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Memory and history of Central American migration in the first decades of the XXIst Century through its regional cinema

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<p>Key words: Central America; history; memory; migration; cinema.</p>	<p>Memory and history of Central American migration in the first decades of the XXIst Century through its regional cinema Abstract: Cinema, just like television, the press, and other means of communication, contributes in forging social and cultural imaginaries as clearly demonstrated by Bourdieu in <i>Langage et pouvoir symbolique</i> (2001) y Chomsky in <i>Manufacturing Consent</i> (2008). However, in depicting social phenomena, cinema not only constructs imaginaries but rather contributes to the creation of filmic archives and likewise allows to construct and reconstruct a part of history. This is our position, adopting the postulates of Ferro (1993 [1977]), Kracauer (1969, 1973), and Billard (1982). Through the prism of the philosophy of history, this article examines the question of to what extent contemporary Central American cinema can be analyzed as a form of construction and reconstruction of the memory and the history of Central American migration in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.</p>
<p>Palabras clave: Centroamérica; historia; memoria; migración; cine.</p>	<p>Memoria e historia de la migración centroamericana en las primeras décadas del siglo XXI a través del cine regional Resumen: El cine, así como la televisión, la prensa y otros medios de comunicación contribuyen a forjar imaginarios sociales y culturales así lo han demostrado ampliamente Bourdieu en <i>Langage et pouvoir symbolique</i> (2001) y Chomsky en <i>La Fabrication du consentement</i> (2008). Sin embargo, el cine al retratar fenómenos sociales, no solamente construye imaginarios sino que también contribuye a la creación de archivos fílmicos y con ellos permite construir así como a reconstruir una parte de la historia. Esa es nuestra posición, haciendo propios los postulados de Ferro (1993 [1977]), Kracauer (1969, 1973) y Billard (1982). Bajo el prisma de la filosofía de la historia, el presente artículo pretende analizar en qué medida el cine centroamericano contemporáneo puede ser considerado como una forma de construcción o reconstrucción de la memoria y la historia de las migraciones centroamericanas en las dos primeras décadas del siglo XXI.</p>
<p>Palavras-chave: América Central, história; memória, migração; cinema.</p>	<p>Memória e história da migração centro-americana nas primeiras décadas do século XXI através seu cinema regional Resumo: O cinema, da mesma maneira que a televisão, a imprensa, e outros meios de comunicação, contribui na construção de imaginários sociais e culturais, como mostrou claramente Bourdieu em <i>Langage et pouvoir symbolique</i> (2001) e o Chomsky em <i>A Fabricação do Consenso</i> (2008). Contudo, o cinema ao retratar fenômenos sociais, não somente constrói imaginários, mas também constrói a criação de arquivos fílmicos e com eles permite construir e reconstruir uma parte da história. Essa é nossa posição, adotando os postulados de Ferro (1993 [1977]), de Kracauer (1969, 1973) e de Billard (1982). Através do prisma da filosofia da história, o artigo pretende analisar em que medida o cinema centro-americano contemporâneo pode ser considerado como uma forma de construção e reconstrução da memória e da história das migrações centro-americanas nas primeiras duas décadas do século XXI.</p>
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Introduction

Addressed through the genres of romance, drama, tragedy, satire, comedy or even epic, the theme of migration has inspired a great number of filmmakers throughout the history of cinema. At the dawn of the age of silent film, the subject addressed in fiction by one of its pioneers and maestros: Charlie Chaplin. With *The Immigrant* (1917), Chaplin would not only mark the history of cinema with his film turned classic by having introduced a dramatic dimension into a register traditionally reserved for comedy, but also by having opened the way to a social theme that has remained to this day a recurring interest of filmmakers worldwide. Nowadays, the socio-geopolitical weight of the subject has spurred the creation of film festivals like the Global Migration Film Festivals, launched in 2016 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) of the United Nations (UN), with the objective of, “easing the way to generate discussions of greater magnitude centering on one of the biggest phenomena of our time.”(UN.IOM. Global Migration Film Festival, my translation).

In Central America, a region of Latin America particularly affected by migratory activity, national cinemas began to address the topic beginning particularly in the 1980s. This period coincides with the ongoing civil wars in Guatemala (1960-1996), Nicaragua (1979-1989) and El Salvador (1979-1992). However, it is only until the beginning of the twenty-first century that the topic attracted serious interest on the big screen¹. The increase in the numbers of films on regional migration is far from being a commercial fad. Within the Central American context, this increase coincides with what in 2014 the President of the United States, Barack Obama, called a humanitarian crisis, referring to the exodus of thousands of Central Americans, including many minors, who attempted illegally cross into the United States.

Cinema, like television, the press, and other means of communication contribute in forging social and cultural imaginaries as has been widely demonstrated by Pierre Bourdieu in *Langage et pouvoir symbolique* (2001) and Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent* (2008). Cinema, however, in depicting social phenomena, does not only construct imaginaries but rather also contributes to the creation of filmic archives and likewise allows to construct and reconstruct a part of history. This is our position, adopting the postulates of Ferro (1993 [1977]), Kracauer (1969, 1973) and Billard (1982). Through the prism of the philosophy of history, this article examines the question of to what extent contemporary Central American cinema can be analyzed as a form of construction and reconstruction of the memory and the history of Central American migration in the first two decades of the XXI century.

¹ For more information on the evolution of the topic of immigration in Central American cinema from 1970 to 2014, see particularly the chapter “Cine y migración” (CABEZAS VARGAS, 2015, p. 377-419).

According to Lorenzen, Frausto and Yanzadig (2018, p. 81, my translation) migration can be understood through three levels of interconnected analysis: “the macro or societal level, the meso or group level, and the micro or individual level.” By studying these three levels of migration through a sociological prism, we can relate them with the concepts of personal history, collective history, and general (or global) history through the study of cinema and history as suggested by Ferro. In this way, the aforementioned levels have an axiomatic parallelism: personal history corresponds to the micro level, or the person as an individual, collective history to the meso level and the history of a determined group or even general history to the macro level. The analysis of this study is built on this parallelism between sociology and the study of the historical philosophy of film. Through this perspective, we will first review the topic of migration in Central American cinema and its evolution at the turn of the twenty first century briefly in order to better understand its increasing presence. Second, we will analyze how filmmakers use their subjectivity to reconstruct a part of global history on one hand through microhistories and, on the other, as a combination of these personal microhistories woven together to form a collective story. Finally, we will look into how commercial film, through fiction, is able to reconstitute another form of history: that of the thoughts and social imaginary of an era.

The crossroads between the history of contemporary Central American migration and regional cinema

In its images, cinema gathers and preserves the work of a lifetime, and in it, the course of history.

(BENJAMIN, 2000, p. 441, my translation).

In order to better understand the growing interest in the theme of Central American migration in contemporary cinema, it is first necessary to delve into the history of migration in the region. The pervasiveness of this theme during the first two decades of the twenty first century is explained not only by cinematographic reasons, but also by the evolution of migratory flows itself in the history of the isthmus, as well as the amplitude that this phenomenon has reached within Central American societies.

The evolution of the topic of migration in Central American cinema

As described by Cortés (2003, p. 32, my translation), despite that fact that internal displacement within Central American countries has always existed, “extra-regional migration is relatively recent” given that in, “the nineteen eighties the phenomenon of extra-regional migration

began to emerge.” Taking a brief look through the cinematographic productions from 1970 until the end of the decades of the nineties, the theme of migration was not a central topic in the productions of that time (CABEZAS, 2015, p. 379). While the topic of internal migration from the countryside to the city had already been raised on the big screen in previous decades in countries like Costa Rica and Guatemala, the first films centered on extra-regional migration were not produced until the 1980s: *El Norte* (Guatemala, 1984) by Gregory Nava and *Wanaki Lupia* (The children of the river [*Los hijos del río*], Nicaragua, 1986) by Fernando Somarriba. During the same period, *Historias de Cuscatlán* (El Salvador, 1989) was filmed by Peter Chapel to address internal migration.

The introduction of the theme of migration coincides with the first extra-regional migratory flows during the decade of the eighties, arising as a consequence of the civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Similarly, the historical context permits to observe and demonstrate that the three films directed in this period coincide with two relevant periods of history. On one hand, the origin of the films coincides with the three countries affected by the extra-regional migration. On the other hand, the gist of the three films focuses on forced migration amidst violent conflict. However, despite elevated numbers of displaced peoples², the issue did not achieve greater relevance in the regional cinema and the three cited films were an attempt to describe a reality that remained essentially foreign to the cinematographic field. Given this, if the decades of the eighties and nineties marked an important parameter in the history of Central American migration, how can we explain the low number of films on forced migration during these decades? If cinema is directly linked to socio-historical realities, as affirmed by Ferro (1993 [1977]), Kracauer (1973 [1947]; 2010 [1960]) and Billard (1982), why does immigration occupy a nearly insignificant space in such a pivotal, historical moment in Central America?

