows stronger. Through her evolving relationship with Rosa, Ashley understands that she has to change as a mother. The landscape changes gradually along the road trip from an urban environment to a lush green landscape. Ashley expresses that she cannot understand why someone would want to leave such a beautiful place and Rosa replies that they have been told that in the United States everyone is rich. As Rosa and Ashley arrive in the village in Oaxaca, they find the village feast is taking place precisely during these days. The Indigenous village in the film is thus established through the scenery, but also through its cultural traditions. The film establishes a contrast between the desire of the Mexican migrants for a better life and Ashley's state of poverty. Ashley can hardly believe the (natural) riches of Rosa's hometown, while for Rosa it is hard to imagine the poverty of Ashley's daily existence.

In this film, Ashley undergoes a dramatic change as she develops a responsible and caring attitude towards Rosa. While Ashley in the beginning of the film was established as someone unable to face problems and responsibilities, she ends up taking responsibility for Rosa. The fact that Ashley lost custody over her own son because of drunk driving, clearly positions Ashley as a character who seems unable to behave responsibly towards herself and others. At the same time, the film establishes in the beginning a bias and degrading attitude towards Mexicans. This bias changes gradually as the film progresses, allowing an audience who identifies with Ashley to adjust its own perspective. The dramatic arch, which refers to profound changes in the character, allows for a strong identification of the audience with the character and his or her emotional journey.<sup>68</sup> While this film is a mainstream Hollywood production, its approach to the issue of migration is very different to other Hollywood representations of Mexican migration and communities such as *Spanglish* (James L. Brooks

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<sup>67</sup> This uniformity is similar to the change of image Hush Puppy undergoes in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, when she is taken to a shelter, and the way in which the girls are dressed in the re-education compound in *Rabbit Proof Fence*. The uniformity to which the characters are subjected expresses the symbolic and systemic normativity of environment and the overt hostility towards difference and diversity. Native American Boarding Schools ordered Native American children to cut their hair. The idea behind the Native American boarding schools was to kill the Indian and save the child (cf. Giago 2006).

<sup>68</sup> See for example *The Writer's Journey* (1998) by Christopher Vogler.

2004), *Fools Rush In* (Andy Tennant 1997), *From Prada to Nada* (Angel Gracia 2011) or *Sin Nombre* (Cary Fukunaga 2009). Even if some of these films present a rather positive image of Mexican migrants, these films uphold existing stereotypes and the notion of the ‘American Dream’ goes unquestioned. In *The Girl*, by presenting a main character who is living in conditions of poverty in the United States, the ‘American Dream’ is in itself flawed from the beginning.

Another big difference lies in the choice for locations and casting. While films such as *Spanglish*, *From Prada to Nada* and *Fools Rush In*, cast either non-Mexican actresses such as Paz Vega (Spanish), Camille Belle (American-Brazilian) and Alexa Vega (American-Colombian) or a Mexican star (Salma Hayek), in *The Girl* an effort was made to cast people from the region. Several of the characters in the village, such as Rosa and her grandmother were played by non-professional actors. Working with non-professional actors is not common in mainstream cinema and is particularly known as a distinguishing aspect of Italian Neorealism. In present times this approach is much more common in independent cinema than in mainstream cinema. Mexican director Carlos Reygadas is known for only working with non-professional actors. Other Mexican films that have worked with a combination of professional actors and non-professional actors are for example *El violín* (Francisco Vargas 2005), *Los últimos cristeros* (Matias Meyer 2011), and *Heli* (Amat Escalante 2013). In terms of representation the consequence is that the image is far less stereotypical than in mainstream films representing Mexican migrants or communities. While the narrative structure of the film is thus fairly mainstream and provides a strong identification with the main character who undergoes a dramatic change, the inclusion of non-professional actors and the choice to film on location gives the film a slightly different aesthetic and is very important in terms of representation. The dramatic arch of the character invites an audience to review its own perceptions of the Mexican community in the United States. From this analysis it turns out that narrative is very important for the representational implications of a film. The presence of Indigenous performers and Indigenous languages often has a decolonizing effect, as Knopf notices. Nevertheless, these elements can be overshadowed by the narrative structure; this is, for example, the case in films such as *Dances With Wolves* and *Apocalypto*. The decolonizing effect of casting, language and art direction, therefore, needs to be supported by the upholding narrative structure. Therefore, in the following analysis I want to concentrate on the script and narrative structure and explore how these influence the representation of Indigenous identity.

