



Original Article

DOCUMENTARY FILM AND THE PLEA FOR JUSTICE: TEMPORARY MIGRANT WORKERS IN CANADA

Graciela Martínez-Zalce

Researcher of the Area of Globality Studies and director of the CISAN, UNAM. Mexico (UNAM), zalce@unam.mx

ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to introduce the main problems of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program between Mexico and Canada which takes place, still, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis relies on documentary films, presenting the activists' struggle, pointing out SAWP's problems in the constitution of the families affected and with regard to "citizenization" of the "temporary" workers in order to present a contemporary context in which these works were produced and disseminated. Once that context is established, five films were analyzed produced over the last fifteen years to find out the participation of workers in the programs, signed by Mexico and Canada. This brief commented filmography has served to put forward the points of view of each documentary and what it seeks to communicate to their audiences. The contributions of this article follow two different lines. The first is that documentary film can be presented as a useful tool to denounce unfair situations when proposed as an activist weapon. The second is to underline how, in the third decade of the 21st century, the condition in which SAWP members work and live still has not changed and how the COVID 19 epidemic has brought to the fore the paradoxical conditions in which the program operates.

Keywords: *Documentary film, ethics, Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, Mexico-Canada relations*

I. INTRODUCTION

This article is a first approach to a quite broad body of film work that is the result of relations between Mexico and Canada, of bilateral perspectives, and of representations from either side of the two extremes of the North American region. In this case, I will look only at documentaries centering specifically on bilateral relations and involving very specific actors: temporary migrant workers. This article is a review essay of documentaries; it is not yet an in depth analysis, but a presentation of a group of films that are linked by their subject and in the case of four of them, by their aim to denounce the unfair conditions in which these men and women work and live.

Documentary cinema has served as a medium to register the injustices that the binational government programs signed by Mexico and Canada commit against their participants. Depending on the aim with which they have been filmed, the documentaries that focus on the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) and its workers present the topic either through a

denunciation or almost via political advocacy, with a critical view that seeks a balance between the benefits the program represents for its participants (both men and women, workers, businesspersons, and governments) and its negative aspects (racism and labor rights violations). The SAWP is documented differently according to filmmaker(s)' intent.

The objective of this article is to introduce the main problems of SAWP in the framework of a reading that takes place, still, during the COVID-19 pandemic; presenting the activists' struggle, pointing out SAWP's problems in the constitution of the families affected and with regard to "citizenization" of the "temporary" workers. Both of these purposes aim to present a contemporary context in which these filmmakers' works have been carried out and shown. Once that context is established, I will analyze five films produced over the last fifteen years to discover how seasonal agricultural workers' participation in the programs signed by Mexico and Canada is documented. This brief commented filmography will serve to put forward the points of view of each documentary and what they seek to communicate to their audiences. They are presented chronologically to see if the programs have improved due to the denunciations made or if the conditions of their participants continue unchanged.

II. THE CONTEXT, BEFORE AND DURING THE PANDEMIC

Given the need to keep supply chains open during the world health crisis, it became evident that the agricultural sector could not stop operating. Although it was classified as essential, however, many of its both male and female workers, far from being recognized as guarantors of food security in entire regions, saw their vulnerable conditions worsen compared to before. In the case of Canada, a country that receives an average of 60 000 foreign seasonal agricultural workers a year (CEI, 2020: 8), these conditions have been widely denounced by the press, academia, non-governmental organizations, and documentary cinema. Workers' complaints have been recurrent and involve accidents on the farms, unjustified deductions from their paychecks, the lack of medical services, deportations, threats, and harsh treatment (MWAS, 2020). As recently as August 2018, around 100 workers made a joint statement denouncing their living and working conditions and requesting more effective government supervision to improve them. Specifically, they complained of crowded living conditions: sometimes more than 10 people shared a single room or lived in spaces that were not built for human habitation.

In this context, it is by no means surprising that COVID-19 contagion increased, to the point that, in Ontario alone (where almost half of these immigrants work), more than 1300 cases and three deaths were reported before the end of the summer. In response, Canada temporarily prevented the entry of migrant workers; however, due to its dependence on foreign labor, it had to renew admissions. One of the measures adopted was that, before beginning work, agricultural workers must quarantine for 15 days. However, once they begin working, crowded living and working conditions they have denounced make it impossible for them to maintain proper distancing to be able to stop the chain of contagion. For civic organizations like Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, even while the government provides financial aid to big agribusiness corporations, the real producers of the food, men and women migrant workers, are experiencing a sharp crisis due to the lack of planning and political will (MWAC, 2020: 9-12).