In order to ultimately understand the timid introduction of the theme of migration into Central American cinema during the last two decades in the twentieth century, it is important to recall all of the diverse factors, both internal and external to cinema, that intervened in the production of the era. In the first place, the countries that had institutions entrusted with the task of developing their national cinemas at that time were Panama (GECU³), Costa Rica (El Departamento de Cine⁴) and Nicaragua (INCINE⁵). These institutions were created in 1972, 1973, and 1979 respectively. Among the three countries, only Nicaragua was affected by forced migration and displacement caused by civil war, which explains why neither Panama nor Costa Rica engaged with the topic. For its part, Nicaragua filmed –with State funds– a cinema of short propaganda films in

² According to Lorenzen, Frausto, and Yanzadig (2018, p. 82), it is estimated that around one million people were displaced in both Guatemala and El Salvador.

³ Grupo Experimental de Cine Universitario.

⁴ In the moment of its creation the institution was placed under the Department of Cinema in the Ministry of Youth and Culture. Four years later, it would become the Costa Rican Center of Cinematographic Production.

⁵ Instituto Nicaragüense de Cine.

support of the revolution, following the model of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC). In the second place, the regional cinema, marked by the profoundly politicized context of the Cold War, began to take an interest in the problems of the war themselves, in the anti-imperialism as well as the armed struggle, more than trying to paint a picture of the first major migration of Central Americans. In other words, the global history captured the attention of the big screen and in so doing absorbed the meso history of those displaced by war, which only represented a part of society.

The panorama changed in the first decade of the twentieth century. Gradually, the regional cinema began to witness an increase in films focusing on migration. Between 2000 and 2018, approximately sixteen films⁶ on the subject were produced. The significant increase is not only explained by the development of cinematographic production in the region, but also by the new historical events that Central America had been experiencing. Migration is no longer a collateral effect of war. Rather, since the first decade of the twenty first century, it has morphed into a central issue and a major challenge for Central American nations. According to Sandoval (2018 [2015], my translation):

The censuses of the United States put this phenomenon into perspective. If one compares the percentages of registered Central Americans in the censuses of 2000 and 2010, it is noted that the Central American population as a whole increased by 136%: Honduras's population, in particular, increased by 191%, Guatemala's by 180% and those originating from El Salvador by 151%.

If the civil wars were left behind in the 1990s, how can this new flow of Central American migrants be explained? What motivated this exceptional increase of Central Americans to leave their countries over the last two decades? Determining the cause of the migratory crisis affecting Central America is a complex task. It is not the intention of this article to develop in detail each element that would explain this situation. However, in an attempt to understand the relationship that is woven between the cinema and the evolution of the history of migratory processes in Central America, it is fundamental to highlight some of these elements in order to understand the complexity of the phenomenon. For this reason, we will mention the most relevant political, economic, and social factors that, according to historians, sociologists, and political scientists, have resulted in the humanitarian crisis that Central American migration represents today.

⁶ Without being able to count on mandatory legal registering requirements or with an official database per country, it is difficult to have an exact number of the films produced in the region. The cited figure corresponds to the number that we have been able to catalogue by updating the data assembled during our doctoral thesis (CABEZAS, 2015), based off of information gathered in the film festivals of ICARO, the International Film Festival of Costa Rica, the International Festival of Panama, the Ibermedia platform and the virtual library of the Fundación del Nuevo Cine latinoamericano.

The relation between the context and the increase of films on the theme of migration

In effect, the evolution of the migratory context had a strong impact in the increase of films on the theme of migration. According to experts, there are multiple reasons that provoked the current regional migratory crisis. In the first place, it is necessary to evoke the consequences of war. Among the most important is the high number of people either murdered or who disappeared, as well as the numbers of forced migrations. It is estimated that around one million people were displaced in both Guatemala and El Salvador (LORENZEN; FRAUSTO; YANZADIG, 2018, p. 82). Although these antecedents might seem like something from the past, it remains important to recall them given that they are directly related with the migratory waves of the new century. On one hand, according to Pearce:

The civil war economically devastates the affected countries, slowing the possibilities of medium-term social and economic development, and left the States and institutions weak, and population heavily armed, contributing to the persistence of violence and the to the increase of criminality. (cited by LORENZEN *et al.*, 2018, p. 83, my translation).

The political and economic fragility of the Central American countries opened the way for organized crime. On the other hand, according to Lorenzen, Frausto, and Yanzadig (2018, p. 82), the origins of the first migratory flow of Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans, begun during wartime, formed major Central American communities in the United States. This not only led to the disintegration of numerous separated families, but also served as motivation, at the turn of the century, for many other Central Americans to attempt to reunite with their family members living abroad, particularly in the United States.

In second place, another consequence of war is violence. This problem, far from diminishing after the end of the conflicts, it has only increased. The forced return of Central American members of the Maras gang originating in the United States provoked the proliferation of new gangs among the youth, who also resort to the use of extreme violence, assaults and extortion of civilians. This problem is linked to the arrival of drug cartels to the region, bringing with them increasing problems of violence and insecurity.

In third place, the impact of the structural reforms imposed on the Central American states during the 1990s by the World Bank, the mechanisms of free trade implemented in the next decades and the privatization of public services have together increased the levels of dependence and poverty. As Nayar explains (2018, p. 14, my translation), “what the model imposed over the last three decades did was to deepen not only poverty, but also strengthen the levels of marginalization, inequality, violence and migration, bringing them to extremes.” Along the same lines, Cordero and Figueroa (2011, p. 130) maintain that, “one of the effects of the articulation of the Central American

market to the neoliberal canons by means of the Structural Adjustment Programs has been the ‘migratory expulsion’.”

In fourth place, at the political level the weakening of the States, the problems of corruption and impunity must also be highlighted. As Sandoval (2018, my translation) underlines it:

The cases of corruption that have sent to prison presidents and ex-presidents of practically every Central American countries with the exception of Nicaragua, where the powers of the State held by the Ortega-Murillo family makes that possibility impossible.

Two factors external to the region align with these four internal factors. The first of these is the impact of the law passed by the United States Senate in December 2008: *Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act –TYPRA–* (ONE HUNDRED, H. R. 7311). The law declares that non-accompanied children and adolescents (NNA) originating from countries beyond the border (thereby excluding Mexico and Canada) and detained by the United States migration authorities could not return to their countries of origin without first appearing before an immigration judge⁷. According to Lorenzen, Gatica, and Reynoso (2018, p. 77, my translation), “while waiting their time before a judge, the U.S. authorities should move nna to non-restricted places, generally with family members that reside in the United States.” According to the results revealed by the same authors (Lorenzen *et al.* 2018, p. 83, my translation), “around one in five Salvadorans and one in 15 Guatemalans and Hondurans reside in the United States, and it has been calculated that 85% of the Central American nna that arrived to the country in 2014 had parents or other family members residing there, mostly without proper documentation”. The second factor external to the region that cannot be omitted is the impact of false rumors spread by groups of human traffickers, known as *coyotes*. These groups took advantage of the orders of TYPRA to spread the rumor throughout the Northern Triangle that the United States had changed its laws on migration and would award residency permits to nna arrival in order to be united with their family members (LORENZEN, 2017, p. 186).

A combination of these factors has provoked a substantial increase in Central American migration over the last two decades. This unexpected migratory phenomenon, catalogued as a “humanitarian crisis”, has not left regional filmmakers indifferent to this reality, which has thus led to the increase in the region of films on the topic. Table 1 displays films on migration that have been used in this study:

⁷ The acronyms “tvpra” and “nna” are employed in lowercase by the authors.