### *Identification in La jaula de oro*

*La jaula de oro* (Diego Quemada-Díez 2013) is a feature length fiction film about the journey of Guatemalan migrants heading to the United States, but crossing through Mexican territory. At first sight, the film appears to follow a rather mainstream narrative structure of a border crossing adventure.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the film combines this mainstream narrative with unexpected elements which trigger a deeper reflection on the subject of migration across Mexico and the United States. The film starts out with Sara, a young girl, who dresses up as a boy. She cuts her long hair, puts on boy clothes and takes a contraceptive pill.<sup>70</sup> The transformation of Sara at the beginning of the film introduces the lurking dangers of the journey ahead. It is clear that Sara is trying to avoid these dangers by adopting a male identity. Next, Juan is introduced, as a teenage boy living in the slums. He roams through a slum until he reaches a garbage dumping ground. The images of the slum are easily associated with Third Cinema, or documentary material. An environment of poverty and violence is overtly present in the images. Children with dirty clothes play war games in the background.

Juan comes to look for his friend Samuel, who works on the huge garbage dumping ground. The image is a wide shot in which the boy can barely be distinguished. This image of the young boy collecting garbage at the dump is overwhelming and depressing. It is absolutely clear why he would undertake a journey in search of a better future. The film establishes that Juan and Sara are boy and girlfriend and have decided to leave together for the United States. Samuel, their mutual friend is travelling with them. It is clear that they are only teens and extremely young to undertake such a journey. Juan prepares himself by sewing all his money into the lining of his jeans, alluding to possible assaults and robberies along the journey. Sara's transformation into a boy make us suspect from the beginning the dangers of gender violence. A study conducted by María Ávila indeed shows that most South American women travelling through Mexico to the United States encounter rape, gender violence and other forms of assault on their journey. Being aware of this, the decision of the youngsters to travel up north is particularly disturbing for an audience.

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<sup>69</sup> Similar to for example *Sin Nombre* (Cary Fukunaga 2009) and *Maria Full of Grace* (Joshua Marston 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Presumably five hundred thousand Central American migrants cross through Mexico every year on a journey towards the United States. This journey is filled with perils gangs and different forms of assault by both authorities and criminal gangs.



Sara and Juan cross the river to Mexico and wait for the train that goes north, also known as 'La Bestia'.<sup>71</sup> While they wait for the train, they encounter an Indigenous boy of their age. The reactions of Sara and Juan to this encounter are quite different. Juan doesn't want anything to do with this boy because he is an 'Indio'.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, and much against Juan's will, the Indigenous boy, Chauk, ends up travelling together with them. Chauk offers Sara and the others some of his food. He carries with him a combination of ground maize and beans, which can be combined with some water. This is the traditional Indigenous version of an instant meal. While Sara accepts the food, Juan is suspicious and rejects it, stressing that he does not want food from the 'Indio'. When they stop in a southern Mexican town, Sara, Samuel and Juan try to make some money performing clown acts in a square. With the money they subsequently buy soft drinks and fast food. Sara offers some of her food and drink to Chauk, mirroring his gesture on the train. The mirroring also marks a difference between them. Whereas Chauk was bringing food with him probably cultivated on his family farm, Sara had to buy it. Whereas Chauk's food was a very natural mixture of beans and water, Sara is used to eating fast food. Juan exacerbates the difference, stressing once more that Sara shouldn't be giving her food to the 'Indio'. The youngsters then encounter a sort of outdoor photo booth. For some pesos they can have their picture taken against different painted backgrounds and with different props. Juan asks for a portrait as a cowboy on a horse. Chauk has his picture taken wearing a Native American headdress. Juan is thus identified with a cowboy, while Chauk is aligned with a Native American. Sara, Samuel and Juan all laugh that Chauk looks like a real 'Indian'. This scene addresses the issue of representation critically as it is clear that Chauk's 'Indianness' at this instance is both a display, performance and explicit construction which is used to mock him and ridicule him. Through this sequence of events a clear difference is marked between Samuel, Sara and Juan on the one hand, and Chauk on the other. The film makes clear that although the travelling youngsters are all from Guatemala, there is a social and cultural difference between them, wherein Chauk is clearly 'the Other'.

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<sup>71</sup> La Bestia means 'the beast', and the train has been called so because of the great death toll it takes among migrants trying to board it. The train transports wood, chemicals, and other trading goods and South American migrants climb on the roof. The train has also been called *El Tren de la Muerte* (The train of Death) or *El Tren Asesino* (The murderous train). Spanish Photographer Isabel Muñoz has made a collection of portraits of migrants boarding the train. Her photographs were exhibited in Mexico, Spain and the United States. More information on the exhibit and the portraits can be found on the website of the Mexican Ministry of Arts and Culture (<http://www.conaculta.gob.mx/detalle-nota/?id=7582#.UhKOkC3CTIU>). Other films about the journey by train by Mexican and South American migrants are: *Sin Nombre* (Cary Fukunaga 2009), *De Nadie* (Tin Dirdamal 2005), *Los Invisibles* (Gael Garcia Bernal 2010).