In the case of Mexico, many voices have warned for decades about the need to reformulate basic tenets of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). While the Mexican government has insisted that it is a "model of international labor cooperation . . . that has demonstrated the possibility

of maintaining a regulated, dignified, effective migratory flow of workers” (SRE, 2020), the truth is that, once in Canada, these workers feel abandoned to their fate. Consular intervention is sometimes ineffective, and at other times, it can even be prejudicial (Valenzuela Moreno, 2018), and, with regard to health, they face risks that make them particularly vulnerable. Díaz and McLaughlin, for example, emphasize that ensuring the health of SAWP workers requires more than access to medical services: what is needed is to attend to a broad spectrum of economic and social conditions (2016: 87—88).

Clearly structural violence by economic, political, and social forces underlies the COVID-19 outbreaks among these workers. The multiplication of cases has complicated their lives. In addition to the aforementioned denunciations, they must put up with workdays of over 16 hours to be able to cover the work of those who have been returned to their countries of origin or are currently quarantined. Employers’ and community members’ xenophobia has increased and the threats aimed at ensuring that the workers do not speak to the press have multiplied. Both male and female workers complain about a lack of information concerning the health crisis and the lack of medical attention in their languages (MWAC, 2020).

In 2021, after the death of three Mexican labourers and because of the visibilization of the vulnerability in which temporary workers continued to labour, a coroner's review of the COVID-19 was issued, changing “in course for the Office of the Chief Coroner, which has never held an inquest into the death of a migrant worker in the province” of Ontario (Mojtehdzadeh 2021). Recognizing their importance to the province’s economy and the heightened risks posed to migrant workers during the pandemic, the report called “for better safeguards and improved working conditions for foreign seasonal agricultural workers, a population that faces barriers to accessing health care and added dangers due to communal living quarters” (Lupton 2021), historically. Its recommendations meet what activists had been claiming for during decades, like an improved access to health care to better communication between governments and agencies involved in closing the contracts for each yearly growing season, but also the need to inform workers about their rights and services available to them, including where to access health care and information on labour laws; and even more specifically like hotlines where workers can report violations or concerns about work conditions, with information available in languages other than English or French.

The report says foreign farm workers should be considered a high priority group when it comes to accessing COVID-19 vaccinations. It also calls for isolation centres to be set up in communities where they're working to deal with any outbreaks. Generally, foreign farm workers have visas that tie them to a single employer. The report recommends changes to allow workers more freedom to move between different work sites during the growing season. (Lupton 2021)

Historically, as we are able to see in the documentaries selected in this article, most foreign farmer workers live in communal housing, generally crowded bunkhouses, provided by their employers. If these conditions were neither safe nor fair before the COVID-19 outbreak unfolded last year, as these five films document, the pandemic made them even worse.

III. WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY’S ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY?

The documentaries reviewed here have all been filmed in the twenty-first century. It is surprising that, despite the passing of years and Conservative and Liberal governments in Canada, these workers’ conditions continue to be unchanged. All the films included here are made using a realist discourse. According to Rubén Dittus, this effect is achieved through “a series of expressive and

content elements ruled by the schema that order the film's discourse" (85). The feeling of realism is achieved by situating the reflexive foundations, associating them directly with the complex reality shown. Since the result is identifiable, it establishes a connection through recognition of spaces and a series of opinions about the issue that make it possible for the viewer to feel that the story is close to his/her reality.

Plantinga (2016) proposes that a rhetorical phenomenon exists that can be called commitment to the characters, through which the viewers produce sympathy, antipathy, alliances, and other responses; this happens in the case of fictional characters. Based on this, filmmakers work with points of view in order to propose responses among viewers, making them expect certain outcomes. Based on realist formats, then, we identify with those characters who are people, social, political, economic, and cultural actors. And, the way in which the documentary presents them also seeks empathy or rejection by the audience.

Giroux has written that cinema has a "constituent, political nature" that creates the possibility of communicating ideas to viewers by mobilizing "power through the use it makes of images, sounds, gestures, dialogues," taking into account both problems and social considerations "that structure the politics of day-to-day realities" (2003: 15-17).

Documentaries have been given the task of observing, analyzing, and interpreting reality, according to Cordero Marines (2019). In North America, "filmmakers see in this cinema a tool for social change, to the extent that they operate as an instrument for information that allows the audience to have a critical view of a certain event" (55). However, it is important not to forget that "they are an ideological reflection of those who create them. That is, by analyzing a documentary, we can discern the filmmakers' perspective about their surroundings" (44).

The body of documentary works examined in this brief corpus are connected: their protagonists are men and women who emigrate to Canada in a seasonal workers program. Not all are from the same country, but they travel for similar reasons and with the same objective: to alleviate their families' needs and offer them a more economically stable life. As viewers, we must always remember that the empathy or rejection of a character interviewed for the documentary is directly related to the filmmaker's will to put in the foreground the current problems facing temporary migrant workers.