Table No. 1: Catalogued films on the topic of migration (2000-2018)

<i>Film</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Typology of the History</i>		<i>Historiographical resources</i>		
				One	Various	Testimony	Archival images	News/event
<i>Desde el barro al Sur</i>	Nicaragua	2002	Documentary		X	X		
<i>Por cobrar(Colect Call)</i>	Guatemala/United States	2002	Fiction		X			
<i>La mesa feliz</i>	Costa Rica	2008	Documentary		X	X		X
<i>Nica/raguense</i>	Costa Rica	2005	Documentary		X	X		X
<i>Norman</i>	Guatemala	2005	Documentary	X		X		
<i>Historia de Rosa</i>	Nicaragua	2005	Documentary	X		X		
<i>El Camino</i>	Costa Rica	2008	Fiction	X		X		
<i>María en tierra de nadie</i>	El Salvador	2010	Documentary		X	X		
<i>Ausentes</i>	El Salvador	2010	Documentary		X	X		
<i>abUSAdos</i>	Guatemala/United States	2011	Documentary		X	X	X	X
<i>La ReBúsqueda</i>	El Salvador	2014	Fiction		X			
<i>Abrazos</i>	Guatemala	2014	Documentary		X	X		
<i>Ambiguity: Crónica de un Sueño Americano</i>	Guatemala/ United States	2015	Fiction		X			X
<i>Casa en tierra aneja</i>	Costa Rica	2017	Documentary		X	X		
<i>Maikol Yordan de viaje perdido</i>	Costa Rica	2014	Fiction	X				
<i>El Regreso</i>	Costa Rica	2011	Fiction	X				

Source: Self elaboration.

It is necessary to clarify that for the constitution of the corpus of the present study we highlighted exclusively the films that focus on the theme of emigration of Central Americans as the central axis of the story, thereby excluding films that discuss migration indirectly or as a secondary topic, or films that discuss other types of migration such as immigration of citizens from countries outside of the region moving to the isthmus. Similarly, we have omitted films directed by non-Central American filmmakers given that we are interested in history and introspection. This is why films like *El choguí* (2001) o *Asalto al sueño* (2006), despite being considered “Central American”, are not represented in our corpus. The former was made by the Spanish filmmaker Félix Zurita, who currently lives Nicaragua. Furthermore, the film focuses on the migration of a Mexican boxer going to the United States and not Central American migration. The latter, for its part, was filmed by the German filmmaker Uli Stelzner.

The aforementioned chart reveals the increase of films on the subject: from three in the 1980s and 1990s to sixteen films in the new century. This rise evokes the relation between cinema and history that philosopher, historian and art critic Walter Benjamin (2000, p. 441-442, my translation) observed at the beginnings of the twentieth century, accepting that, “through images cinema collects and preserves the work of a time period, and in that the course of history.” Being

the product of a time period, cinema gathers the problems, preoccupations, and fears that affect individuals as well as groups in a society in a given time period in a determined context. As a result, it is no surprise that an increasing interest in this topic corresponds to the reality of the context of the first decade of the twentieth century.

Images that construct memory and history

The so-called Northern Triangle comprised by El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, encapsulates the countries most affected by emigration to the United States and is the most studied by scholars as well as the most exploited by the press. Given this, it is not surprising that the majority of the fiction and documentaries films produced revolve around these three countries, as well as the North-South migration. For this reason, our analysis will mostly focus on this area. However, Central American cinema, with its regional specificities, has also portrayed some of the stories that are the least mediatized internationally, directly affected the isthmus, and constitute a part of the history of its regional migration. For this reason, in our attempt to demonstrate the role of regional cinema in the historical construction and reconstruction of Central American migration, we cannot overlook South-South migration. In this way we will attempt to give a cross-cutting analysis of the migratory processes that the cinema has captured through its lens and that, together, writes Central American history. For this, we will next evoke the different means that the regional filmmakers have used in order to narrate the history of Central American migration and their effects in what is traditionally known as forms of writing memory and history.

Construction and reconstruction of collective memory based on microhistories

In order to construct and reconstruction collective memory, the first strategy used by regional filmmakers is the narration of microhistories⁸: from the experience of an individual within a group. In historical terms, the word “micro” refers to individual histories; from these microhistories global history is shaped (CERUTTI, Ginzburg, Levi⁹), and in this case that of Central American migrants. In this sense, migration seen through microhistory encompasses as much the reasons for an individual to migrate as their individual experience in the process of migration. The microhistory therefore attempts, “to take on singularities in order to demonstrate

⁸ The word “micro” is understood from the point of view of history and sociology, not from literature.

⁹ Between 1981 and 1991 Giovanni Levi, Simona Cerutti and Carlo Ginzburg directed the collection “Microstorie” from the Italian editor Einaudi, which inspired the creation of around twenty volumes dedicated to the study of Microhistory, with the participation of both Italians as well as other nationalities (GINZBURG, 2006).

how those specificities can contradict and deconstruct the global cases in each instance, more than representing them faithfully in a positivist, classical manner.” (MAN, 2013, p. 169, my translation).

The term is relevant particularly because in order to “(re)construct” the history of migration oftentimes forgotten, that is to say, the human side of the issue, filmmakers use multiple means and methods. Among those, perhaps the most “innovative” during the first decade of the twentieth century is the use of intimate space as the starting point. In the majority of cases, filmmakers who have directed documentaries and fictions on the topic of migration have been migrants themselves and garner support from their own multiple individual experiences, their own microhistories, and their own affinity for the subject in order to reconstruct fragments of the history of migration through the medium of film. This is the case of the Guatemalans Luis Argueta and Grisel Wilson, the Salvadoran-Nicaraguan Marcela Zamora, the Guatemalan-Mexican Julio Hernández Córdón, the Honduran Martha Clarissa Hernández, the Nicaraguans María José Álvarez and Carlos Solís, and the Costa Rican Ishtar Yasin, among others.

Among this group of regional filmmakers, the Guatemalan Luis Argueta is without a doubt the most involved in the subject of migration through his films. This is perhaps explained in part by his own experience given that the director knows perfectly well how difficult being an immigrant can be. After having received a scholarship to study engineering at the University of Michigan, Argueta went on a journey in 1975 that would take him to many countries including Italy and France, where he was denied a work visa. Frustrated for not being able to work in Europe, he returns to Guatemala before finally settling down in the United States in 1988. While in exile, he directed a series of films on the subject of migration. The first of these is *Por cobrar* (*Collect Call*, 2002), followed by his trilogy of documentaries *AbUSAdos* (2011), *Abrazos* (2014) y *Vuelta en U* (*The U Turn*, 2017). In the series, he respectively portrays the imaginaries around migration: the abuses suffered by a large number of undocumented Central American migrants working in one of the biggest meat packing plants in Postville (United States). the hard consequences of migration at the center of nuclear families, and the fight of a group of Central American migrants to have their rights recognized by U.S. migration authorities with the U-Visa¹⁰.

On the other hand, the directors Martha Clarissa Hernández y María José Álvarez also know what it is like to live abroad. Nicaraguan-born Álvarez lived in England where she studied philosophy, as well as in the United States where she studied photography, cinema and television in the city of Boston. Hernández, originally from Honduras, moved to Nicaragua in the middle of the revolution to work at the INCINE, where she’s lived since 1979. Together they established the production company Luna Films in 1990. Among her lengthy filmography, two documentaries are

¹⁰ The U-Visa is reserved for victims of certain crimes that have suffered physical or mental abuse and provides support to public agencies and governmental officials in the investigation and prosecution of criminal activities. For more information, see: H.R. 7311 (ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA).

centered on immigration. The first of which, *Desde el barro al Sur* (2002), focus on the thousands of Nicaraguans that migrated to Costa Rica. In the second feature film dedicated to migration, *Lubaraun* (2014), Álvarez and Hernández outline the journey taken by the Garífuna Diaspora on the Central American coast. Although their second feature film is rather an exercise on visual anthropology, the documentary is intriguing because it centers on the theme of the migration of minority groups such as those from Africa, which is rarely featured in the region's cinema.

The Salvadoran documentary filmmaker Marcela Zamora, for her part, also has intimate knowledge of the phenomenon of migration because of her Nicaraguan roots. For both academic and professional reasons, she has lived abroad multiple times. Zamora is a journalist and the co-founder of the film production house Kino Glaz, based in El Salvador and Mexico. Furthermore, she graduated in journalism at the Universidad Latina de Costa Rica and has a diploma in documentary filmmaking at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y TV at San Antonio de los Baños (EICTV), Cuba. She has lived and worked in such countries as Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Mexico, Venezuela and Cuba. Her own experience as a migrant in different countries could be the impetus behind her first full-length documentary, *María en tierra de nadie* (2010), which she dedicated to the subject of migration. In the film, Marcela Zamora travels 3,000 kilometers from the South to the North of Mexico, following one of the routes that Central American migrants use in the journey towards the United States. In the documentary, Zamora collects the testimony of Central American migrants exposed to kidnapping, murder, rape, and robbery. The origin of her first work can be found in her desire to show migration from a different angle given that, “the interviews in the migrant camps in Mexico would only cover the events of the men.” (ZAMORA in CONTRERAS, 2017). For this reason, she decides to reveal a feminine perspective of Central American migration in a powerful and painful portrait on the theme of migrants, through the testimony of women –grandmothers, mothers, and daughters– all victims of the consequences of the terrible path taken by undocumented migration.