<sup>72</sup> Demeaning word used in Mexico and Guatemala to refer to the Indigenous population.

Sara, Samuel, Juan and Chauk get detained by Mexican police officers, robbed of all their money and belongings, and are sent back across the Guatemalan border. They decide to try again and board 'La Bestia' once more, but Samuel does not feel prepared to undertake the journey and decides to stay. Consequently, Sara, Juan and Chauk are travelling together now. On different occasions Juan tries to get rid of Chauk, but Sara stands up for him and makes it clear that they are travelling together the three of them or not at all. As the film proceeds Chauk turns out to have certain survival skills that Sara and Juan do not possess. For example, as they travel through Mexico they need to obtain food. Juan at a certain point steals a chicken. Yet Juan has a lot of trouble catching the chicken and certainly does not know how to kill it. Chauk takes the chicken effortlessly, it is clear he has been living on a farm. While Chauk caresses the chicken and speaks softly to it, Juan sarcastically remarks that Chauk wants to kill the chicken by talking to it. Chauk then in one quick movement breaks the neck of the animal. Those familiar with Indigenous cultures from the region, understand Chauk is asking permission to take the chicken's life.<sup>73</sup> The presence of this ritual speech and its narrative function within the film are noticeable. The scene presents Chauk as essential for the group's survival as he possesses skills which the others do not. In a different situation, the youngsters are offered work in exchange for food and a sleeping place. The labour consists of harvesting sugarcane. While the work is new to Juan and Sara, Chauk has obviously done this before and is able to work faster. Throughout the film, Chauk's character is presented as important for the survival of the group and as having particular gifts that are related to his Indigenous identity. During the whole film Chauk speaks a Maya language.<sup>74</sup> Chauk's dialogues in Maya are not translated. Instead, the audience understands Chauk from Sara's perspective. In their conversations, Sara tries to learn certain Maya words and at the same time teaches Chauk some words in Spanish. The audience understands and gets to know Chauk through Sara's conversations with him and sees him increasingly through her point of view. The film thus positions the viewer in Sara's situation and only understands Chauk partially. The film in this sense follows a similar strategy to the one chosen by Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva in *Hopiit*, a film in Hopi language with no translation, thus making all non-Hopi audience members outsiders to the film. This strategy is interesting because it denies the audience a position of knowledge with regard to the Indigenous subject.

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<sup>73</sup> In many contemporary Mesoamerican cultures it is common to say a prayer and to ask for 'permission' when either harvesting crops or taking an animal's life for food. In my own documentary *Yaavi*, I document the prayer that is spoken before opening up an agave plant to extract pulque (traditional alcoholic beverage extracted from the maguey or agave plant).

<sup>74</sup> In the film Chauk speaks Tzotzil, one of the Maya languages, which is spoken in the state of Chiapas in Mexico and is also spoken in Guatemala.

On the contrary, it is clear that the non-Indigenous audience has very little access to understand the Indigenous character and his motivations and desires. In spite of the lack of a common language, the audience feels empathy for the Indigenous character through the identification with Sara. But the film also encourages an identification with Chauk through the use of point-of-view shots, subjective shots and shot-counter-shot. For example, Chauk's point of view of Sara taking a shower, and discovering her secret of being a woman expresses both his surprise and lingering desire. After harvesting, the youngsters get a chance to take a shower. While Sara takes a shower Chauk catches a glimpse of Sara's bare breasts through the curtains and understands she is actually a girl. In this scene Sara and Chauk exchange looks, expressing a sense of desire and love interest. The film thus creates a feeling of identification through the different points of view and the perspectives of the different characters.

The relationship between Sara, Chauk and Juan can be understood as a love triangle. In one particular scene the migrants have an evening with music and drinks and the youngsters dance together. Sara and Juan kiss, and Chauk clearly feels betrayed. The love story is accessible for a general audience, with or without previous knowledge of the conditions of Central American migrants and Indigenous Peoples. In this sense, the film employs a strategy mentioned by storyteller Cuticchio; while the context is very specific, the story presents relations and emotions recognizable for a general audience. The triangulated love story turns rather painful when the train is attacked by a group of delinquents. The assaulters separate the women from the men and it is clear they will be taken for prostitution. At first the audience is led to believe that Sara's disguise as a man will save her. But one of the assaulters discovers she is a woman and Sara is taken anyway. Juan tries to protect her, but is struck with a machete. Sara is then taken with the other women. Her voice continues to cry out for Juan and Chauk as she is driven away Juan remains wounded and unconscious and Chauk picks him up.

