

Rhythms of identity and marginality: Exploring Slowed-Down Cumbia in Fernando Frías de la Parra's *I'm No Longer Here* (2019)

Since its invention as a new audiovisual medium in the 19th century, cinema has been a source of fascination in terms of its specificity as a medium, its impact on audiences and creators (now known as filmmakers), and its constant transformation over time with the advent of new technologies. There have also been several theoretical debates about film's relationship to other arts with a longer history, such as **literature**, **painting**, and **music**. As an *art of the moving image*, some film studies theorists argue in favour of the universality and uniqueness of film, while others compare its components (angles, camera movements, use of sound, etc.) according to their impure and impure character, creating a “pattern of winners-and-losers” (Chion 4).

The truth is that cinema is the site of a heterogeneity of genres, practices, and audiences in which a single concept to define it is impossible. This is mainly due to the presence of different musical styles and approaches to musicality. They not only give life to films but, as part of a whole, shape their aesthetic and narratological choices. While the object appears to have an existence in real-time on the screen, **music reinforces cinema's “iconic sense of time”** (Brown 17) to the viewer. In other words, when we watch a film, music helps us to understand the deeply stylised language of the story as a cinematic production.

Given the prevalence of music in today's most popular films, I wondered how to listen to a film score and decipher its *stylized, iconic sense of time*, and whether music was just another element in the service of a larger narrative. The answer seemed simple at first: I had to go back to the film sequences and disseminate them note by note. But, contrary to what many people believe, analysing a film is not an easy task.

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How could I approach much-discussed cult films to understand the importance of music in cinema? Or, more importantly, there were no other productions that raised new questions about representation, narrative, and/or aesthetics in film music?



Official promotional poster for the film “I’m No Nonger Here”, winner of ***the Ariel Award for Best Film***, and ***Best Actor at the Cairo International Film Festival***, among other awards and honourable mentions.

With this in mind, I thought that instead of focusing on well-known cinema, we could learn how to listen to film music by exploring contemporary film repertoire that suggests new relationships between music and film—including its score as what is heard on *diegetic* and *non-diegetic levels*^[1], and its innate musicality *as a link between the moving image* and sound *as an instrument*. New cinematographic choices imply new ways of hearing and seeing the well-known binarisms between what is **shown** and what is **said** on screen.

On this logic, the film ***Ya no estoy aquí*** (2019) —*I Am No Longer Here* as the official English title—, directed by the Mexican producer Fernando Frías de la Parra, may offer clues to a musical function little explored in cinema and ***mentioned by Michel Chion*** (2021): “the parenthetical value of music” (226), which inscribes its own temporality on the film. Far from interrupting the film's narrative, however, these music parentheses allow the story to be mobilised in non-linear time. In this way, the story follows Ulises, a young man from Monterrey, Mexico, who belongs to the countercultural movement of ***the Kolombia***, defined as those “natives of Nuevo León who live according to Colombian practices” (Olvera Gudiño 96). Together with their friends, the gang of *Los Terkos* (stubborn in English), they meet to dance slow cumbias^[2] in the streets, wearing a multicoloured aesthetic that combines fashionable styles with their marginalised conditions.

After a misunderstanding between gangs, he is forced to flee his hometown and migrate to New Jersey. His only motivation for moving forward is his love for cumbia music, whose nostalgic melodies and hybrid rhythms take him on a journey through what was and what will never be. While I had to piece together a complex jigsaw puzzle of Ulises memory to understand the story, I noticed that the music operated in the background and “co-irrigated” (Chion 226) each scene with vitality and comprehension.

Later I understood why the term "irrigate" was appropriate to define the process by which the music *narrativizes* and *mythologises* the film. For the moment, I started by looking at the first few scenes and the relationship between the moving image and the music. At the beginning of *I'm No Longer Here*, we are confronted with a deeply emotional first scene: a boy in baggy clothes, whose name we do not know, is saying goodbye to his family.