The history of Costa Rican filmmaker Ishtar Yasin is also a history of migrations. Born in Moscow, she was the daughter of an Iraqi father working as a theater director and a ballerina and choreographer mother from Chile. After her birth, her parents moved to Chile. However, because of the *coup d'état* led by Augusto Pinochet (1973) against the government of Salvador Allende, her parents finally settled down in Costa Rica –the country of origin of her grandfather, the famous Costa Rican writer Joaquín Gutiérrez– where she grew up and began her academic training. Subsequently, Yasin travelled to Moscow to study cinema and later returned to Costa Rica where she filmed her first feature film dedicated to migration: *La mesa feliz* (2005). Her second film, *El Camino* (2008), was filmed as a fiction inspired by the accounts of the migrants she encountered in her first documentary.

The personal journey of Julio Hernández Córdón is, similarly, exemplary of migration given that he was born in North Carolina (United States), is the son of a Guatemalan mother and a Mexican father, and has three nationalities. He has lived in the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. His first films centered on the realities of Guatemala. In his documentary *Norman* (2005), Hernández Córdón focuses on the history of a Guatemala ex-gang member who lives on the Mexico-Guatemalan border. The director follows the protagonist in his attempts to achieve the American dream.

The path taken by Grisel Wilson is not far from that taken by the migrants themselves that he projects onto the screen in his first fiction feature film: *Ambiguity* (2014). Wilson is a Guatemalan who immigrated illegally to the United States in the 1980s while the civil war was erupting in his home country. He is currently Vice President of the non-profit organization *Independent Film Arizona* and worked in cinema for many years while taking on various roles in the industry until he directed his first feature film in the United States. In *Ambiguity*, the writer and director tells the fictional story of a tempestuous path taken by a group of Guatemalans attempting to illegally cross the border and the subsequent consequences of this event.

The journalist Carlos Solís Munguía, co-director of the documentary *Nica/ragüenses* (2006), is another example of Central American migration. He left his native country Nicaragua to live and work in Costa Rica for around ten years before settling in the United States in 2006 (WEBMASTER LA PRENSA, 2018). Together with the American Julia Fleming, he filmed his first documentary under the form of a social survey. In the film, the directors revealed the imaginaries that have been constructed around Nicaraguans in Costa Rica, confronting them with the realities that the immigrants encounter from the moment they decide to make the journey all the way until their “insertion” into Costa Rican society. The documentary reveals how they are welcomed by their neighboring nation.

All of the filmmakers cited above are an example of Central American emigration. These descriptions perhaps reveal the interest, respect, and sensibility that these filmmakers bring to the topic of migration, viewed through the genre of drama or historical documentaries, without falling into stereotypes, comedy, or satire. Their personal experiences are an inherent part of the microhistories that make up the history of Central American migration. They reflect the main reasons why the inhabitants of this region migrate: economic, political, family or social motives, lack of opportunity in work, education or personal security, among many others.

Someone once said that writers use characters in order to not tell their own history, this happens with me, many things that are described in this work are things I lived myself.
Grisel Wilson (*In MEJÍA, Soy 502*, 20 April 2014, my translation).

As Wilson recalls, whether in literature or in cinema, oftentimes the artists tend to express their own personal history in latent, discreet, or unperceived parts of their works. Despite that none of the previously cited filmmakers openly reference their own experiences as migrants, with the sole exception of Wilson, this does not mean that their histories are not subjectively narrated. On the contrary, they tend to weave dialogues between reality and fiction into their works.

In the first place, we can argue that in cinema intimate experience is not only narrated autobiographically. It reveals itself through the accounts of those who accept to narrate their personal stories in front of a camera. Taking into account that discourse and narration are one of the main sources of microhistory, it is important to underline that in the majority of documentaries on the topic, filmmakers give the word to and elevate the voice of the migrants. Zambora (*In CONTRERAS*, 2017, my translation) affirms: “My voice replicates the voice of the victims.” In second place, intimacy is related to the proximity and the sensibility of the topic; the filmmakers cited have also been witnesses to the history of Central American migration, in a way similar to that of the characters in their films, but have also lived their own raw experiences of migration. Luis Argueta, Grisel Wilson, and Carlos Solís Munguía address the topics of their films from the proximity of their experiences in the precise moment of filming: Argueta and Wilson being migrants from Guatemala and Costa Rica living in the United States and Solís being an immigrant in Costa Rica. Along the same lines, in the case of the group of directors previously mentioned, the “personal perspective” is captured in a subtle but perceptible manner during the filming process. The discreet selection of filming locations, of the people who participate in the films as well as their testimonies, the choice of the images, the sounds, the sequences, and the edition of all of these elements is the product of the director’s subjectivity. We reiterate that cinema is not objective or impartial. Instead, it adopts the vision that the director wants to give to the story and it is through their perspective, from their moral or ideological vision in regards to the subject matter, that the spectator receives the final message of the documentary.

In turn, those registered films and images on the filmmakers’ cameras constitute part of history’s heritage, as Nacimiento Dos Santos (2015, p. 60, my translation) recalls: “Voice and memory constitute an important role in the process of the historical configuration of humanity, of its survival as cultural archives.” In this way these individual voices, from the memories of its characters as well as their faulty memories and omissions, whether voluntarily or not, reconstitute a part of individual history. Whether it centers on the testimony of one person in particular –as demonstrated by Julio Hernández Córdón in *Norman* or Florence Jaugey in *Historia de Rosa*– or from multiple histories giving form to a choral discourse –as in *Desde el barro al Sur*, *La mesa feliz*, *Ausentes*, *AbUSAdos*, *María en tierra de nadie*, *Casa en tierra aneja*, and *La cocina de las patronas*–, the microhistories come to contradict the positivist discourses on migration revealing the

underside of the migratory dream, the dangers of the journey, the terrible reality of undocumented foreigners in a neighboring country, and the gloomy situation behind the statistics of the millions of dollars of remittances flowing back to Central American countries. In both cases, stemming from one or various narratives, the characters incarnate a unique history and reconstruct their at times faulty memory through the means of the liberation of their speech from the subjectivity of their unique experiences.

Construction and reconstruction of History based on meso history

Collective memory, according to Assmann J. (2019), is the memory of the common past of a determined collective or human group. According to our hypothesis, this memory, frequently associated with traumatic periods of history such as wars or genocides, can also be applied to the history of migration. In Central America, the number of deaths through violence and crime already exceeds the number of deaths recorded during the recent civil wars. As a report from Doctors Without Borders reveals, the violence that has descended upon the countries in the Northern Triangle is equivalent to the suffering endured by these countries in war (MÉDICOS SIN FRONTERAS, 2017), therefore becoming one of the main reasons to migrate. However, throughout the journey and upon arrival to the country of destination, many Central Americans continue being targets of violence and organized crime, losing their lives along the way or becoming victimized by traumatic situations comparable to the wars they left behind. Through alternatives to traditional history, the directors of the isthmus attempt to propagate some of the various stories of the millions of Central American migrants that would otherwise remain untold.

Most of the documentaries in our study's corpus share the same characteristics of what Marc Ferro calls "memory History". According to Ferro (1993, p. 213-214), "memory History", as opposed to general history, cannot aim at legitimizing official or institutional history, but is rather centered on the exclusive reconstruction of the past of a group or a given community, with the clear objective of restoring their dignity. The majority of Central American feature films share the characteristics mentioned by Ferro, as we can see in the following summary:

Table No. 2: Characteristics of “memory History” in Central American film on migration (2000-2018)

Definition “Memory History” according to Ferro (1993, p. 213-215)	Characteristics present in Central American feature films
Principle of chronological organization:	All of the documentaries studied follow a chronological narration of the events with the goal of putting them into a clear and concise form and context, whether it be from a more global perspective, starting at the origins of the problem of migration in Central America (<i>Casa en tierra ajena</i>), from a group vision following the journey the various migrants take (<i>Ambiguity</i>), or from the individual perspective following the journey of a single character (<i>El Camino</i>).
Explicit function of the identification:	In the group of documentaries analyzed, the introspective vision of the director is combined with the vision of the characters, in a form of identification, provoking feelings of affiliation in the spectator.
Voluntary intention of the filmmaker to “erase themselves” from the story:	In the Central American documentaries analyzed, the directors choose to give a voice to the individual or a group of migrants with the purpose of letting them narrate their own story.
Latent objective of the film:	Even if the initial idea is to inform about the issue of migration, the Central American documentaries under study seem to have a moral and social intention as well, which according to Ferro is to restore dignity to the group. In this case, this intention is relayed through the respect with which the undocumented immigrants are treated.

Source: Self elaboration.