The narrative does not follow the mainstream model of resolving the story of Sara in the end, nor does it construct a heroic path. While in many mainstream narratives, the hero would go to rescue 'the damsel in distress', in this film the boys are unable to go for her rescue. Sara is lost in this story, just as many migrants are 'lost' along the way, leaving relatives and loved ones in incertitude about whether they are alive or not. The film makes clear that Juan and Chauk both suffer because of Sara's kidnapping. It is also clear that the boys feel they should rescue her but are unable to do so, as Juan utters: "No vi a dónde se la llevaron" (I didn't even see where they took her). The narrative of *La jaula de oro* is thus in

stark contrast with a film like *Sin nombre* which deals with the same subject matter. Also, in *Sin nombre* the main characters are Central American migrants (Honduran) crossing by train through Mexico. The main characters in *Sin nombre* are Sayra and Willy. Both are travelling by themselves to the United States. Like the events in *La jaula de oro*, the migrants on the train are attacked by local gangs. When one of the gang members tries to rape Sayra, Willy interferes and saves her, positioning him as the hero of the narrative and Sayra as the damsel in distress. This narrative device continues throughout the film, and in the end Willy sacrifices himself for Sayra to safely reach the United States. The motif of the 'damsel in distress' is a recurring feature in mainstream narratives. Many mainstream films are constructed around this motif. Vogler points out that archetypal roles for women are those of the mother, witch, or 'damsel in distress' and mentions *Titanic* (James Cameron 1997) as an example. Vogler states:

The character of young Rose is a manifestation of the 'damsel in distress' archetype. As such she is a sister of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, princesses caught between life and death and wakened by a kiss. (Vogler 1998: 259)

Vogler seems aware that the 'damsel in distress' archetype is problematic and contends:

Women struggle with the 'damsel in distress' archetype because it perpetuates patterns of domination and submission, and can encourage a passive, victimized attitude. However, it is an easy archetype to identify and empathize with, representing the feelings of anyone who has felt powerless, trapped, or imprisoned. The 'woman in jeopardy' is a staple of movie and TV plots because it creates instant identification and sympathy and raises the emotional identification of the audience. (ibid.)

From *The Writer's Journey* it also becomes clear that the 'damsel in distress' archetype mostly functions as the catalyst and object of reward for the hero's quest. Vogler's observations with regard to gender roles in heroic narratives are quite reductionist and seem to miss the criticism that a similar narrative structure constructs women as trophies for male heroes and hardly as protagonists and subjects of their own. It is apparent that *La jaula de oro* chooses to follow a different narrative construction and by doing so offers a different perspective on the migrants' journey. Sara is never constructed during the film as a 'damsel in distress'. She is a young person traveling north like her male companions. Her kidnapping

does not function as a narrative device to offer the other youngsters a chance for a heroic rescue, similar to the developments in *Sin nombre*. Instead, Sara's disappearance is a raw reference to the reality of female migrants crossing through Mexico, as many of the female migrants are forced into sexwork.<sup>75</sup> The choice for this specific turn of events provides an insight, as Dancyger explains, into the authorial voice of the writer. What the narrative seems to imply is that this journey is not really a heroic one, but one of suffering and loss, which becomes particularly clear in the scenes after Sara's kidnapping. Chauk nurses Juan's wound until he gets better. It is clear that both feel guilt and sorrow over what happened, as the film presents us with images of Chauk and Juan sitting silently together in empty train wagons. Juan and Chauk eventually find a place to sleep in a shelter for migrants. The film at this juncture provides an interesting mix of fiction and documentary through the figure of father Solalinde.<sup>76</sup> Father Solalinde appears as himself in the film offering the migrants a place to stay. The presence of this figure ties the story firmly to real events going on at this moment in Mexico and positions the film clearly as a plea for a better treatment of migrants on Mexican soil. In the shelter, Chauk appears to see Sara, but it turns out to be an illusion. Chauk only saw a youngster in similar clothing. The audience receives this information through Chauk's point-of-view and is encouraged to feel the pain and loss that he must be feeling. Just as Chauk, the audience understands that Sara is not coming back. The film will not satisfy the audience's need for suture and closure.<sup>77</sup> Instead, the audience, like the boys, will remain in unresolved doubt and anxiety concerning the fate of Sara.