Bill Nichols (1997) has stated that in documentaries, we as an audience see and hear individuals and people who should be considered social actors because, in the film, they are representing themselves in front of the camera in a specific historical context. I would add that they also do so in the spatial context in which they act. If we are aware of all this, we are obliged as viewers to decode the stories we watch based on that premise, although it is also important who is doing it and what he/she wants to get across.

IV. THE FILMS

El Contrato (2003), by Min Sook Lee, is a watershed: it is recognized for having contributed to making visible the exploitation of seasonal migrant workers in Canada's agro-industry (Butovsky and Smith, 2007; Martínez-Zalce, 2018). It is also undoubtedly the most complex of the five films examined here because it focuses on very diverse actors: businessmen and women, diplomats, activists, and centrally, the workers and their demands. Lee presents all this in the framework of the public sphere through her medium-length film, interspersing and counterposing their expectations

about the program. In an openly activist approach, Lee wants to use this document to denounce a series of offenses against those who sign the contract because they are at a disadvantage.

To achieve empathy with the workers—all Mexican in this case—, Lee focuses her story on a central character; it has a beginning, in which we see the paperwork for the hiring and his departure from home; a development, during tomato planting and harvesting season; and a denouement, with his return home. This is complemented by opinions from academics and another worker who, with his face covered, talks about the injustices they are subjected to.

Thus, Lee's strategy in building her story is based on a kind of metonymy: she centers on an individual, Teodoro Bello, who represents the collective, although, without, of course, universalizing.

However, what gives the story its strong impact is the counterposing of voice-over, which explains with figures and data the Canadian government's motivation in picking this cheap labor, with the spontaneity of the on-camera verbal exchanges that allow us to see the naked truth about the power relations established between the bosses—both men and women—, the Mexican government representatives, and the workers themselves (who, in the case of this particular film, are all men.) The result is shocking: racism, class prejudice, and abuses of power are displayed, while those who exercise them are smiling all the while. It is so shocking, in fact, that both the National Film Board and the director herself were sued for defamation by the greenhouse owners, who all on their own, had referred to the workers as their property, admitted to allowing the overseers to mistreat them, and had consorted with the Mexican diplomats (Lee, 2018).

Thus, the rhetorical construction of the characters that Lee uses to communicate her position about the groups that populate her documentary is very clear. On the one hand, we have a group of men who, because of financial need, left home and emigrated to Leamington, Ontario, to work for eight months in the greenhouses that produce tomatoes year-round. Lee documents these men's daily lives as they share a house, squeezed into bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom; the long, hard workdays; the highly regimented existence in which they are not encouraged to interact with the society hosting them; their common living in a small space which they make little changes in order to create a feeling of home and, in the place of family, by reproducing their practices from their places of origin. They cook, sing, go to mass, and perform new tasks: cutting each other's hair, writing letters, going to meetings with other compatriots. The camera follows them in these activities as they speak about their frustrations, their dreams, and the problems they deal with as employees. In this film, health matters are mentioned as a source of problems because the employers are not willing to solve them, and, in any case, their answer is to repatriate anyone who is ill. The camera also follows the Mexican diplomats, whose job it is to defend their compatriots' rights, but who, on the contrary, threaten them with repatriation. Housing and health issues are discussed in these meetings where, instead of being heard, the workers are expected to submit.

The film's title is fundamental for understanding the filmmaker's intent. It is in Spanish, and it refers to the instrument that ties the workers to their employers; it is what fixes the rules of their stay and sets the conditions in which they will live for their eight months of exploitation. And it is only in the title, because it appears nowhere else in the film. However, it becomes clear to the audience that the proximity between the Mexican authorities, who do not defend the workers' rights as is their obligation, and the employers, who should treat their employees fairly, is responsible for the precariousness of the seasonal migrant workers' existence.

According to Nichols (1997), documentaries achieve expressiveness when they present an authentic world. Through that expressiveness, the control of the narrative is determined by the needs of the content itself and the viewer responds to that. *El Contrato* can be considered an extremely

expressive text because it is very effective in communicating the situation of the seasonal workers through its story.

Although the story is structured linearly, its beginning and end take place in the characters' homes, underlining the consequences of the act of migrating in the lives of the families involved. Thus, the filmmaker is betting on creating empathy with their cause, by making visible the injustices experienced by these workers, who, despite their journey, are not able to overcome the precarious circumstances that expelled them from their country in the first place.