Additionally, it should be highlighted that in all of the documentaries – and in the fictions *Ambiguity* and *El Camino*, despite having their own specificities, the cases presented do not aim at becoming the rule. As seen in Table no. 1, the majority of the films do not center on a single story, but rather on a group of stories or on one story that is retold in different ways, as is the case of *El Camino*. This emphasizes the argument made by Central American filmmakers that migration is a common issue. In both the documentaries and the fiction films mentioned, there is a particular intention to not set the problem in a specific country, but rather in a wider context. Although some of the films are centered on the precise case of Nicaraguans migrating to Costa Rica (*Desde el barro al Sur*, *Nicaragüense*, and *El Camino*), this does not mean that the migration case presented in these films is exclusive to a determined country, in this case, Nicaragua. Migration and the issues associated to it are, on the contrary, presented here as a regional problem.

Using the term “Central American” to refer to the migrants in the documentaries reveals an intention of treating the problem as a regional issue. Similarly, through the testimonies that mention the cases of the Nicaraguan, Panamanian, or Costa Rican migrants, the directors include the group of countries extending beyond the Northern Triangle. However, it is important to point out that the cases of Costa Rica and Panama are treated in a different manner than the other countries in the region. In the case of Costa Rica, the cinema underscores the dual role that the country plays: on one hand, as a host country and, on the other, as a nation that expels migrants. It is worth mentioning that the majority of the Costa Rican filmmakers concentrate more on the legal Costa

Rican emigration, while foreign directors are the ones that dare to present the country as an ejector of illegal migrants. Although this difference seems quite subtle and the representation of Costa Rican migrants actually slips through the threads of the narration in a precise manner. This is the case in *Casa en tierra ajena*. When alluding to the massacre of Cadereyta, there is an indirect reference to the country as a Costa Rican migrant is found on the list of casualties. Likewise, through the testimony of a young migrant in *María en tierra de nadie*, the cases of Costa Rican and Panamanian migrants are evoked.

For the most part, the documentaries as well as the fictions of *El Camino* and *Ambiguity* aim at revealing the other side of history, which according to Ferro is an essential element of “memory History”. By revealing the darker side of migration through historiographical resources such as testimonies (in all of the documentaries analyzed), archival images (*Nica/ragüense*), and the coverage of events through other means of communication (*Ambiguity*), these films expose a part of history that remains voluntarily submerged by global history and political interests, and in the process become a form of “rewritten” history.

For the director Grisel Wilson (HACER CINE, 2014, my translation), whose residency in Arizona allows him to be a witness to the constant discovery of Central American immigrants’ corpses, who died or were murdered in the desert: “These human beings have perished in their attempt, they need to have a dignified discourse about them”. In order to salvage these stories from obscurity, the filmmaker finds inspiration in the events published by the press, mixing elements of cinematic action, drama, and thriller. In *Ambiguity*, the director takes up the main dangers that migrants are confronted with: extortion, human trafficking, and the threat of death at the hands of organized crime groups, while at the same time denouncing the drug cartels’ use of migrants to smuggle their goods up to and across the border, the complicity of the authorities, and the networks of human traffickers. This is how the trio of migration officials involved in the intersection of the “bribe” responds according to the declarations of the director to real life events having occurred in Arizona (BURSTEIN, 2015).

For its part, the documentary *Casa en tierra ajena* struggles against oblivion and impunity by focusing on the massacres of groups of migrants at the hands of organized crime such as the mass killing of seventy two murdered migrants¹¹ in 2010 in San Fernando, near the Northern border with the United States, also known as the massacre of Tamaulipas, the massacre of Tamaulipas 2 (2011) in which ninety three corpses of migrants were found in a mass grave, and the “massacre of

¹¹ Among the 72 bodies, the majority was Central American: 24 Hondurans, 14 Salvadorans, 13 Guatemalans, 5 Ecuadorians, 3 Brazilians and one Indian. 12 of the bodies were unable to be identified (PÉREZ SALAZAR, 2015).

Cadereyta” (2012) in which only the torsos of forty nine people were found, mostly Central American migrants, with their heads and extremities cut off¹².

In *María en tierra de nadie*, the testimonies of Janeth and Irma –victims and survivors of kidnaps¹³ by the Zeta¹⁴ cartel– are fundamental in not only reconstructing their own memories, but also piecing together the histories and memories of those who lived similar experiences and who were unfortunately not able to survive. Their testimonies give spectators a glimpse into the inner workings, hierarchical organization, and the operational model of the cartel, which according to Janeth is divided into three operational groups: “the soldiers”, “the patrolmen”, and the “butchers”. According to Janeth, each of them has a specific role. The first are entrusted with the task of organizing the ambushes and bringing the migrants to a group of houses. The second group has the responsibility of keeping watch over them. The third group is responsible for killing whoever refuses to give the phone numbers of their family members and is unable to pay for the ransom fee. The prices –according to her testimony– varies between \$500 in order let them return to their country and \$3,000 for them to continue migrating to the United States. Ranging from shock to indignation, the powerful speech of Janeth takes the form of a confession as she narrates how she accepted to “work” for this criminal organization in order to save her own life. While cleaning and cooking for her executioners, she was witness to “unmentionable” events that the Central American fiction films have been unable, for the time being, to bring to the big screen. Through her trauma she narrates how the “butchers” cut off the bodies of migrants, putting them into barrels and later lighting them on fire. For her part, Irma explains how she was handed over in an “exchange” by her own uncle. Despite the \$500 ransom fee paid by her mother, her kidnappers refused to release her. She was then converted into sexual merchandise, alongside other Central American women.

From the sense of pain evoked by their testimonies, a common factor is deduced: both Janeth and Irma set out on their migratory journey to escape violence and poverty, without suspecting that they would soon fall into a vicious cycle of violence. The testimony of María Inés Méndez links to the voices of both women, but from a different perspective. María is the mother of Sandra, another victim of illegal migration. Unable to reconstruct the testimony of the young woman, the director turns to the testimony of the mother who spends years desperately searching

¹² According to the Fundación para la Justicia y el Estado Democrático de Derecho, the 49 torsos belong to 42 men and 7 women. The first results were only able to identify 13 people with the following nationalities: Honduran, Mexican, Costa Rica. Later, the identity of 8 Hondurans were identified according to a Forensic Commission where the Argentinian group of Anthropological Forensics and PGR specialists, as well as 11 civil society organizations in the hope of finding the identities of the other bodies (FUNDACIÓN PARA LA JUSTICIA Y EL ESTADO DEMOCRÁTICO DE DERECHO, n.d.).

¹³ After four months of being held hostage, Janeth and Irma were able to escape and found protection with an association of human rights, where they revealed in front of Zamora’s camera the operations of this human trafficking network.

¹⁴ An organization that kidnaps undocumented immigrants that circulate in the transport corridors towards the United States.

for her daughter. Sandra left her house one day, leaving behind her mother and two children, promising to find a better future for the four of them. However, the young mother disappeared along the way without a trace. In her tireless search to find her daughter, María sets out on the same migratory path to Mexico with 30 other Salvadoran women. The testimony of these women becomes essential in the reconstruction of the story as well as the collective memory of those who also lived the same experiences of these women, but unfortunately ended up dead or went missing. The individual stories seem to recur time and again in Central American cinema, with different nuances.

This notion of a continuum or interconnected history that incessantly repeats itself is the case of the film *María en tierra de nadie*, in which the character named María is a unifying thread connecting multiple parallel stories. How many Marías are there in the film? This matters little in the philosophical analysis of the story. What does matter, is that there is not just one, but many: How many Marías are there in the history of Central American migration? How many mothers are looking for their missing daughters? How many migrants are risking their lives in the face of organized crime? How many women have been deprived of their bodies and their dignity? How many murdered migrants lie along the tracks of the path to the United States, or in the desert of Arizona? How many “Sandras” are lying in mass graves without ever being found? How many murderers act with impunity? With the use of rhetoric, director Marcela Zamora encourages audiences to reflect on the cyclical, never ending problems of migration. Like Zamora, Florence Jaugey uses the story of Rosa to pose similar questions about abandonment and neglect: How many girls are harassed and abused with impunity because of their chronic vulnerability that, in turn, springs from their status as undocumented immigrants?