The film presents the different perils to which undocumented migrants are exposed and is careful to stress the ethnic, social and gender differences between migrants throughout the story. While the film started with the explicit disdain and resentment of Juan towards Chauk, this changes gradually towards the end of the story. It is clear that Juan's transformation or character arch is strongly tied to his relationship with Chauk. After Sara is kidnapped Juan and Chauk continue their journey and are eventually misled and tricked into the hands of a gang that extorts money from migrants. The migrants who are caught by the gang are separated according to nationality (Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala). In the story it turns out the gang is led by a man from Guatemala who comes from the same district and

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<sup>75</sup> Documentaries on this subject are for example *De Nadie* (Tin Dirdamal 2005) and *Los Invisibles* (Gael Garcia Bernal 2010)

<sup>76</sup> Father Solalinde is very well known in Mexico for his ongoing support to central and South American migrants. He has founded many migrant shelters and has tried to keep people safe both from authorities, criminal gangs and drug cartels. A crude example of the violence against migrants can be seen in the attacks of migrant shelters in the year 2010, where approximately 75 migrants were killed.

<sup>77</sup> Suture and closure are the mechanisms through which an audience feels certain satisfaction for having an end to the story. Mainstream cinema tends to fulfil the audience desire for closure.

neighbourhood as Juan. The gang leader therefore lets him go. Initially Juan walks away, but after wandering around he returns to ask for the freedom of Chauk. The leader of the gang asks him why he is so concerned about the 'Indio' and Juan answers that he owes him his life. The leader of the gang replies that he will let Chauk go, if Juan takes his place. Juan agrees to this arrangement, but the gang lets the youngsters go anyway. In this scene it is clear that Juan's initial hostility towards Chauk has completely changed. Juan has come to appreciate Chauk in a manner that he is willing to sacrifice himself for him. In contrast to the beginning of the film, where Juan was outright hostile towards Chauk, this can be considered a dramatic shift. Through the identification with the youngsters, the audience is encouraged to understand the dangers and painful process of migrating to the United States. The identification with the youngsters is established on different levels: through the narrative itself, the development of the characters, the acting, and through the employment of cinematic devices such as point-of-view shots. In the film, Juan's attitude towards Chauk changes gradually, encouraging an audience to revise and rethink their own attitude towards Indigenous people and towards marginalized and stigmatized 'Others' in general.<sup>78</sup>

Juan and Chauk manage to cross into the United States, but are left by the crossers to fend for themselves in the wild. Just across the border Chauk is unexpectedly shot by a sniper. Juan wants to help but is unable to do so and is forced to run. Chauk's bleeding body rests on the grass and seems to blend with the mountainous landscape. The image collapses the bleeding body of Chauk with the land, thus creating a visual statement on the suffering of the people in the Americas. In a way this image can be read as the visual representation of the title *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (1971), the famous book by Eduardo Galeano on the exploitation of Latin America.<sup>79</sup> The translation of this title in English is *The Open Veins of Latin America*, evoking thus the image of a bleeding body. In this book, Galeano traces the exploitation of the continent back to the period of the Spanish conquest, the colonial period and more recent U.S. imperialism. Feminist writer and academic Gloria Anzaldúa refers on different occasions to the Mexico U.S. border as *una herida abierta* (an open wound), clearly referencing the text of Galeano. She states:

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<sup>78</sup> This is of particularly importance in view of the humanitarian crisis at the Mexico / U.S. borders where thousands of unaccompanied minors from different Latin American countries have stranded. The public opinion in the U.S. border towns has grown increasingly hostile, see for example the recent events in Texas.

<sup>79</sup> In 2009 Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez presented the book as a gift to the president of the United States Barack Obama.

The U.S.- Mexican border is *una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. 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 a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’. Gringos in the US Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they are Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only ‘legitimate’ inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. (Anzaldúa 1987: 25)

This text, much like the image of Chauk’s bleeding body, can be understood as referring to the real violence taking place at the Mexico U.S. border, but can also be understood as a more general reflection on the process of exploitation and systemic violence in Latin America as described by Galeano. Chauk’s bleeding body thus becomes a visual metaphor of both border violence and colonial violence.