Matices (Nuances) (2011), by Araón Díaz Mendiburo, delves into the same circumstances, but with a more moderate tone. From a multifaceted perspective, he follows the traditional route of the documentary that alternates between interviews with those involved and the images that complement their words. Due to its structure, the documentary does not establish a specific story with a beginning, development, and denouement. However, the different voices that it introduces, like in a chorus, form a narrative that shows how the men and women seasonal workers—Mexican, in this case—leave behind a life rich in social relations and cultural expressions to insert themselves in another, rigid life that confines them to being cloistered both physically and symbolically, relating almost exclusively to each other.

Where are the nuances? They are in the multi-focused perspective, which we could call horizontal, since none of those involved is more important than any other. One of the characters, José Luis Córdoba, writes corridos, which accompany the images of the men and women migrants dancing at a club in the opening scene, thus demanding the right to leisure and enjoyment. Who makes up the chorus? A Mexican woman worker, several male workers, an Anglo-Canadian woman volunteer, a Latin-American-Canadian woman activist, and two Anglo-Canadian women academics, one of whom also writes and performs another of the songs on the film's soundtrack.

Nichols (1997: 205-210) points out that the documentary is committed to social issues, which are the basis for their exposition/plot. It is this perspective that we find in *Matices*, where we hear different voices, all presented as genuine with diverse versions of the same plot, based on proof and concrete data. Most of them refer to the invisibility of the agricultural workers, who spend more than half the year in Canada and, due to their living circumstances, do not have—rather, are not given—the opportunity to become part of the communities where they live. The audience can be certain of the references that these actors provide because they witness them directly. *Matices*, then, fulfills Nichols's perspective that the documentary takes us into the stories, through exposition or representation, by reconstructing the plot: it is necessary to make the seasonal workers' living conditions visible.

The chorus of voices unfolds as follows: a migrant describes his day's work, which we see in images; the academics put forward the racialization of the work and why Mexicans are considered better at it than Caribbeans, given that they have no family ties in the countries, do not speak the language, cannot face up to the bosses, and are easier to control, all at the same time that the images of the men working in the fields continue flashing across the screen. A woman migrant, speaking on camera, explains how she feels invisible and that her identity is even wobbly, since she cannot integrate into the space where she works; and, when she returns home, she is no longer the same person who left her homeland behind. An activist explains that it is Canada's obligation to incorporate them into the community since they are part of the country's economic and social life. A woman volunteer recognizes the importance of all the migrants for her own people; she has lived with them, has visited their country, and, based on that, places greater value on their personal history and their unending work with no rest. As she is speaking, we see shots of a religious celebration in

the streets of a Mexican town and then a baptismal fiesta, reinforcing the idea of the rich community life there.

This documentary also takes up the issue of health, and the lack of recognition that leads to the health clinics not having Spanish-speaking staff, as narrated by a migrant and the activist. This contrasts with the opinion of one nurse, who underlines the lack of communication between doctors and migrants and chalks it up to migrants' timidity and incomprehension. Here, the filmmaker uses a powerful strategy to illustrate the situation: his interviewee answers in the Totonac language, and the film does not subtitle the response, limiting most of the audience's ability to understand. When another of the academics explains the almost complete uselessness of the three medical and life insurance policies that should protect the workers —without doing so—, the scenario of defenselessness into which they are thrust is clear. For example, they are afraid to fall ill, something previously noted in *El Contrato*. The lack of medical care, then, persists almost a decade after it was first exposed in a documentary.

The second problem —which appears in the previous documentary, although there it is only shown and not commented upon— is the migrants' living quarters. Scenes are counterposed in which dirty, unsanitary warehouses refurbished with plywood cots are compared to others that have showers, an ample kitchen, and cubicles with beds, thus reaffirming the idea that lodgings cannot be considered temporary when people live in them for eight months at a time. In this regard, the Mexican authorities do not intervene because they don't want conflicts with the Canadian employers, and they shield themselves by claiming that the municipal authorities and provincial health departments should be conducting inspections to ensure minimum health standards in these living quarters.

Matices also achieves expressiveness through the representation of a world whose inhabitants try to understand and take in the others who arrive to contribute to the prosperity of the very world that makes them invisible and excludes them. The film's intent is that we understand the different ranges in the web of relationships that make up the space left behind, the destination, and the return of all the program participants. And the viewer responds to this chorus by exercising solidarity with the point of view of the workers and empathizing with those who relate to them without prejudices.

Esperanza PQ (2012) is the only film which is not engaged with the temporary workers struggles. The opening scene of Diego Briceño's documentary proves the hypothesis that whoever makes it and what he/she wants to narrate are important. With the aesthetics of what looks like a television commercial, beautiful, bright green lettuces and celeries, hygienic and covered in clear plastic bags are displayed in a Quebec supermarket. The antiseptic subtitles state that the province's agricultural industry requires foreign labor to be successful.