To the boisterous sounds of an industrial Monterrey in the 2010s, one of his friends runs to see him off and gives him an MP3 player. Then she forms a star with her hands and declares: "Terkos forever" (1:50:05). This MP3 will be key to the plot, as it will build the entire score for the film. It also represents a combination of two of the three ways in which, according to Chion, music can be present in film: the sound that comes out of the MP3 "as something we hear but do not see in the performance, and the sound that we hear and simultaneously see being played and sung" (13)



Scene 1. In a long shot, Ulises leaves his mother to go to New York. In the background, we see Monterrey, a crucial industrial and musical centre for Mexico. Global Panorama, Netflix (2020).



Scene 2. Ulises says goodbye to his friend "Chaparra" while holding in his hand the MP3 player she gave him. Global Panorama, Netflix (2020).

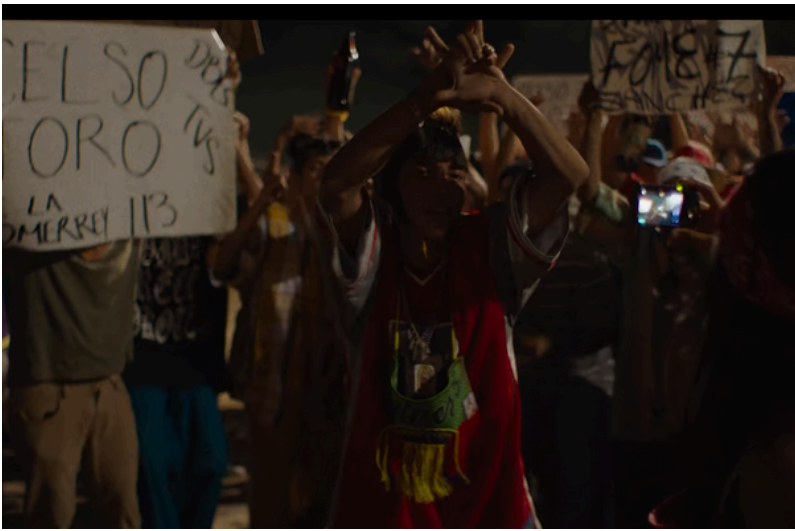
Silently, I moved away from Monterrey and the scene cut to the present, where the boy and another Mexican migrant are looking for work in Mr. Low's shop in Queens, New York. The music only reappears when Ulises calls a local radio station to send a message to his friends after failing to find a job. The fact that the music I have heard so far has only been reproduced through a technological device says a lot about the transformations and reappropriations of cumbia as a musical genre.

According to L'Hoeste and Vila (2013), when cumbia reached Mexico's borders and was imbued with *norteña music*^[3] —characterised by a strong rural accent—"it enjoyed early access to the technology and resources of popular music, which emphasise *mass appeal, commercial value, an urban character and a bond to technological development*" (88-89 with emphasis). The musical world of the early scenes was thus empowered by the uncertain rhythms of technology, the same that reinvented culturally rooted genres like cumbia and transformed them into transnational sounds.

These ideas were materialised in the first dance scene of *I'm No Longer Here*, where Ulises and his gang start dancing to the rhythms of a *cumbia rebajada* (a slowed-down version of the genre) at a clandestine party. In an interview with the director, he claims that "for me, this music comes as the voice of resistance trying to make the song last a little longer, trying to hold on to that dance, *trying to squeeze every drop of meaning out of it*, because after that, the future is not so promising" (Frias 2021 with emphasis).



Scene 3. Ulises joins the clandestine party motivated by Chaparra and dances to the sound of cumbia. This space brings together other Kolombian gangs. Global Panorama, Netflix (2020).



Scene 4. For the first time on screen, we see the star symbol of the gang Los Terkos. This star represents the five points of the compass where each member lives. Global Panorama, Netflix (2020).

The music, as a metaphor for the desire to prolong a finite youth in which Ulises and his friends, as marginal subjects, are relegated to the slums and have no chance of social mobility, also becomes a "spatio-temporal apparatus" (Chion 205). This apparatus shows us, in a condensed form, the cinematic world that the director wants to create.

“Thus, always as part of a whole, it circulates through space and time, creating a system of circulation in which each scene is interwoven from the boy's perspective.