The portrayal of the continent as a human figure has been present since the first European representations of America. For example, in the early sixteenth century engraving by Theodor Galle entitled *Amerigo Vespucci landing in America*, America is represented by a naked woman lying in a hammock.<sup>80</sup> In his plate *America* from 1671, Jacob van Meurs depicted the continent as a sparsely clothed Amazon warrior. In European Art history the representation of the different continents as human figures, mostly women, is quite common. Famous Mexican painter Frida Kahlo regularly painted her agonizing body as intimately connected to the landscape and to the land. For example, in the painting *The Love Embrace of the Universe, The Earth, Mexico*, the universe and the earth are painted as women and visually mimic Kahlo’s body. In this painting both Kahlo and Mexico are wounded. Art historian Janice Helland explores the links between Kahlo’s representations of her own body

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<sup>80</sup> For an extensive analysis of this image see Mason 1990.

to cultural identity. Helland points out that much of the imagery employed by Kahlo can be traced back to pre-Columbian art. Helland observes in this respect:

Her repeated use of often bloody Aztec imagery is an intrinsic part of her social and political beliefs and derives much of its power from the depth of her convictions. Thus, the skeletons, hearts and Coatlicue, images relating to the emanation of light from darkness and life from death, speak not only to Kahlo's personal struggle for health and life, but to a nation's struggle. (Helland 1990: 398)

In her analysis Helland specifically frames Kahlo's work in the context of a postcolonial critique. Helland implicitly refers to Spivak's famous text when she states:

She was a political radical and passionate nationalist, whose art was inspired as much by her public beliefs as well as by her personal sufferings. In a feminist art history Kahlo's pictures are interventions that disrupt the dominant discourse *if* we allow her to 'speak' herself and refrain from imposing on her work our own Western middle-class values and psychology. She should be seen not as a Surrealist, nor as a member of any other Western modernist movement, nor exclusively as painter of the female experience, but as a committed Third World cultural nationalist. (Helland: 405)

Helland's analysis of Kahlo's work seems to be in line with literary theorist Frederic Jameson's considerations on Third World literature:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with properly libidinal dynamic necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (Jameson 1986: 69)

Jameson's affirmation is problematic in that it homogenizes experiences and texts in the so-called 'Third World'. In his essay 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the National Allegory', literary theorist Aijaz Ahmad critiques Jameson for his reductionist approach of 'Third World' texts and argues that a more complex reading is required. Nevertheless, as Naficy points out in *An Accented Cinema*, the private and the political tend to be intrinsically connected in many 'Third World' texts, whether they are films, paintings or literary works. It



therefore makes sense to read Chauk's dead body in *La jaula de oro* as a more general reference to the fate of not only undocumented migrants, but also Indigenous Peoples on the continent. As such the dead body of Chauk represents the physical extermination of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>81</sup>

Juan is finally able to make his way to the urban landscape of the United States. He looks at buildings with the U.S. flag which are surrounded by corrals or barbed wire. The image tells us the 'American dream' is not accessible to Juan. This image is in stark contrast with similar images at analogous points in the films such as *Sin nombre* (Cary Fukunaga), *Not Without My Daughter* (Brian Gilbert 1991) and *Maria Full of Grace* (Joshua Marston 2004). In all these films, the protagonists eventually reach the shelter of a United States embassy, or territory, looking up at the US flag as a symbol of saviour. In *La jaula de oro*, the US flag is inaccessible and appears to represent rather enclosure or entrapment. This coincides with the title of the film where the 'Golden Dream' of going to the United States has been replaced by a 'Golden Cage'. The extent of this entrapment becomes apparent in the last scene, where the film shows Juan's new job. In an extremely industrialized abattoir, Juan works picking up the waste. Although shot in a very different fashion, the images of the abattoir immediately call to mind those of the garbage dump. Where the garbage dump seemed overwhelming and exasperating because of its vastness in wide angles, the abattoir seems inescapable and crude due to close ups of raw meat. The film appears to contend that whether in Guatemala or in the United States, Juan seems to have no other option than to clear trash in humiliating conditions. The images focusing on the waste of meat can be read as a metaphor for the loss of life within the current economic and capitalist system which enslaves people to inhuman working conditions.<sup>82</sup>

When Juan steps outside after work it is already dark. He watches how snow starts to fall in the light of a street lantern. Juan murmurs the word "taiv" which is Maya for snow. Chauk had mentioned the word on several occasions to Sara, and Juan had understood its meaning when Chauk and himself were looking at a snow landscape in a toy store. The last image of the film consists of floating white particles against a black background. The image might well be a point of view of Juan looking at the snow falling down in the night. The theme of snow permeates the film as a form of subtext and therefore merits a closer look. After staying at the migrant shelter, Chauk and Juan continue travelling up north. Eventually

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<sup>81</sup> Among others the massacre in Acteal in Mexico and the genocide in Guatemala.