The difference between this documentary and the other four is its point of view. Despite the fact that it begins in Chimaltenango, Guatemala, and that it introduces three male characters, the real story is that of the Forino family. Starting from the premise that they (the owners of the farm and their employees) are all migrants, the film shows the cordial relationship that the employers apparently have with their workers. "Apparently," because the reality that the viewers see does not jibe with the spectacle of efficiency and justice that the documentary attempts to communicate.

Of course, in contrast with the English-speaking businessmen and women, the Quebecois Forino makes an effort to communicate in Spanish with his workers and treats them with familiarity. However, when we see where they live, it turns out to be a storeroom partitioned into tiny cubicles in which the workers, half Mexicans and half Guatemalans, have their beds. (These bunkbeds where the COVID outbreak flourished). The employers' familiarity with the workers involves their joking with them, from their superior positions, on camera, or sitting down to a meal with them in which

the game is to put together boxes —the very same boxes that they pack the vegetables in—, setting the Mexicans and the Guatemalans against each other; or, allowing them to take an offering of vegetables to a mass held in Spanish at Saint Joseph’s Oratory of Mount Royal in Montreal; or playing soccer; or taking an English class, given informally by another of the migrants in solidarity, in a patio with a toy magic lightboard.

The director and the camera are there to bear witness as authorities to the prosperity that certain migrants achieve by exploiting others, who will never be able to become citizens who can enjoy that bonanza.

The discourse of the three characters with names is similar to that of the Mexicans who appear in the other two documentaries. However, the tone of this discourse is not one that recognizes injustice, only exhaustion. The camera simply registers without any visual counterpoint that could act as a commentary —as we see in the other documentaries. The workers say that they are made to work twelve hours a day from Monday to Saturday and half a day on Sunday; that the woman employer ignores them when she’s not scolding them; and that the days seem long because of how boring it is to just go back and forth from the dormitories to the field, with no variation in the routine week after week, month after month, in an attempt to keep up a high yield and be on their best possible behavior, because their evaluation at the end of their stay determines whether they will be hired again the next time and for how long.

The fact that the story ends with the characters’ return trip reinforces the idea that the documentary has been filmed to show the program’s success story, from the perspective that participants have benefited, even though those who have had the opportunity to be informed about it discover the injustices covered over by the Forino company’s apparent benevolence. And, despite this not being its aim, Briceño’s text reveals an involuntary sub-text that many critics of the program have noted: the Canadian government’s refusal to allow the temporary workers from abroad to opt for citizenship. This means that there are different categories of migrants and that those who do unskilled work and are cheap labor are not worthy of becoming citizens.

In *Migrant Dreams* (2016), a full-length film, Min Sook Lee returns to Leamington, Ontario. But this time, the protagonists are different. This time they’re women: a lesbian couple, a mother, and two female activists. The diegesis deals with their stay in Canada, with constant reference to the families they left behind in Indonesia.

The role of the Justicia for Migrant Workers organization, which for decades has demanded the same rights for migrant workers as those enjoyed by Canadians, occupies more space in this work, and the filmmaker aligns her viewpoint with theirs. Cordero (2020: 21) argues that the documentary plays an active role in the configuration of the context and social debates and has been used as an instrument for social and political change. This documentary’s activist perspective revolves not only around a discussion about citizenship, based on the Canadian government’s perception that these people are more workers than migrants, but also around the corruption that has been generated in order for the program to continue to be successful. Coming back to the subject, from the perspective of another community (not the Mexican one) helps us understand why the Coroner’s report before cited has been a landmark in the long (pre-COVID struggle for health, housing and citizenization).

The film is organized based on following the protagonists’ daily lives. They are never portrayed at work. It documents three parts of their lives: housing, family life, and their immigration status.

In documentaries, the narration depends on our vision of what is true. Montero and Paz (2013) state that, like any truth, this is to be found in the minds of those who put it forward. “In the sphere of the audiovisual, the documentary has consolidated itself as the most direct form of telling truths

about nature, society, and people themselves. . . It has always been difficult to establish the dividing lines between the documentary and fiction, between truth and the plausible.”

The cell phone becomes an instrument for intervention and the characters’ direct participation in making the film, in order to tell the truths that disrupt their lives. The migrants, men and women, live in spaces of geographical exclusion (Flores, 2020), so desolate as to seem that they have been conceived that way so that no one would want to stay there. They film the filth, the unsanitary conditions, and the cockroaches to prove that the bosses violate their rights. They are not free to pick where they live; the contract, written in English but signed by people who do not speak that language, stipulates that the employer must find them lodging that they will pay rent for. Moving out of the indecent housing is a challenge, and, even so, the employers demand rent payments. Consultations with the lawyer make it clear that the procedures are not only unfair, but illegal.