At first, I was confused because the story did not unfold linearly. But by following the music we hear with Ulises on the MP3, we find a more *evocative* way of connecting his nostalgic memories as the film begins to jump from the past to the present and vice versa. In order to understand how the main character's memory is constructed through cumbia music repertoire, I looked at three key sequences that might shed some light on how music forms a sympiotic relationship ^[4] with this film.

The first shows the arrival of a new member of Los Terkos, called "Sudadera" because of his unfashionable clothes. To join the group, the little boy must prove that he genuinely likes cumbia, so he starts singing [Lizardo Mesa's Lejanía \(1982\)](#), while Ulises and his friends accompany him on improvised instruments.



Scene 5. Sudadera sings *Lejanía* accompanied by Los Terkos, who use buckets, pencils and notebooks to imitate accordions, drums and cumbia melodies. Global Panorama, Netflix (2020).

In his song, we find the nostalgic and sad feeling of those who lived in the countryside and had to migrate to Monterrey for various reasons: " How I miss my beautiful savannah tucked into the mountain range (...), and in my chest a cumbia of nostalgia blossom/ as a tear that escapes" (1:32:33)[\[5\]](#). His tearful singing contrasts with the question-and-answer system and effusive rhythms typical of cumbias. Nevertheless, this sequence made me understand the verbal nature of cumbias: although they are dominated by percussion, it is the lyrics that make them identifiable and ready to be appropriated.

In this sense, the song sung by Sudadera "encodes the visual/narrative fusion with the mythologies embedded in a particular culture" (Brown 30). Both this music, represented by the sung melody, and the cumbias that Ulises listens to on his journey, engaged with the visuals of the film to consolidate a mythified universe of nostalgia. Cumbia is the most important soundtrack, in contrast to other scenes where English rock and electronic music are heard because only its melody can transform the object-event in the film into an affective object-event.

This may explain why Ulises refuses to listen to and dance to other music when he arrives in the United States as the cumbia style stimulates his ability to remember what he once loved and what he once was: "The music is very lame" (30:42), he says when he is invited to a party by Lin, Mr Low's granddaughter. However, this *pinche* music, as Ulises derogatorily calls it, is everywhere in the U.S., and his only escape is to cling to his last remaining trace of identity as a Kolombia, his MP3 player. Similarly, in his friendship with Lin, he refuses to learn English to communicate with her and even acts hostile to any sign of change while Lin tries to discover his style and music.

This corresponds to a frozen state of cumbia in Monterrey since the 1990s, where "young people continue to listen and dance to the old cumbias of Andrés Landero, Policarpo Calle, Los Corraleros de Majagual, Alfredo Gutiérrez and Lizandro Mesa" (L'Hoeste and Vila 97). The desire **for everything to remain as it was** comes not only from the character but also from the lowered cumbia itself, which changes every sequence of the film, even in the frames that remain still and last longer. As a character, Ulises "does not want the music to stop because there is no future, there is no hope, there are no possibilities, there is no way out of these situations" (4:24), [according to the director](#).



Director Fernando Frías talks about his award-winning film and what motivated him to create this moving story about memory, nostalgia, migration and cumbia. The World Around, Youtube (2021)

The second sequence took me to Ulises and Lin as they fall asleep in the room on the roof above Mr Low's shop, where the boy is hiding because he has nowhere else to go. As if in a dream, and to the rhythm of his MP3, he gives his body to the music, and for the first time we see how he manages to transport his body to the past when he danced in front of Los Terkos. The cinematic elements respond to this musical call, and the scene in the small, claustrophobic room merges with the dance scene in Monterrey. So, the scene continues, and he ends up dancing alone, with his beloved city in the background. At the same time, another unseen transition/transposition takes him to the New York subway, where he keeps dancing for money without leaving his musical trance.

Suddenly, a stranger yells at him to stop, bringing him back to the present, and he runs away, frightened. In this way, the film "creates worlds where music can appear out of nowhere or leave you without warning, filling your heart with haunting regret" (Chion 203). As part of the audience, I was able to interpret these silences and musical voids through the eyes of the stigmatised character, who seeks refuge in music and, failing to find it, his world falls silent.