<sup>82</sup> Forced Labor, unhuman working conditions and neo-slavery are serious threats to undocumented migrants throughout the world. For the migration of Mexican Indigenous people to the USA, see for example: Fox and Rivera Salgado (2004).

we see an image of Chauk and Juan gazing through a window shop in the snow. The image is deceiving, as at first it appears the boys have already reached the United States. It turns out that they are looking a little electronic train cut through a snowy landscape in a store. This image calls to mind different other narratives and motifs. It is easily associated with the Andersen story of *The Little Match Seller* which starts out describing the cold and the snow outside, while the girl gazes into the comfort of different homes as it is New Year's Eve. This story was also the source of inspiration for the Colombian film *La vendedora de rosas* (V́ctor Gaviria 1998) which deals with the hardships of Colombian youth living on the streets. The image of Chauk and Juan in the snow thus creates a link between children exposed to hardship and poverty in different locations and at different moments in time, and expresses the vulnerability of a childhood of poverty and without protection.

Images of snow also figure throughout the narrative of *La jaula de oro* as a symbolic subtext. On different instances the image of falling white snow particles against a black background interrupts the main narrative. This seems to be an explicit citation of the film *L'Amour à Mort* by Alain Resnais (1984). To understand the meaning of these interruptions it is therefore worthwhile to examine the way in which Alain Resnais uses this motif. Film scholar Jenny Munro analyses how snow is present as a motif in different of Resnais films. In this 2012 essay Munro discusses Bazin's essay 'Il neige sur le Cinéma' (1948) and the connotations of snow with death in cinema. Munro goes on to cite Guillot (1999) and Combs (2007) to argue that the interruptions with images of snow in Resnais films are a kind of *temps mort* and make a reference to stillness and death. Munro points out that in the film *L'Amour à Mort*, the main character Simon has a deteriorating health and is living suspended between life and death. She observes:

Crucially, this suggests not only snow's connotations of frozen morbidity, but its transience and the sense of repetition in the film, which weighs heavily on its protagonists and also disrupts the spectator's viewing experience. Each dissolving flake reflects the imminence of Simon's death, and his constant memories of his death. It is the incongruity with which these images are inserted as visual motifs that highlights the ability of the cinematic medium to allow the spectator to identify with the frustrating hiatus Simon experiences. With each jarring interlude, we experience temporal stoppage ourselves, in an interstice between life and death, and the snow's stark whiteness suggests not only the inanimate barrenness of this space, but the inevitability of the journey from life to death. (Munro 2012: 6)

As in Resnais's film, the images of twirling white particles against a black background in *La jaula de oro* are apparently snow interrupting the main narrative. The idea of snow is reinforced by the end of the film when Juan looks at the snow particles falling in the darkness of the night and whispers "taiv". In this sense, like in Resnais's film, the snow is linked to death, as it becomes emblematic of Chauk who died along the way. If the images are read as a citation of Resnais's *L'Amour à Mort*, they signify a suspension between life and death. In this case, the images seem to convey that the youngsters are suspended in an interlude, a timeless barren space in which they exist without truly living. The film contends that living as an undocumented migrant with no rights, securities, protection or basic living conditions seems indeed to be a form of entrapment. A similar reading is indeed supported by the title of the film.

The interludes of snow position the film in the realm of auteur cinema, even though at first sight the narrative seems rather straightforward. The auteur cinema aesthetics are also present in other images that function as symbolic subtext of the film. Throughout the film, images of tunnels or beams of light disappearing in the dark night are overtly present. One shot depicts an opening of light becoming smaller and smaller in the distance, as the train enters deeper into a tunnel. The image conveys a sense of fleeting hope. These images underline a general sense in the film that the situation of the undocumented migrants is nearly hopeless. The film thus combines mainstream narrative structure and identification processes with the aesthetics of European Art Cinema and the subject matter of Third Cinema. The mainstream narrative structure ensures a greater sense of identification with the youngsters, while the aesthetics provide the film with a subtext. The subject matter focuses on the issues faced by undocumented migrants in real life in present times, making the film strikingly different from mainstream cinema.

The motif of snow and of a snow globe produces a different kind of association in the film *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles 1941). The association with *Citizen Kane* makes sense, as this film also addresses the 'American Dream' all be it in a different context and historical period. The film is considered to be one of the first to be actually critical of the 'American Dream'.<sup>83</sup> When Charles Foster Kane dies, a snow globe drops out of his hand as he whispers the word "Rosebud". Both the globe with twirling snow and the word Rosebud, which refers to his sledge, relate to Kane's childhood memories. The film presents Kane as a child playing

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<sup>83</sup> See for example Bordwell (1973) and Gottlieb (1992).