The gender perspective shown when focusing on the female characters serves to underline the way that nuclear family relations are affected by the absence of the mother in the home or by choosing a partner abroad. Cultural considerations, religious practices, and the domination by families even from afar define the characters’ lives. We do not even know what their working conditions are like.

However, those working conditions and the contracts that govern them are what have situated these women in the space in which their stories unfold in the diegesis. In the fundamental discussion about citizenship, the documentary’s cross-cutting theme, a new actor emerges: that of the recruiters or agents who, despite the existence of the binational migratory program, act in a sense as human smugglers since they charge the workers for taking them in groups to Canada. In the scenes filmed by the protagonists, which help uncover the collusion between recruiters and employers, we see the way the workers are extorted on payday to continue paying debts that reach up to US\$7000. They are threatened and bullied, and, if they decide to make a complaint to the authorities, their homes invaded. And when they do make a complaint, everyone becomes news: more material for the documentary, in the form of radio spots and newspaper articles, that they only half understand.

So, the story is constructed based on the possible rules the women workers could break when they try to avoid the restrictions to their freedom imposed by the contract (the right to fall in love, marry, or denounce injustices). When their contract finally comes to an end, since they cannot renew it from inside Canada, they must emigrate again, covering the round-trip travel costs themselves, if they do not want to change their status, become “illegals,” and, as a result, be excluded from future possible contracts.

It is, then, the government’s inflexibility, born of the unwillingness to allow the migrants to become citizens, even though they contribute to the country’s economy and society, that produces this corruption.

The activist documentary aspires to being an instrument that serves to achieve objectives, and, according to Dittus (2013), it has been characterized by taking positions in power struggles in which different ways of understanding society, the community, and identity are debated. In general, this kind of film takes a stand in favor of creating support, empathy, commitment, responsibility, and mobilization. This is exactly what *Migrant Dreams* attempts and succeeds in doing. But it also goes one step further. The close of the documentary describes victories achieved in the face of the abuse of power as a result of the fair demand for workers’ rights, using different sorts of data. The conclusion is that the prosecutor has brought charges against the recruiter. The film also offers a list of the names of people who refused to participate in the documentary and, by remaining silent, give their consent. Lastly, it closes with powerful numbers: Canada currently hosts more than one million

migrant workers with temporary status, from more than 80 countries. Since 2006, that number has been larger than that of those who are given residency status. And with those figures, the documentary concludes. It is important to note that during the COVID-19 crisis, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau hinted at the possibility that this situation might change, but nothing official has come of that, and, as I mentioned in the introduction to this article, the precarious conditions of many migrants have caused contagion and death.

With *Migranta, con m de mama* (2020), Aaraón Díaz Mendiburo attempts a different exercise: his main objective is to give voice to and put a face to Mexican temporary migrant workers in Canada by telling their stories. He gets them to answer two questions: why they decided to travel as a life choice and what the costs and consequences of having made that decision are.

At the beginning, a vehicle of amusement, an almost empty carousel, acts as a metaphor: the lives of these mothers go around in circles. They watch as the children of others have fun, while they have to work alone and far away from their own. After this minimal introduction, the documentary is divided into three chapters, one for each of the protagonists, titled with an affectionate diminutive. Each begins with a close-up of a woman's face wearing a beautifully decorated mask. All of them are the embodiment of the problems put forward by the foregoing documentaries, the ambiguity underlying the expression "to live better," and how that ambiguity has shaped their identities.

V. WHERE ARE THEY TEMPORARILY?

Vicky tells a story that began in *Matices*. Widowed due to an accident in Leamington, she had to travel in order to support her two children. Vicky's story, told in her house, rests on something she calls an irony: that her son, who had always complained about being abandoned, now also works in the program. Two generations of seasonal migrant workers, two stories of apparent abandonment. From her point of view, the cost of a wage that stretches further has been nostalgia and ongoing sadness; receiving complaints of abandonment from her children and feeling herself out of place. Being divided, eight months abroad, four at home. The cost of economic well-being is emotional malaise.

Betty, for her part, talks about the difficulty of being far away, which ends up making her a stranger to her daughter despite the family support that provides the little girl with a couple of substitute mothers. She is a stranger, because she has been part of a different place for a large part of the year and because she knows that affection stems from living together. She touches on a point that is developed in the documentaries previously analyzed: that adaptation means submission. While she talks about exhausting workdays and complicated situations, we see her walk in the vineyard, explaining how, in those fields, she discovered that she had turned into a worthless foreigner (cheap labor), with no right to feel anything, forced to put aside her needs and desires, watched, prevented from having social relations and emotional attachments, plagued with fear, hiding her friendships. She denounces the imposition of rules so strict and absurd that they sometimes imply health risks because of fear of punishment.

