



sin nombre

(Without a name)

Spring
Season
2010

Review by Andrew O'Hagan, London Evening Standard:

The famous murals of Diego Rivera show Mexico as a perfect kind of society, a place that makes up in civility and co-operation what it lacks in milk and honey. They are florid social fantasies, where the people — ah, The People — march in the same direction, fully in tune with one another and the sound of destiny. To see where that fantasy ended up in the 21st century one must watch a new kind of masterpiece, the film *Sin Nombre*.

A pretty and likeable teenager from Honduras, Sayra (Paulina Gaitan), meets a father she has not seen in many years. He now lives in the United States with his new family, and returns to see the folks back home. Though his status is illegal, his life seems blessed, as all American lives do, and she decides to cross into Mexico with him and make the dangerous journey north.

She will not understand how dangerous until it is too late. Meanwhile, Caspar (Edgar Flores), a young man who is not as tough as his friends, is hanging out in Tapachula, Mexico, with a band of street warriors called the Mara Salvatrucha brotherhood. The leader of the Tapachula branch of the Mara gang, Lil' Mago (Tenoch Huerta Mejía), has the most ferocious facial tattoos in movie history, and he is, shall we say, a tad unsentimental when it comes to the welfare of the gang and the broader attachments of its members. Caspar has brought a new recruit, 12-year-old Smiley, who will have to prove himself.

The Mara gang, who are well known in Mexico, make the Jets and the Sharks, to say little of the members of Fight Club, look like groups of poet-tasting fairies out of Gilbert and Sullivan. Theirs is a world of blood and fire, of rituals and revenge, and when Caspar crosses the line he finds himself one of the hunted. The freight trains out of Tapachula carry hundreds of would-be illegal immigrants heading for the border.

They sit on the roof in all weathers and risk being robbed by the Mara. After a terrible incident, Caspar ends up on the roof of the moving train, where he meets Sayra and her father. Will they make it to America? Will Caspar ever be free of the Mara? And will these two teenagers find in each other the love they have always missed?

Beautifully shot and perfectly realised, *Sin Nombre* is a gripping narrative that also manages to be a tale of our times. From *The Gold Rush* (1925) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and *In America* (2002), the myth of the pioneer or the immigrant who struggles through violence and ill luck to reach the American frontier is a potent and dramatic one. But with *Sin Nombre* the genre is given an entirely new face. Movies born out of real struggle and true jeopardy are too scarce nowadays. You might hold your breath over a leap but very seldom over an idea. Yet watching this film, you care not only about the characters' fates but you care about the values and the forces that determine their fates. This is film-making at its absolute height and, in today's terms, both very welcome and very unusual. *Sin Nombre* brings a fresh fund of imagination to circumstances so real they could break your heart.

Review by Mick LaSalle, San Francisco Chronicle:

The highest calling of movies is to show audiences - to show you - a world you never thought of, a way of thinking and a way of life you never imagined, and then, having shown it, to make you understand it in the common language of human emotion. This is what writer-director Cary Fukunaga accomplishes in *Sin Nombre*.

Take his presentation of Lil Mago (Tenoch Huerta Mejia), the leader of a street gang in southern Mexico. His face is covered in menacing black tattoos. He looks like a monster, and he is - as erratic and as sadistic as a psychotic Roman emperor. Even when doing good is 10 times easier than doing evil, he summons the effort to do evil, just out of principle. Yet, while in no way softening the character, Fukunaga gives us enough information so that Mago is no cartoon. We understand the psychological underpinnings of the character, just as we understand why gang life could be perceived by his men - wrongly, insanely - as a ticket to autonomy and self-respect.

Willy (Edgar Flores) is a teenager in Mago's gang. Gradually, Willy goes from being a recruiter for the gang - he brings in a little boy (Kristyan Ferrer) with a talent for larceny - to realizing that gang life is far from a liberation, that it is, in fact, the enemy of every good thing worth having. This realization has life-changing consequences and brings him directly into the orbit of Sayra (Paulina Gaitan), a Honduran teenager trying to make it across Mexico to the Texas border.

Most Americans think of illegal immigration as something that happens along the California or Texas state lines. Fukunaga shows us the process of getting to the border, one that involves hopping freight trains and avoiding local authorities, who could be lurking at any given stop. These are people with no means, people who, if caught, might never make it home, much less into the United States. Meanwhile, the poverty as seen from the train is staggering, people in ragged clothes, living in shacks instead of houses.

Sin Nombre is an escape saga and a romance in which a teenage girl, fleeing poverty, meets a boy who is running for his life, and the two find a common understanding. There are some brief minutes when the tension drops and the story starts to sag, but Fukunaga almost always fills the frame with something worth seeing, and the story has a built-in suspense.

Flores has the lived-in fatalism of a film noir hero, the look of someone who has lived too long and seen too much, which is disconcerting in someone who otherwise looks like a kid. Fukunaga has the emotional sophistication to show us why a teenage girl might find this quality romantic, while letting us know that, in reality, it's the furthest thing from it.