carefree in the snow, before he is separated from his parents by Thatcher, an event that will mark the rest of his life. The motif of snow in *Citizen Kane* refers thus to his childhood before entering the American Dream, still under the care and protection of his parents. In *La jaula de oro* the youngsters choose to leave the safety of their homes to pursue the American Dream. In *Citizen Kane*, the protagonist succeeds in gaining fame and wealth, but is simultaneously its victim as he dies alone and is estranged from everybody else. He has gained the American Dream at the cost of the loss of a family life and emotional peace. Just as Charles Foster Kane utters “Rosebud” as a way to express what really mattered to him, Juan seems to utter the word “taiv” in recognition of what has been really important to him, namely Chauk’s friendship and companionship. Both films seem to imply that in the end personal relations are more important than economic wealth or progress.

When Juan whispers “taiv” as he looks at the snow falling down, he connects with his friend Chauk. Throughout, the film Chauk has mentioned the word “taiv” on different occasions. The snow is constructed throughout the whole film as an element belonging to Chauk. For example, when the youngsters have their picture taken, Chauk is photographed against a background of a snow landscape. The images of snow particles falling against a black background have been like an interior point of view, a sort of interior monologue for Chauk. The image of falling snow in the night can thus be understood as a profound connection of Juan with the inner world of Chauk, a form of intense identification. When Juan whispers “taiv” he finally acknowledges Chauk’s Indigenous roots and expresses his esteem and acceptance not only of Chauk, but of this Indigenous heritage. The construction of national identity in Mexico and Guatemala has been largely built on the negation and exclusion of Indigenous Peoples and their cultures. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Anzadúa writes about the negation of Indigenous heritage as a form of self-negation and proposes identification with the oppressed, with the alien, with the other, as a new ‘mestiza’ consciousness:

The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show through the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundations of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the

beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (Anzaldúa 1987: 102)

Juan's internal journey in the story brings him to connect not only with Chauk as a person, but with the Indigenous heritage of the American continent, dissolving the binary opposition between 'Indian' and 'non-Indian' presented in the beginning of the film. The connection between Chauk and Indigenous roots is visualized in the film through images of long roots lying bare in the tropical landscape of southern Mexico. The film encourages identification on different levels. The film on one hand encourages the identification of the audience with the young undocumented migrants, and on the other, shows the identification of Juan with Chauk. Through this process the film provides an opening for the "breaking down of the subject-object duality" mentioned by Anzaldúa. In stimulating identification with the subaltern on different levels (with the undocumented migrants in the United States, with the Central American migrants in Mexico, and with the Indigenous population in Guatemala itself) the film creates a nomadic movement from one margin to the other. Through the active search for identification with the subaltern in each different context, the film produces what Edward Said has called a 'secular' movement, a continued move towards the margins.<sup>84</sup>

This analysis shows that narrative structure can make an audience identify with marginal characters and call attention to particular political issues and identification is present at different stages of a film, both within the film and between an audience and a film. At the moment of viewing a film an audience identifies with the characters in the film because of the narrative structure of the film, the visual language and the performance. Through the identification with the characters, an audience can be stimulated to reevaluate their own feelings or perspective on particular matters. Both *La jaula de oro* and *The Girl* start out with characters that have a biased and negative attitude towards the Indigenous population. The dramatic change in the characters allows and stimulates the audience to reconsider its own attitude towards the migrant and Indigenous population. While the process of identification through the use of conventions such as the shot-counter-shot, points of view, close ups and over-shoulder shots is common in mainstream cinema, these conventions can also be employed in marginal filmmaking. Both *La jaula de oro* and *The Girl* employ rather

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<sup>84</sup> See Aamar Mufti's *Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture* (1998).

mainstream storytelling devices but have an oppositional effect.<sup>85</sup> Although *The Girl* and *La jaula de oro* were made by non-Indigenous filmmakers, both films have many elements which Knopf mentions as decolonizing tools. In *La jaula de oro* the voice of the filmmaker is clearly present in both the narrative structure, as well as the visual aesthetics of the film. As Kydd mentions in *The Critical Practice of Film* an analysis of the narrative structure and the aesthetic elements of a film can bring to the fore ideological standpoints. In the following chapters, I will analyse in a similar manner short films and documentaries by different Indigenous filmmakers, although I will also refer occasionally to representations of Indigenous Peoples in films by non-Indigenous filmmakers. The analysis will focus on the ways in which the narrative and aesthetic elements present certain ideological standpoints.

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<sup>85</sup> Other oppositional films that employ mainstream storytelling devices are for example: *Paradise Now* (Hany Abu Assad 2005), *Smoke Signals* (Chris Eyre 1998), or *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce 2002).