Letty, for her part, talks about her life in terms of the negotiation of time. She speaks of her rural daily life in Mexico. If the family grows, what is required is to have shorter stays to live more with the children, the product of ineffective contraceptives. Based on these reflections, her priority is to compensate for her absence.

Above all, these three stories are stories of loss, but without melodrama. They show an acceptance of the reality that everything has a cost, which, at the end of the day, has probably been very high.

As already mentioned, expressiveness in the documentary is achieved when the real world is represented. By approaching these women in an intimate but not obtrusive fashion, the film shows us how the program affects the subjectivities of its participants. Through expressiveness, according to Nichols (1977), control of the narrative is determined by the needs of the content itself, which is the individual perception of the program's consequences in family life. Viewers can empathize with the protagonists if they understand their dilemma—or they cannot if they object to the dividing up of families. I am interested in pointing this out right now because of the bridge that Díaz Mendiburo builds between the two films through the person of Vicky, in the process showing his ethical commitment to the men and women whose lives he documents.

The stories in which the women explain their reasons unmask the emotional side of their participation in the program. In this sense, the ending makes literal what had been put forward symbolically: they take off their masks and give their full name, at the same time that they express a wish, thus completing their identities on camera, with their faces uncovered and with a first and last name.

VI. CONCLUSION

As we follow the development of the COVID-19 pandemics, and the impossibility of the full closure of borders in case of the temporary migrant workers that travel every year to Canada, it is important to see how subjects that have been denounced by activists, discussed by academics, represented by documentarians, dealing with their lack of rights, bad housing and poor health attention, have to be placed up front. There is one scene in *Matices* that shows a shot of a monument which reads, chiseled in stone, "In a country like ours, all rights must be safeguarded and all beliefs respected." This sentence seems ironic after analyzing the body of work based on four crosscutting topics: the program, the workers, the employers, and the governments.

How has the seasonal agricultural worker program been presented in these documentaries? It is paradoxical that, for more than 15 years, through changes in administrations, activist groups' denunciations, academic analyses, and the documentaries themselves, some of the problems, like the excessively long workdays, the bad housing, the lack of healthcare, and others, continue, while other, new ones, associated with the recruiters and extortionists, have come on the scene.

What balance sheet do the documentaries present of the program? An unfavorable one, which is paradoxical because this programme (both in Mexico and in Canada) has been called a binational model of international cooperation towards the wellbeing of all participants. If a documentary must present its perspective as a truth that will offer proof and certification so that its story is not questioned, this is achieved convincingly through a variety of structures. All of them seem to conclude that, as long as the worth of temporary migrant men and women workers is not recognized, injustices will continue to happen.

In each of the documentaries, the workers detail how much they miss Mexico and their families. However, after more than a decade of going back and forth, almost all of them say that they will only return a few more times. But there is always a next time. As in the carousel, they turn around and around a single spot. The documentaries make visible what the pandemic accentuated. As long as the governments do not reform certain aspects of the workers' stays, the labor relations will continue to be unfair, as the documentaries, fulfilling their purpose, have helped to make visible.

SOURCES

ÁNGEL METROPOLITANO

2020 “Mexicanos en Canadá revelan condiciones laborales,” *Ángel metropolitano*, June 24, <https://angelmetropolitano.com.mx/2020/06/24/>.

BUTOVSKY, JOHAN, and MURRAY SMITH

2007 “Beyond Social Unionism: Farm Workers in Ontario and Some Lessons from Labour History,” in *Labour / Le Travail*, vol. 59, Spring, pp. 69-97, www.jstor.org/stable/25149755.

CAMPBELL, TAYLOR

2020 “Chief Coroner of Ontario to investigate local migrant worker’s COVID-19 death,” *Windsor Star*, June 1, <https://windsorstar.com/news/local-news/local-migrant-worker-dies-of-covid-19>.

CBC

2020 “Second migrant worker, 24, dies from COVID-19 in Windsor-Essex,” CBC, June 6, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/second-migrant-worker-death-covid-1.5601673?fbclid=IwAR2SS1myMWpAKJeyCPHB33d3-a1DUvX0r-wo95sHXAgNZfuuefZxIxd3GEs>.

CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS INTERNACIONALES GILBERTO BOSQUES

2020 “Trabajadores agrícolas ante el COVID-19: Comunidades mexicanas en Estados Unidos y Canadá,” *Contexto internacional*, July 14, <https://centrogilbertobosques.senado.gob.mx/analisisinvestigacion/contexto>.

CORDERO MARINES, LILIANA

2019 “Documental político en Norteamérica: una herramienta de contrainformación y configuración de las identidades políticas,” *Norteamérica*, year 14, no. 1 (January-June), pp. 39-64.

