

Sin Nombre: The fate of Central American youth on their way to the US

By Luis Arce
24 April 2009

Written and directed by Cary Fukunaga

Following the lives of two teenagers, *Sin Nombre*—in Spanish with English subtitles—tells the story of thousands of poor youth in Central America trying to cope with a society that has nothing for them. Some opt to take the long and dangerous trip to *el Norte* (the US) in search of work, while others—those who stay behind—are often attracted to gang culture, looking for a sense of belonging and brotherhood, a life that ends up imprisoning them in the same or an even more miserable existence.

2005 Student Academy Award silver medalist Cary Fukunaga has succeeded in telling this story in a realistic, compelling and moving film that follows Casper, a.k.a. Willy (Edgar Flores), a Mexican boy from Tapachula, a city near the Guatemalan border, and Sayra (Paulina Gaitan), a girl from a poor neighborhood in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

Sayra's father, who has been deported from New Jersey, returns to Tegucigalpa to take the daughter he left behind—now a teenager—back to the US.

In Tapachula, Casper has joined a gang—the Mara Salvatrucha—and is responsible for a 12-year-old boy who goes by the nickname of “Smiley” (Kristyan Ferrer). There is another side to Casper's life: his love for Martha Marlene (Diana García). Casper is so careful about keeping Martha separate from his gang life that he uses the name Willy with her.

Martha, however, feels uncomfortable about keeping her love a secret and decides to show up at a Mara Salvatrucha meeting. Li'l Mago intervenes, and Martha is brutally taken away from Casper forever.

After a long and exhausting trip, Sayra, her father and uncle manage to cross into Mexico and arrive at the Tapachula train yard. There they are joined by hundreds of Central America's poor waiting to make the journey to the Mexico-Texas border.

The Tapachula train yard, nicknamed *La Bombilla*, is Mara Salvatrucha territory. Li'l Mago orders Smiley and Casper/Willy to board the train and prepare to rob the immigrants riding on top of the freight cars. In response,

Casper makes a decision that will change his life.

As the journey proceeds, Willy and Sayra develop a warm and caring relationship, having been brought together by a common, intense desire to survive and a newborn hope of beating the odds and overcoming the horrors of the past.

Willy promises to reunite Sayra safely with her family in New Jersey. The film comes to a climax when all the main protagonists meet on the banks of the Rio Grande (which separates the US and Mexico).

The greatest strength of the movie lies in how closely it documents the cruel and treacherous reality faced by youth in the poor neighborhoods of Tapachula and Tegucigalpa. To his credit, Fukunaga made a bold decision to experience first-hand the dangerous journey of Central American immigrants across Mexico.

In an interview published at Indiewire, Cary Fukunaga explained:

“So I decided to go down to Chiapas with two of my friends...to investigate in person the story that it seemed inevitable that I would be writing. Over two months we went to prisons to interview the gang members that controlled the train lines and the gangs they battled with, we went to shelters for the traveling immigrants and those injured on the journey, and organizations that specialized in the human rights of the immigrants who were being accosted on the way. We interviewed hundreds of immigrants in train yards and in varying states of the journey.”

Fukunaga's decision to partake in person of the immigrant's drama helps bestow the film with a natural power and its characters with a passionate, human authenticity.

It might be useful to put *Sin Nombre* (*Without Name*) briefly into its historical and social context.

Honduras is the poorest country in the region. The precarious conditions in which the urban and rural poor live, including Sayra's grandmother, have cost thousands their lives, prey to hurricanes, heavy rain and floods.

The banana plantation that Sayra, her father and uncle

cross by foot en route to Mexico might have been a killing field where the CIA-backed military death squads were assassinating peasants and terrorizing the Salvadorian people in the 1980s.

The border between Mexico and Guatemala is full of dangers; immigrants are constantly exposed to assault and exploitation by corrupt Mexican authorities. Many see their dreams of getting a decent job in the US come to an end at the frontier and must begin the painful trip back to their country of origin.

Central to the success of the film is Adriano Goldman's excellent cinematography. With their choice of close-ups, the filmmakers induce the spectator to participate as another character in the story. Goldman's art shows how good camera work can speak to other senses besides the visual, communicating the warmth, the smells, complementing what the eye can see and more fully capturing the reality.

The viewer experiences the filthy streets of Tapachula and the shanty in Tegucigalpa where Sayra meets her father. With Casper and Smiley, one gets an inside view of the gang's hangout. One meets the various members: "el Picaro," "Smokey," "Turbino," and "Peluquin." When food arrives, gang members sit with the women and children to share a family moment.

There is a hellish element of life for Central America's urban poor. It is no accident that the image of Satan still plays a powerful role in popular culture, in conditions where filth and denied opportunities coexist. Sayra tells Willy (Casper) that a neighbor who was a witch told her she would make it to the US, "not by the hand of God, but the claw of the Devil."

The scenes at the rail yard uniquely portray the immigrants' drama. The risks they must take to escape misery and hunger. Sleeping surrounded by garbage, exposed to the elements. Gathering in groups to protect themselves, perhaps with others coming from the same neighborhoods, or perhaps with new-made friends destined for the same US city. The transvestite selling water is a colorful and sadly-funny personality, the type found at various lawless crossroads in Latin America. There is the sense of anticipation when the train arrives, presaging a new beginning.

The shots of the weeks-long train ride across Mexico do not transmit the beauty of the landscape like, for example, certain scenes in *Motorcycle Diaries*. *Sin Nombre* shows the impoverished Mexican countryside. Shanties and garbage follow the railroad tracks in an uninterrupted line of poverty connecting Guatemala and Texas.

The film realistically captures different stages in the process of degeneration that transforms youths from petty thieves into killers capable of executing their own. The

passage from one stage to the other occurs in a single, brutal act lasting just seconds that destroys childhood and binds an individual to gang life forever.

In one scene, "Smiley" tells a group of other 12-year-olds—perhaps from the neighborhood, or perhaps from school—that he is getting ready to kill someone and proudly shows off his revolver. He gains the respect of his friends who react with admiration and enthusiasm. One goes as far as to suggest how to carry out the crime: "You have to ambush him." In this world nobody except young children are still capable of smiling, though many of them already possess a good dose of cynicism.

Casper (Willy) has a personality with two sides so different from one another that each needs its own name. Like many, he follows the path to *el Norte* and has a simple notion of the American dream, promising to take Sayra to a Six Flags amusement park and sharing with her his desire to fly in an airplane.

All the principal actors have had some acting experience in film and local productions. But the ease and naturalness of the performances suggest that their lives are not that far from those of the characters they portray.

The young director is aware that filmmakers can make use of human misery for their own purposes. Fukunaga told an interviewer, "I felt strange about the possibility of profiting on a story about real people risking their lives. I get frustrated with certain filmmakers who stand under a banner of altruism with their socio/political stories that I think sometimes border on the exploitative."

Sin Nombre's powerful story, like Tapachula itself, is thousands of miles from the superficiality of most Hollywood mainstream production. Fukunaga's courageous decision to make this story "his story" is commendable.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>