Through the use of fiction, Ishtar Yasin introduces the theme of child migration with a great sensibility and lyricism in a heartbreaking story. Despite the fact that Yasin’s fiction has as a starting point the migrant stories from her documentary *La mesa feliz*, the fiction film is not based on testimonials as is the case of *La Historia de Rosa*. The filmic discourse gives way to the unspeakable by means of ellipsis, inviting the spectator to imagine the events. How can one remain indifferent to Soslaya’s direct stare into the camera? In the film’s final moments, after she had set out onto the path of migrants to look for her mother in Costa Rica, but also after having fled the incessant abuse of her incestuous grandfather, her gaze directly addresses the spectator. Soslaya ‘s empty yet desperate stare reaching out to spectators after having fallen into a prostitution network and being raped once again, sends us a desperate cry for help. How many Soslayas are nowadays included in the statistics on Costa Rica? Or on Central America? In the dramatic yet poetic fiction by Yasin, the title is not only understood as a painful journey of migrants, but also the journey begun by not only Soslaya, but also so many other girls who have been victims of sexual

exploitation. In the story of Soslaya is enclosed other similar stories of boys and girls that took the solitary route of exile and the loss of innocence.

Through the personal story of Norman, Julio Hernández Córdón exposes the case of young Maras gang members that consider migration a form of escape. That same issue is evoked again, years later, in the fiction film of the American director Cary Jogy Fukunaga in *Sin Nombre* (2009). In one way or another, all of the filmmakers that have been mentioned so far share in their documentaries or fiction films stories that surpass the personal level and take on a regional issue.

Despite the differences among the stories of the characters, each one with its singularities, they all share similar causes and consequences of Central American migration. The resonance of all of these voices and all of these stories united together form part of the meso history and these, in turn, are part of the collective story of Central American migrants. In the same way, this attempt to reconstruct the region's collective history through the moving images produced by the cinema, becomes part of the macro history of migrations throughout the world. As expressed through fiction or documentary films, the specificities of the migratory context in Central America –which differ from other migratory flows across the world such as those of Africans migrating to Europe– constitute a humanitarian crisis that has caused the demise of thousands each year.

The construction of History from thoughts and imaginaries

The beliefs, the intentions, the imaginary of man are history as much as History itself.
(FERRO, 1993, p. 40, my translation)

The way of thinking and social imaginaries that emerge from a cultural work are the result of a society at a given time and, therefore, the product of history. According to Ferro (1993, p. 42), imaginaries, just as literary works, are a pivotal part of history. As a product of human invention and imagination, fictional cinema feeds history. From the perspective of commercial cinema and with the intention of “entertaining”, fiction films retell migration stories differently from the “memory history” analyzed previously. As opposed to serious documentary cinema¹⁵, critical fictional cinema¹⁶ (*Ambiguity*), or critical cinema¹⁷ (*El Camino*), commercial cinema defends its position from a traditionalist view.

This form of writing is known as “pragmatic History” or “general History”. Both share the same idea, one through the prism of philosophy and the other one through history. Through the former, cinema is presented as a spectacle, so in order to reach the spectators it needs to speak to

¹⁵ Engaged cinema is one that opts for a vision of denouncing aspects of society and/or politics, in this case the causes and consequences of migration. Here we can refer to the entirety of the documentary previously analyzed in the study.

¹⁶ Interrogative cinema is one that questions transcendental events of society.

¹⁷ Critical cinema looks to show the other side of history. In the case of migration, it breaks with the national and official discourses as we saw in the previous chapter.

their worries, interests, and desires. For their projects, “the transcendental myth should incarnate itself in the immanent mythologies” of which lessons of moral and civic conduct are demonstrated (BILLARD, 1982, p. 29, my translation). Another essential characteristic of “pragmatic cinema” is the search for or the defense of a political ideal, of a race, of a nation, of liberty or of happiness (BILLARD, 1982, p. 30). Regarding the latter, Ferro believes that general History tends to be, “a reproduction of the discourse of political leaders [...]. It is the official or institutional History, that of their opponents as well” (FERRO, 1993, p. 213, my translation). When serving the interests of a State or a nation, this type of cinema situates itself between the limits of “general History”, aiming at unifying by privileging information from official sources and “fiction History”, which takes a position by hiding other versions of history, either voluntarily or involuntarily. In this way both theories sustain a visible version of history. In our present study, they will allow us to clarify the imaginary forged through migration from the perspective of commercial cinema in the Central American region.

Before continuing with this reflection, it is important to recall that fictional commercial films addressing the theme of migration and produced by Central Americans are relatively few (5) compared to the volume of documentaries produced (11), especially considering that to this date, Central America does not have a cinematographic industry in full swing. This is however no reason to set these films aside in our analysis. On the contrary, these films present a particular version of history in their own right. In the period of 2000 and 2019, five fiction films with the topic of migration as a central theme were released: *El Camino*, *Ambiguity: Crónica de un Sueño Americano*, *El Regreso*, *La ReBúsqueda* and *Maikol Yordan de viaje perdido*. Among these we can highlight one auteur film (*El Camino*), one independent film (*Ambiguity*) –which have already been analyzed– and three commercial films (*El Regreso*, *La ReBúsqueda* and *Maikol Yordan de viaje perdido*). It is necessary to point out that the cases of the commercial films, which we will shortly analyze, can not in any way be analyzed in the same way as the films that we have previously mentioned given their particular definition of history, as well as the particular aims of this type of cinema.

In the first place, the main argument that allows us to classify commercial films such as *El Regreso*, *La ReBúsqueda* and *Maikol Yordan de viaje perdido* as examples of “general History” or “pragmatic History” is the main purpose of the film; it seeks to profit from massive box office earnings (FERRO, 1993, p. 215). Accordingly, this type of film chooses to not take risks and go against the current of official history. This characteristic, far from being a banal element, constitutes a central piece in understanding the strategies used by the directors in presenting Central American migration, especially taking into account that the three films were hits in the movie theaters of their respective countries. The film *El Regreso* became one of the most watched Costa Rican films,

reaching the third place in the country's box office ticket sales at 122,912 spectators (SOLÍS LERISI, 2014) for over twelve weeks and winning the prize for the best feature film in the HBO Festival of Latin American Cinema. *Maikol Yordan de viaje perdido* is the highest-grossing film in the history Costa Rican and Central America cinema. The film attracted 770,233 spectators (MATARRITA F., 2018), totaling \$2,210,000 in ticket sales and was projected in movie theaters across Central America, as well as in New Jersey, Manhattan, and Washington D.C. *La Rebúsqueda* was also a success in movie theaters, considering that El Salvador has a very limited national production. It played in theaters for six weeks, sold 21,581 tickets, earned \$75,282 (EGEDA, 2015, p. 171), and was shown in Cancún and Playa del Carmen in Mexico, as well as Washington D.C., Maryland, and Virginia in the United States (NOCHES, 2014).

In second place, according to Ferro (1993, p. 215), through this commercial cinema, filmmakers search for recognition, prestige and, to a certain extent, a kind of artistic vanity. This objective effectively turns out to be the opposite of “memory History” cinema, wherein the latent objective is to rescue the microhistories as well as the collective history of migrants from obscurity. In this light, through “memory History” directors tend to voluntarily erase themselves from the film, enabling those who do not typically have the means to express themselves. In “general History” and “pragmatic History”, this is not the case: artists use the fiction genre to garner, above all, visibility and recognition for their work, aiming to satisfy the principle of pleasure that creation generates. In this sense, it is worth noting that in the three productions the main characters are incarnated by one of the creators of the film. In the case of *El Regreso*, the protagonist is played by the director himself, Hernán Jiménez, while in *Maikol Yordan* the protagonist is played by one of the writers, Mario Alberto Chacón. In *La Rebúsqueda*, the main actress is played by Cristina Meléndez, one of the film's producers. These stories based on fiction, although partly inspired by real events, –such as the case of Hernán Jiménez and Cristina Meléndez whose characters draw from their own personal experiences as young immigrants studying in the United States– are in no way autobiographical films. Consequently, the recognition that is sought not so much for the storyline as much as for their “artistic talent” (FERRO, 1993, p. 215).

Finally, national character, whom Billard and Ferro consider to be a fundamental element for this type of film, must be highlighted given that the three films defend the idea of a national product the spectators can identify with and is widely promoted in the advertising campaigns of the three films. In order to demonstrate our position in respect to this analysis, we will briefly summarize each of them.

El Regreso (2011)

El Regreso was written by young director, comedian, actor, and writer Hernán Jiménez, who studied theater at the National Theater School of Canada and film at the University of Colombia and the San Francisco Art Institute (where he wrote and directed the post-production of his feature film). According to the director himself, despite being inspired by personal experiences, the film is not a reproduction of a personal story. The director explains it this way: “It is undeniable that my distance from Costa Rica, my constant returns, my affective links, and my life in general is inspiration for the story. But it is not an autobiographical film.” (MATEO, 2011, my translation). More than transposing the story of Jiménez, he uses it to transmit emotions, feelings, worries, and fears that a part of the Costa Rica population shares, as both he and his brother are “companions of travels and returns,” and it is him to whom he eventually dedicates the film.

