

Under the Same Moon: Something lost en route

Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Patricia Riggen; screenplay by Ligiah Villalobos

The plight of undocumented immigrants is tackled by first-time feature filmmaker Patricia Riggen in *Under the Same Moon* (*La Misma luna*). Mexican-born, American-educated Riggen takes a stand against the efforts of the ruling elite and its media machinery to create an anti-immigrant atmosphere. Despite its admirable intentions, however, the work relies too often on sentimentality and ends up blunting its own arguments and impact.

Riggen, born in Guadalajara, Mexico, has previously made two short films that have been recognized at numerous film festivals. Her second, a 28-minute documentary, *Family Portraits*, deals with poverty in Harlem through the photographs of a little boy taken by Gordon Parks in 1968.

In her latest work, the filmmaker calls attention to the fact that Mexican women are now crossing the border into the US in increasing numbers, involuntarily leaving their children behind. Riggen states that her film is based on “four million true stories” about people who risk everything in the hope of a better future. The film opens with a flashback of a desperate crowd struggling in the water against “*la migra*,” US immigration police.

Nine-year-old Carlitos (Adrián Alonso) still lives in Mexico, only waiting for the moment when his mother, Rosario (Kate del Castillo), can bring him north to the US. For the last four years, his main contact with her has been through Sunday morning telephone calls Rosario initiates from a Los Angeles phone booth—the details of whose location she often describes to him. When things become unbearable, they remember that they’re ‘under the same moon.’

Carlitos does odd jobs for the village “coyote,” a smuggler of people. He takes note of an American brother and sister (the latter played by television star America Ferrera) willing to smuggle children across the border. Momentum is building up for Carlitos to depart: his grandmother (and guardian) is increasingly ill and he’s the target of unethical relatives who covet the \$300 a month Rosario sends back

home. Although he has amenities that the village children don’t have, such as decent clothes and blinky-light sneakers, they mean nothing without the warmth and presence of his mother.

When the inevitable happens, the death of his grandmother, Carlitos turns his attention to the north. Getting into the US is neither the last nor the least of his perils. Conditions in America are brutal and once in Texas, he has to evade the clutches of a drug addict, a pimp and *la migra*. Eventually, he serendipitously hooks up with the grouchy, but good-hearted Enrique (Eugenio Derbez) in Tucson. Hitchhiking to LA provides an occasion for the duo to be serenaded by the legendary, Grammy-winning *norteño* band, Los Tigres del Norte.

Meanwhile, Rosario is unaware that her mother has died and that her son is making his way to her. As a cleaner and nanny for the rich—one of whom takes advantage of her undocumented status—Rosario finds it impossible to save enough to reunite with Carlitos. Her options are a loveless marriage with the extremely kind, and legal, Paco (Gabriel Porras), or a return to Mexico in defeat. The film’s predictable ending is little short of a miracle.

Besides referring to the mother-son bond, the movie’s title also implies, according to Riggen, a “universal moon that we all see, no matter where we are in the world; no matter which side of the border we’re on. With the debate on immigration taking place now, it is good to remember that we are all under the same moon.”

While Rosario and Carlitos are connected by the moon, the movie’s cinematography is intended to make clear they are worlds apart. In Mexico and then on the move, Carlitos is situated in a flashy, colorful terrain. On the other hand, Rosario is imprisoned in a white, alienating urban setting. The homes she cleans in a gated community are as sterile and lifeless as their owners. The hideous Mrs. McKenzie, who threatens Rosario with exposure, is aptly nicknamed “Cruella de Vil.” She happens to be a plastic surgery and designer clothes nightmare, played wonderfully by (the late) Jacqueline Voltaire.

Riggen works hard to convey certain truths: “The Mexican immigrant is very generous, very heroic. They are the first audience targeted by the movie, their wants, what moves them, their dreams, their fears. All their sentiments, all their emotions, all their diversions, because this is about them, this is for them.”

With obvious sympathy, the director shows resilient human beings struggling to survive while seeking to remain invisible to the attack dog-like authorities, an effort that renders them vulnerable to various exploiters. She shows how they endure hazardous journeys to cross the border. Even when the undocumented immigrants succeed in entering the US, the threat of police raids and working at menial jobs for a pittance make stability and security virtually impossible.

Unfortunately, many of the poignant moments are overwhelmed by a routine and formulaic narrative. In an interview, the director explained her misgivings about treating the subject matter directly: “[N]obody’s going to want to see a movie about immigrants.” Therefore as a counterweight, she relies on a “universal,” love between mother and child, and pedestrian plot elements. These are sacrifices to the unholy gods of prettified reality—the sugar-coating of a bitter pill. In actuality, the filmmaker jeopardizes her themes by diluting the work to the point where it loses its essential motive force.

It would be wrong to indict Riggen for responding to a real quandary. There is not currently a socially realistic or critical cinema in the US, nor a mass audience yet assembled for such work. The independent filmmaker is under financial and cultural pressure to reach a certain ‘market,’ to carve out his or her own niche. To pull an audience, which is increasingly youthful, away from blockbusters of various kinds is not done overnight, even though there is obvious dissatisfaction with the current fare.

The critical faculties of many spectators have not been developed or encouraged. Works that challenge audiences on complex issues such as immigration, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or the use of torture by the US military are not guaranteed instant success. How then can the filmmaker finance his or her next project? The solutions are not simple or immediate, but Riggen’s response is inadequate.

The socio-ideological and artistic questions are intertwined. If the artist holds back, politically or otherwise, out of fear of popular failure or industry exclusion, the work tends to lack utter sincerity and will not prove dramatically gripping, which, in turn, impedes winning or elevating an audience. A pragmatic short-cut to complex cultural problems, the ‘natural reflex’ of the American artist at present, only hinders the process in the long run. And this is certainly what afflicts *Under the Same Moon*.

Besides aiming to pull at the spectator’s heart-strings, there is much in the film that is calculated toward crowd-pleasing. In the first place, Riggen has assembled a cast of top Mexican performers. Adrián Alonso (Carlitos) has appeared in numerous movies, soap operas, plays and television commercials; Kate del Castillo (Rosario) is Mexico’s leading lady of the telenovelas; Eugenio Derbez (Enrique) is the country’s best known comedian; and of course, America Ferrera who plays Martha, the “coyote,” is famous from the hit American television series “Ugly Betty.”

This adaptation to a celebrity-crazed culture, and not only in the US, is not a crime and perhaps understandable; and clearly these performers signed up for the \$2 million project as a labor of love. But their glamour and “star quality” add to the film’s general problem of sanitizing (and distancing) the immigration question. Derbez in particular hams it up at inappropriate moments. In general, a more serious artist would have approached the problem differently.

Pilling it on further, Riggen artificially injects the legendary Mexican-American band into a musical interlude at a time when Carlitos and Enrique are fleeing for their lives. Trying to cover all bases in this fashion does not add to the film’s spontaneity. Further, from the time the opening credits roll, *Under the Same Moon* hardly deviates from a template: the purity of the protagonists insures a happy ending.

Again, the dilemmas facing the filmmaker shouldn’t be discounted or minimized. Riggen is not responsible for the generally wretched cultural climate in the US. However, she has not proven up to the task as an artist of confronting those difficulties and creating a memorable work about a horrific social problem.



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