Sequence 1. Between 41:34 and 40:15 of the film we see one of its most beautiful sequences. In the first scene, we see the image of Lin and Ulises fade into another scene of him dancing with his friends. In the middle scene, we see him dancing alone to the sound of cumbia. The third scene ends with another fade-out that transports Ulises' body to the New York subway. The slowed-down version of the song [Besos sobre besos \(1970\) by Anibal Velásquez](#) ties the whole sequence together. Global Panorama, Netflix (2020).

This is only one example of how the visuals and music are brought together by the narrative "to elicit emotions (and become an affect-object event) and make the viewer believe in the reality of what they are seeing" (Brown 23). This unleashed emotion not only blossoms within me as the observer but also within Ulises, as he realises that the world denies his existence and does not allow him to be. When the music disappears, new fears arise in him, while in later scenes Lin asks him if the reason he didn't return to the subway was because he didn't like dancing alone. Cumbia is, therefore, the only thing that allows him to continue resisting, creating "a *big persona* that affirms himself and allows him to respond to social stigmatisation and marginalisation" (Frías 2021).

Yet Ulises cannot find a sense of belonging in a place that blurs his true identity, leading him to part ways with Lin and wander the desolate streets of New York in a state of despair. In this moment of solitude and silence, he has an identity crisis and decides to cut his distinctive hair to break free from a past lost in the imposed flows of time. Alone with [Lizandro Mesa's Te Llevaré \(1984\)](#), playing on his MP3 player, he chooses to lose himself in the memories of how he crossed the border: "You were left crying/because you can't travel with me/but I'll carry you in my heart/I'll carry you here in my song" (16:45)[6].

Cumbia as a musical score is represented as the love left behind. This means that the songs Ulises listens to are only echoes of their rhythms, and the engine of his memories has become pure nostalgia. As such, the music in *I'm No Longer Here* "seems to enter as an imaginary source of the movement of images whose real source is *mechanical projection*" (Chion 233 with *emphasis*). Following this logic, I moved on to the final sequence, in which Ulises' dance performance and the cumbia music become one in the narrative, and the symbiotic relationship becomes even more palpable.

While walking the streets, the protagonist is found by the authorities and deported to Mexico. After several months in detention, he returns to Monterrey to face a harsh reality: his friends are now part of violent criminal gangs, and the marginalised cumbia no longer fills the streets where he used to dance.

“As a viewer, I wondered how he would return home, to what he once loved. However, the answer was always in the music.



Scene 6. In an almost silent scene, Ulises is picked up by US immigration authorities and sent to a deportation centre in Mexico. Global Panorama, Netflix (2020).

With the sounds of riots, screams, and violence in the background, Ulises decides to climb to the top of a hill and put on his MP3 headphones to listen



Scene 7. Ulises puts on his MP3 headphones to listen to the cumbia song [Quiero decirte hoy \(2018\) by Octubre 82](#) and dances to an unfamiliar and alien Monterrey that he once called home. Global Panorama, Netflix (2020).

to what we know will be his last song. Between a combination of medium-long shots and wide shots, we see him dancing to Monterrey in a slow and melancholic way. In this scene, with the beautiful use of camera, I was reminded of how cinematic narrative is fictionalised through highly manipulative and subjective filmmaking processes. However, ***fiction is not understood as untruth***, but as consciously constructed, with artifice and carefully stylised elements.

Ulises' experience is deeply human and emotionally motivated in a world that condemns him for his social condition, the way he dresses, and the music he likes to listen to. His story, through the embodiment of music as a narrative driver, shows a variant of reality that is forgotten on the margins of society. If we consider music in the film "in relation to the continuum of speech through breaks, interruptions or silences" (Chion 247), then we could argue that these fictionalised spaces allow cumbia to flourish and, along with other cinematic elements such as camera angle and dialogue, co-irrigate all its potentialities on screen.



Scene 8. A crashing and colossal Monterrey is compared to the dancing figure of Ulises. However, he doesn't stop to move to the cumbia rhythm until the music is abruptly interrupted by the lack of battery in the MP3 player. Global Panorama, Netflix (2020).