El Regreso tells the story of Antonio, a young writer who after spending ten years abroad returns to his origins in Costa Rica. However, the return to his country is shocking for the young man who has to confront underdevelopment, delinquency, a country in crisis, a metaphor of both a fragmented family and society. However, in *El Regreso*, the idea of Costa Ricans’ attachment to their land is implied as upon arrival the protagonist constantly voices his desire to go back to New York, yet changes his mind in the film’s conclusion. Upon rediscovering a family that he lost connection with—but loves profoundly, a friend who does not appear anything like he remembered—but professes unconditional friendship, and a childhood friend who moves him with her joy of life despite being unemployed and whom he falls in love with, Antonio realizes that perhaps, despite everything, his place is there in his homeland next to his friends and family.

Jiménez describes the storyline in this way:

It’s a story that deals with the very fibers of underdevelopment, of the daily hassles to it, of all those times when we want to run away from our own city. At the same time it suggests that we love our land, that it’s difficult to live without it, that we accumulate the past and remember it with nostalgia and, deep inside, we’re looking for it, whether to cling to it or simply make peace with it. (JIMÉNEZ in MATEO, 2011, my translation).

El Regreso also addresses the theme of immigration through the character of Paolo, played by the Argentinean producer Fernando Chironi. This seductive, bohemian and intellectual character certainly incarnates a part of Costa Rican history given that immigration has contributed to its cultural development, in particular the migration of Argentinean and Chilean intellectuals during the dictatorships in their respective countries (MATARRITA A., 2009). However, behind the seemingly anodyne appearance of the selection of Paolo’s nationality is revealed, consciously or not, a selective vision of history: that of the official history. In this way, the migration of other

nationalities such as Nicaraguans, Colombians, Venezuelans, etc. are put aside, as well as that of the other migrant profiles such as the workers in factories, fields, services and others. In this deliberate selection a clear definition of social class is revealed –the social class that the director himself belongs to– and is manifested in the cracks of the plotline.

Maikol Yordan de viaje perdido (2014)

In regards to *Maikol Yordan*, a relevant point of analysis is that the script was written by four Costa Rican comedians, known as *La Media Docena*: Mario Chacón, Erick Hernández, Daniel Moreno, and Edgar Murillo. Since its creation in 1994, the group has achieved notoriety with the national public at large through their own television program: *El Show de la Media Docena*¹⁸. Beyond being a mere anecdote, this fact is relevant in order to understand part of the success of the film. Given that they were already known to the public and that they took their characters from popular tradition, the film was much anticipated by the followers of their television program. Likewise, it is noteworthy that the protagonist of the film in one of the characters of the television program of *La Media Docena*, already known by Costa Rican audiences. Indeed, Maikol Yordan is a key character of the program and was inspired by one of the founding figures of Costa Rican identity: the farmer or “labriego sencillo” hailed in the national anthem¹⁹. In this character, an archetype of the Costa Rican farm laborer, converge some stereotypes such as the lack of education, ignorance, and naiveté, but also a conglomerate of “national values” such as honesty, integrity, and a good work ethic according to the advertisements promoting the film.

In the same manner, this character embodies the problem of migration that affects the countryside. In the first place, internal migration is addressed by a country character coming to the city. Having money issues, Maikol Yordan moves to the city. However, because of his low levels of education and limited work experience in agriculture, he is unable to find work and must return to his town. Secondly, another type of migration—external migration—is revealed through the North-South perspective. After receiving an award, Maikol Yordan has the possibility to travel to the European cities of London, Rome, and Paris. In these travels, he meets several Latin American immigrants, including a Costa Rican photographer who works and lives in Paris. In the film, the main character reunites a series of characteristics—mentioned previously—that the migrants from the documentaries share: the low economic status, the lack of education and work opportunities,

¹⁸ Since 2005, *El Show de la Media Docena* is relayed by national television through the Teletica channel (channel 7). Furthermore, since 2009 the comedians also have a radio program: Platicomedia.

¹⁹ The Costa Rican national anthem makes references to the farmer in line 7: “they conquered your sons – simple farmers”. National Anthem. Costa Rica. Lyrics by José María Zeledón Brenes (1903).

living in rural zones and being on the verge of losing their land (where his wife, his eight kids, his parents and his grandmother live).

However, the character of Maikol Yordan is not presented as an undocumented immigrant, but rather more as a character that is blessed with good luck and given the opportunity to travel legally and thus becomes a tourist. In the story illegal emigration of rural Costa Ricans is overlooked, reinforcing the myth of the historical exceptionalism of the country in the context of Central America. Similarly, the film reinforces the ideas promoted from the nation-State about Costa Rican nationhood. First of all, the myth of the “immigrant farmers that built the country” since Maikol Yordan is of European descent and it is thanks to his ancestry that he is able to find the money to save his house and his state, thus saving himself from the jaws of capitalism, incarnated by the unscrupulous foreign bankers. In the second place, the idea of love for one’s country is reinforced through the anthem extolling Costa Rican patriotism, *La Patriótica costarricense*²⁰: “I don’t envy the pleasures of Europe [...] my land is a thousand times more beautiful [...]”. Playing with national symbolisms in visual and symbolic forms, this idea is strengthened with the fact that Maikol Yordan chooses to return to his land and is not tempted by the idea of staying in Europe like the other immigrants he came across during his sojourn in the Old Continent.

La Rebúsqueda (2014)

In the case of *La Rebúsqueda*, the producer and scriptwriter studied communication and theater at the Nova Southeastern University in Miami. Just like Hernández's film, hers is not based on the experiences of the director or the producer, but the fiction film is impregnated with a particular vision that, consciously or not, seeps through the fissures of the film: the vision of an upper middle class. Ana, the main character, is a young woman who decides to return to El Salvador after having spent 10 years in Los Angeles. In the words of the producers, the title, “was born from popular language making a humorous critique of the “search” of many Salvadorans that come across an opportunity and don’t waste time to take advantage of it” (CÓDIGO 21, 3 Sept. 2014, my translation). The title can also be understood as an allusion to Ana’s search for her roots, a rediscovery of her country, her family, and of love, all of which can be found upon returning to her country.

However, unlike the documentaries of fiction films such as *El Camino* or *Ambiguity*, the causes and consequences of Ana's migration do not have a greater relevance in the film’s plot. The

²⁰ In Spanish, *La Patriótica costarricense*, is a song that is considered as the second national anthem of the country. The music was composed in 1862 by Costa Rican musician Manuel María Gutiérrez Flores, the same person who wrote the music of the national anthem. The lyrics were composed by Pedro Santacilia in 1852.

most important aspect of the character of the young migrant is the present and the future that she can build by returning to her country and recovering her heritage. A vision of a beautiful, modern (although naïve) young woman is displayed through the protagonist; her middle-class status indirectly incarnating the “American way of life”. Ana does not go unnoticed. Her character can be interpreted as a metaphor of migration itself: she attracts and enchants in the same way that the American dream continues seducing thousands of Salvadorans, inciting them to emigrate. The difficulties endured by Central American migrants in the United States as well as the hardships of migrating illegally are obliterated from the screen, only zooming into the myth of the American Dream. Although the country’s violence, kidnappings, and extortion are included in the film, they are mentioned through the lens of humor and do not have any major consequences for the heroine who is able to come out unhurt during her adventures. A crossing between a road movie, a romantic comedy, and a postcard, *La Rebúsqueda* reinforces the myths of migration as a mechanism of social recognition, which are synonymous with wealth and success. Furthermore, in a certain way it invites tourists and Salvadoran nationals living abroad to visit El Salvador, transforming itself into a form of propaganda for the country as a tourist destination.

In the light of the philosophy of history, the Hegelian vision proposed by Billard²¹, and our analysis in this section, we can affirm that the Central American commercial films mentioned here belong to the category of “pragmatic History”. Each of them adheres in different ways to the dominant ideologies, projects and national policies, thus proposing a form of “moral pedagogy” in accordance with the national values of each country. These values endorse a certain form of nationalism, reflected in the love for one’s country, at the same time that they show an idealized vision of migration. The three feature films address the phenomenon of migration from the perspective of the upper and upper middle class. First, the works are the product of directors who belong to these social classes and the plots of their films indirectly filter their own points of view. Secondly, despite the fact that the films claim to speak to the population at large, their characters and stories are crafted by a social class that is not representative of the popular classes. The character of Maikol Yordan, who poses as a farmer from the lower classes, has an incredible destiny that seems quite unrealistic. In the same way, in *La Rebúsqueda* and *El Regreso* the main characters are situated in a privileged social sphere, whether economically (*La Rebúsqueda*), socially, particularly regarding intellectuals and artists (*El Regreso*), or because of sheer luck (*Maikol Yordan*).