CORDERO MARINES, LILIANA

2020 “Continuidades y discontinuidades en Norteamérica a principios del siglo XXI: un análisis desde el documental de denuncia política,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales*, at press.

DÍAZ MENDIBURO, AARÁÓN, and JANET MCLAUGHLIN

2016 “Vulnerabilidad estructural y salud en los trabajadores agrícolas temporales en Canadá,” *Alteridades* vol. 26, no. 51 (January-June), pp. 85-95.

DITTUS, RUBÉN

2013 “El dispositivo – cine como constructor de sentido: el caso del documental político,” *Cuadernos. Info*, vol. 33, pp. 78 – 87.

DUNSWORTH, EDWARD

2020 “Canadians have farmed out tragedy to the migrant workers who provide our food,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 13, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canadians-have-farmed-out-tragedy-onto-the-migrant-workers-who-provide>.

FLORES CASTILLO, MARIANA

2020 “Cartografía de llegada. “Migración y precariedad en *Preparación para la próxima vida* de Atticus Lish,” *Cruzando la frontera II*, at press.

GIROUX, HENRY A.

2003 *Cine y entretenimiento. Elementos para una crítica política del filme*, Barcelona, Paidós Comunicación.

HURTADO VEGA, JUAN CARLOS

2020 “Traumas psicosociales en las familias de trabajadores migrantes,” *México: Origen, paso y destino de migrantes* 69, August 3, pp. 47-67.

Lee, Min Sook

2019 “Reencuadrando los programas de trabajadores temporales a través del documental,” *Cruzando la frontera. Narrativas de la migración: el cine*, CISAN-UNAM, Mexico City, pp.31-40.

MARTÍNEZ-ZALCE, GRACIELA

2016 *Instrucciones para salir del limbo: Arbitrario de representaciones audiovisuales de las fronteras en América del Norte*, Mexico City, CISAN, UNAM.

MARTÍNEZ-ZALCE, GRACIELA and AARÁON DÍAZ MENDIBURO, EDS.

2019 *Cruzando la frontera. Narrativas de la migración: el cine*, CISAN-UNAM, Mexico City.

MIGRANT WORKERS ALLIANCE FOR CHANGE (MWAC)

2020 “Unheeded Warnings: COVID-19 & Migrant Workers in Canada,” June 8, <https://migrantworkersalliance.org/unheededwarnings/>.

MOJTEHEDZADEH, SARA

2020 “Migrant worker claims he was unduly fired,” *Toronto Star*, July 31, A3.

MONTERO DÍAZ, JULIO, and MARÍA ANTONIA PAZ REBOLLO

2013 “En constante adaptación a la realidad. El cine documental y su flexibilidad a lo largo de la historia,” *Revista TELOS (Cuadernos de Comunicación e Innovación)*, Madrid, www.telos.es, accessed May 28, 2018.

NICHOLS, BILL

1997 *La representación de la realidad*, Paidós.

PLANTINGA, CARL

2016 “I followed the rules, and they all loved you more. Moral judgement and attitudes toward fictional characters in film,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (2010), academia.edu, file:///Users/gra/Downloads/I_Followed_the_Rules_and_They_All_Loved.pdf, December 29, 2016.

SECRETARÍA DE RELACIONES EXTERIORES

2020 “El Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales México - Canadá (PTAT),” Gobierno de México, Acciones y programas, <https://www.gob.mx/sre/acciones-y-programas/el-programa-de-trabajadores-agricolas-temporales-mexico-canada-ptat>, accessed September 2020.

VALENZUELA MORENO, KARLA ANGÉLICA

2018 “La protección consular mexicana y la precarización de las y los trabajadores agrícolas temporales en Canadá,” *Norteamérica*, year 13, no. 1 (January-June), 57-78.

FILMOGRAPHY

El Contrato. Directed by Min Sook Lee. Canada: National Film Board. 2003. 51 min.

Esperanza P.Q. Directed by Diego Briceño-Ordúz. Canada: MC2 Communication Média. 2012. 59 min.

Martínez-Zalce

Documentary film and the plea for justice: Temporary migrant workers in Canada

Matices. Migración “temporal” en Canadá. Directed by Aaraón Díaz Mendiburo. Mexico: 2011. 54 min.

Migrant Dreams. Directed by Min Sook Lee. Canada: 2580971 ONTARIO INC / Tiger Spirit Production. 2016. 88 min.

Migranta con M de mamá. Directed by Aaraón Díaz Mendiburo. Mexico: 2020. 25 min.

Received 07 April 2022; Reviewed 24 April 2022; Accepted 28 May 2022