As a result, Ulises' dance only ends when his MP3 player's battery runs out, leaving him to contemplate the sounds of a strange city that he can no longer call home. Metaphorically, even before it was cut, the song conveyed his sense of alienation: "I want to tell you today/That I no longer love you/That I no longer miss you" (9:14)[\[7\]](#).

Certainly, talking about the relationship between music and cinema in the film *I'm No Longer Here* (2019), by Fernando Frías de la Parra, led me to think about cumbia as a musical genre and its influence both on the music scene in Monterrey and on the cinematic analysis of each scene. Cumbia has been forged in between legitimacy, relevance, and national and transnational identity. With its varied rhythms and nostalgic lyrics, it also became an emblem of the Mexican migrant experience. In the film, cumbia is heard as the main soundtrack only through technological devices such as Ulises' MP3 player and the radio. However, despite being limited to its medium, it manages to wreak havoc on the protagonist and become the driving force of his memories.

In this blog, I used the word *co-irrigate* to define how music permeates the screen, making it flourish by reinforcing its fictional worlds. I also argued that it *narrativizes* and *mythologises* the chain of affections that are produced in us as viewers. In this way, I firmly believe that music becomes a means of resistance in which Ulises and Los Terkos, ***in the words of Guillermo Del Toro in a Netflix interview with Alfonso Cuarón (2020)***, "understand that they are oppressed by many things, but for the moment they are dancing, they are alive. *That's the existence of making a film in Mexico. Things are against us, but for the moment we dance*" (14:30 with *emphasis*).



Directors Guillermo del Toro and Alfonso Cuarón discuss the work of new Mexican filmmaker Fernando Frías de la Parra and his first feature film, *I'm No Longer Here*. The film is available on Netflix with English subtitles. Netflix (2020)

The cumbia music embodied in the Kolombia contraculture as the main soundtrack is just one way of redirecting studies of music and film towards disruptive cinematic proposals with great social potential that make visible the power of fiction in reality. Perhaps, beyond showing the ***pornomisery*** [\[8\]](#) so familiar in Latin American productions, the film constitutes an ode to how cumbia has been appropriated in Monterrey. An ode to life, to memory, to eternal exile and the popular songs of historically marginalised classes.

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Cumbias Rebajadas

Playlist by La Cumbia Llegó Para Quedarse



To get a more detailed insight into *cumbia rebajada*, I recommend that the reader listen to this playlist, which includes some of the songs that appear in the film.



Scene 9 and 10. Appealing to nostalgia and finitude, we see the last moments of the Terkos gang, before Ulises leaves and everything changes, as a distant dream. Global Panorama, Netflix (2020).

Footnotes

[1] According to Michel Chion (2021), *diegetic music* belongs to the action shown on the screen, while *non-diegetic music* comes from an imaginary source not present in the action.

[2] In the introduction to their book *Cumbia! Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Music Genre* (2013), Héctor D. Fernández-L'Hoeste and Pablo Vila define cumbia as a genre that was born on the coast of Colombia and, as a product of the coexistence of different cultures, mix Amerindian, Spanish and African musical traditions such as percussion. It is also part of the rhythms (ritmos) of the Atlantic coast of Colombia, along with chandé, and bullerengue.

[3] *Norteña music* is a sub-genre of Mexican regional music, characterised by using the accordion and bajo sexto. Unlike Colombian cumbia, it is one of the genres that has most influenced the music scene in Monterrey, Mexico's symbolic capital.

[4] By symbiotic relationship, I refer to the biological sense in which two or more organisms interact in different ways to survive. Specifically, I believe that the relationship between music and film is defined as mutualism, as both media benefit from each other and create fictional worlds out of their active dialogue.

[5] In the original version: “Como extraño mi sabana hermosa metida en la cordillera (...), y en mi pecho ofreció una cumbia de la nostalgia/ como una lagrima que se escapa”

[6] In the original version: "Tú te quedaste llorando/porque conmigo no puedes viajar/pero yo te llevaré en mi corazón/ te llevaré aquí en mi cantar".

[7] In the original version: "Quiero decirte hoy/que ya no te quiero/que ya no te extraño".

[8] *Pornomystery* is understood as a way of exhibiting violence and marginality to generate morbidity in the public, especially around the pain and suffering of the victim.