In the same way, with their colloquial language and profusion of regionalisms and their stereotypical characters, these films encourage national spectators to identify themselves in the

²¹ According to Billar, films can be classified into “esthetic History”, “pragmatic History, and “critical History” (BILLARD, 1982).

films through what is known as “general History”. The three films adopt the vision of the return of the emigrant, presenting migration as a beginning of a new life, a reunion with values such as love, family, and the acceptance of the constrictions of life in developing countries, thus underscoring the positive aspects of each²². Through the use of humor, the dramatic effect of the negative elements of society are removed, represented instead through the application of the Central American comic tradition that reproduces traditional speech, double meanings, the exaggeration of gestures, and daily life. In summary, the topic of migration in fictional commercial cinema is seen through the collective imaginary as a positive element, a motor of change and progress, but always keeping in mind the idea of returning back to one's roots, to one's irreplaceable homeland. This type of cinema participates in the “reconstruction of history” from the collective imaginary, but does not claim to be objective history. Rather, it presents a generalized vision that is woven together from the perspective of a privileged social class.

Concluding thoughts

The immigrant is not a statistic; he has a face and dignity²³.

It is not necessary to turn to the seventh art in order to know and to understand the global problem of Central American migration. Nevertheless, through its use, filmmakers encourage us to see the history of regional migration from another perspective. Indeed, cinema provides a different vision and reflection, from the sensorial and the emotional –in the words of Marie José Mondzain (2013) –for whom cinema constructs the ethical and political dimensions of an emotion. To tell the truth, cinema provides a more humane dimension to mobilize our senses and awake our critical spirits, at the same time that it shows the history of migration from the singularity of an individual, a group, or a social class. Indeed, this human dimension seems to be the main factor that has increasingly motivated Central American filmmakers to devote their work to the subject of Central American migration and memory.

Responding to the initial inquiry, to what extent can contemporary Central American films be understood as a form of construction or (re)construction of memory and history of Central American migrations in the first two decades of the XXI century? We can conclude that since the dawn of the new millennium, impregnated by the new regional context of urgency, Central American cinema has effectively forged a new form of construction or (re)construction both from individual and collective memory and the history of Central American migrations. On one hand, we

²² Although in the film *El Regreso* attempts to give an auto-critical vision of the country and of migration, this is not sufficiently developed and the idea that continues to resonate at the end of the film is a positivist vision.

²³ The citation was painted on a wall and captured in the documentary of Marcela Zamora, *María en tierra de nadie*.

can affirm that cinema enables history-making to the extent that new elements and information are provided –from microhistory– as well as from the constitution itself of audio and video files and archives through personal testimony. In the same way, cinema allows an individual (whether it be that of the filmmaker or of those present in the film) and a determined group of migrants to rebuild their memories, thereby reactivating personal memory and interconnecting it with others through the construction of the film itself as well as a group of films, conceived of as a *continuum* of history in construction. On the other hand, cinema contributes to constructing history whether by consolidating the general vision relayed by the official version –from within Nation-States– or by showing a hidden or obscured history behind the shadow of global history. In fact, from our analysis of the body of films, we can conclude that the history of migration that Central American cinema presents is not homogenous. It represents two opposing dimensions.

In the first place, we identify the dimension that goes against the tide of official history. This aspect of cinema, designated as “memory History” by Ferro, claims to restore dignity and centers itself in the struggles of illegal migrants with the objective of rescuing their stories from oblivion: those that get lost in national statistics, in the numerous archives of the Mexican Institute of Migration, in the mass graves that still have not been found, and will probably never be, as well as all of the stories that have been silenced for various disparate reasons. The directors bring these stories from anonymity into the light, putting a face and name on migrants, thereby revealing the multiple typologies of migration: from the most mediatized (the Central Americans emigrating to the United States for economic or social reasons) to the most marginalized and least known cases. Examples of these include: the case of Mara members who try to reconstruct their life by escaping to the United States (*Norman*), that of indigenous groups (*Casa en tierra ajena*), as well as the Garífunas (*Lubaraun* and *Casa en tierra ajena*) who have had to emigrate away from their communities for lack of opportunity, living under the plundering of their lands by the State or multinational companies (*Casa en tierra ajena*).

In the same vein we can highlight the story of Nicaraguans who expose their lives to danger crossing the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, fleeing violence or poverty (*El Camino*) and needing to adopt “survival strategies” –according to the words of the migrants themselves– once arriving on Costa Rican soil (*Desde el barro al Sur* and *La mesa feliz*), against the violence of racism as well as the abuses dealt out by their employers, the Costa Rica State, or its citizens (*Nica/ragienses*). In this type of cinema, other side of migration is contemplated through the story of: abused migrant women (*La Historia de Rosa*); of prostitution rings of girls and young women (*El Camino* and *María en tierra de Nadie*); of the exploitation and human trafficking of migrants at the hands of criminal networks (*María en tierra de nadie*, *Casa en tierra ajena* and *Ambiguity: crónica de un sueño americano*); of labor exploitation practiced by American companies

contracting undocumented Central American migrants (*AbUSAdos*); as well as the impact of migration on the society as a whole and at the heart of Central American families, driving them apart (*Abrazos* and *Ausentes*). All of these stories crystallize the complexity of an individual and collective history that fits into the global history: that of underdevelopment, poverty, impunity, violence, and the human desperation in reaction to what the most vulnerable social groups are confronted with throughout Central America.

The second aspect is constructed from a commercial system and is the one that follows the official version of history. This, in its effort to reach a maximum of the population, is centered on the reproduction of national myths and stereotypes along the lines of Hollywood cinema and its famous “happy ending”. In this type of cinema, the construction of history originates not from an actual historical document, but rather from an object of history. By reproducing a way of thinking, one of a specific group, oftentimes that of the upper and upper middle classes’, these films become testimonies of the imaginary constructed by a section of society. Reinforcing the idyllic image of the country (*La Rebúsqueda* and *Maikol Yordan*) or reproducing the historical myth of migration through the lens of a favored class (*El Regreso*), these fiction films are part of what Billard describes as “pragmatic History” and that Ferro prefers to term “general History”. These are classified under the meso category, meaning that they are part of the cultural history of a group, although they are not part of collective history but rather of the collective imaginary of a section of society.

By means of what is revealed (the privileged view of legal migration) and what is hidden (illegal migration, minority groups and the lower classes of society), this type of cinema becomes the concrete example of what Kracauer calls the visible state of the world that escapes the will of the filmmaker, unconsciously fueling the social imaginary about migration. Indeed, the issue of migration is presented as a duality. On the one hand, it is the solution to economic (*Maikol Yordan*), social (*La Rebúsqueda* and *Maikol Yordan*) or personal (*El Regreso*) problems; but on the other hand, it is the engine that makes nationalism, the love of the homeland, and the family emerge, establishing the desire to leave to later return and build a better future for themselves and their loved ones. In sum, this type of cinema helps to understand the thinking and actions of a part of society in the same way that it can encourage migration. It is, therefore, a powerful agent of history.

To conclude, we can affirm that through the Central American cinema of the 2000s, new alternative ways of writing history have begun to be explored, showing the problem of migration from its complexity and its contradictions. While on the one hand the ideal of migration through commercial cinema is reinforced by a few; on the other hand, from the “Memory Cinema”, the causes and consequences of clandestine migration are shown, and so are the struggles that the countries of the region find in fighting against it and breaking with a cycle that seems to have no

end. According to our results, 69% of regional films, far from reinforcing the myth of the migrant who achieves the American dream or the hopeful end of Chaplin's *Immigrant*, show the heartbreaking drama and human tragedy of thousands of exploited, humiliated, Central Americans, stripped of their dignity and in some cases even their lives.

Historical memory works not only as a mechanism to collect and remember tragic events from the past; it also functions as an agent of history itself, calling for its intervention in order to change its course. Most of the regional cinema certainly fits this definition, as it serves to write, reconstruct or to fix history, but also to try to transform it, as many of the filmmakers have stated. Central American cinema has thus launched an alert call, to try to dissuade those who plan to take "the death row", one of the most dangerous migratory routes in the world that takes the lives of thousands of Central Americans every year. Likewise, the filmmakers invite the spectators and the authorities to adopt a socially committed stance and not to remain indifferent in the face of the human crisis that has caused the mass migration of Central Americans in the 2000s and exhorts them to change the future, to react to prevent more people from perishing on the various paths of illegal migration.

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