



Still from Luis Estrada's *El infierno* (2010)

Narco and Cinema: The War Over Public Debate in Mexico

Carlos A. Gutiérrez | Cinema Tropical

Hand in hand with the so-called “Drug War,” another struggle is unfolding in Mexico: the cultural battle of the representation of the narcotraffic in the media and of its discussion in the public arena. The official discourse on the subject, which has

found echo in most mainstream media, has been largely Manichaeian and one-dimensional, attempting to justify the rapid rise in drug-related murders (over 40,000 people have been killed since President Felipe Calderón took office in 2006) as a mere casualty of the declared war against the drug cartels, in effect arguing that the resulting violence is an affair between criminals. Furthermore, the government has condemned popular representations of the narco-culture. For example, it has criticized the musical genre of the *narcocorrido* as a glorifying vehicle for drug traffickers; it also condemned the editors of *Forbes Magazine* for including the Mexican drug kingpin, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, in the annual list of the world multimillionaires (“El Chapo” was ranked at 1140 in 2011 with an estimated fortune of \$1 billion USD). The temptation to use popular culture as a scapegoat for failed government policies has been powerful, and the public conversation has largely fallen into the black-and-white oversimplifications of official discourse.

Recent Mexican cinema, however, has engaged in the representation of drug trafficking and narco culture in more interesting terms, although its insights and analyses have not been incorporated into the national public debate and remain largely marginalized. These films offer diverse and variegated depictions of the narco for the mainstream, art-house, and B-movie realms, drawing from both fiction and non-fiction narratives. Looking at these films, it becomes evident that filmmakers have sought creative ways to represent the drug war and its impact on different political, financial, and social registers. Some of these films try to fill the information vacuum that is the result of the strange mix of sensationalism—images of beheaded bodies plague local newspapers—and superficiality characteristic of the mainstream news outlets’ representation of narco violence, as well as of the dangers faced by independent journalists in the country. Mexico is considered one of the most dangerous places for journalists to work in the world, and there is little financial support for investigative or in-depth journalism. It is in Mexican cinema, therefore, that some of the most interesting conversations about the narco are unfolding.



Consider Gerardo Naranjo’s *Miss Bala* (2011), which is bound to become a Mexican classic in the vein of *Amores Perros* (2000). The film was a favorite with critics when it premiered at Cannes in May 2011, a box-office success in Mexico, and Mexico’s submission as Best Foreign Language Film at the 2012 Academy Awards. The film skillfully imagines the machinations that unfold behind the scenes of real-life media reports on the capture of drug traffickers through the lens of a young woman, Laura (Stephanie Sigman), who dreams of

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participating in the Miss Baja beauty pageant, in part to leave a life of poverty. Laura ends up being forcefully recruited to serve as a mule for a drug cartel in exchange for them helping her win the beauty contest. Naranjo here achieves a complex representation of how drug trafficking permeates everyday life in specific parts of the country.



Meanwhile, two recent documentary films work to analyze the drug violence by deliberately avoiding the representation of graphic violence: Natalia Almada's *El Velador* (2011) and the US/French production *El Sicario: Room 164* (2010) by Gianfranco Rossi. Almada's documentary is a highly stylized film with almost no dialogue and long sequences that follow a night watchman who works at a narco cemetery in Culiacán, Sinaloa, that houses enormous and extravagant mausoleums; it offers an alternative portrait of violence and its aftermath in lives of everyday people. *El Sicario, Room 164*, on the other hand, offers a potent glimpse into the gruesome life of a cartel hit man; the film is an extended interview of a former *sicario*—also unit commander of the Mexican police with FBI training—who describes in vivid detail the methods of the cartels, their relation to the police and states, and the techniques he used to torture and assassinate people.



In the spring of 2011, in alignment with current federal policies, a group composed of several of the largest and most influential media conglomerates in Mexico signed a pact in which they publicly committed to follow a series of guidelines on how to cover the government's war on the drug cartels and the violence of organized crime. The ten point "Acuerdo para la cobertura informativa de la violencia" (Agreement for News Coverage of Violence) pledged, among other things, not to glorify drug traffickers or publish cartel propaganda. The pact generated abundant yet divisive debate as to whether this agreement set effective professional standards or whether it was merely an instance of self-censorship on the part of the media. The signing of the pact made evident that these media organizations are willing to follow the government's condemnation of the so-called veneration of narco culture without a larger discussion of the social, economic, political, and cultural issues surrounding the phenomenon. The risk here is that any representation or coverage of drug-related violence that doesn't fit the state's agenda runs the risk of being denounced as a "glorification" of the criminals, therefore narrowing the public discourse on the subject.



The very same day the agreement was signed, the Mexican Academy of Film Arts and Sciences announced the nominations for the 53rd edition of the Ariel Awards, the country’s national film prize. Luis Estrada’s *El infierno* (*Hell*, 2010) led with 14 nominations, and eventually won nine awards, including Best Film, Best Director, and Best Actor. Described as an “epic black comedy,” the film offers a satirical portrait of drug cartels, centered on an undocumented worker who is deported back to Mexico where he—like “Miss Bala” in Naranjo’s film—finds few viable options to earn a living. He pursues the only “profitable” industry in town, the narco, and ends up participating in unbridled violence and corruption.

Similarly, Beto Gómez’s *Salvando al soldado Pérez* (*Saving Private Pérez*, 2011) was released the weekend after the signing of the Agreement and became the number one film in the country’s box office. Like *El Infierno*, this film offers a dark parody of the same “glorified” images of drug bosses otherwise proffered or condemned in the mainstream media. Subtitled “You can lose your life, but not your style,” the film follows a posse of Mexican narcos on a misguided mission to Iraq in search of the brother of lead drug lord’s brother, Private Pérez, who has been captured by the Iraqis while serving in the US army. Crossing narco-glamour and cowboy culture, the film offers insight into the glorification of male vigilantes—cowboys, drug lords, and perhaps soldiers—in popular culture.



It is important to underline that the fascination with the narco in Mexican cinema is in no way new. Hand in hand with the long and rich tradition of *narcocorridos*, since the late '70s the country has witnessed a flourishing Narco Cinema, or “videohome,” as it is known in Mexico, which is a hugely popular B-movie industry mostly composed of low-budget action films about drug traffickers, cops, and prostitutes. *Camelia, la texana* (1977), *La banda del carro rojo* (*The Red Car Gang*, 1978), and *Lola, la trailera* (1985) are some of the best known titles of this popular subgenre that arguably is the most successful segment of the Mexican film industry. The movies are readily available locally in Mexico, as well as in any Mexican grocery store in the US and in national outlets such as Walmart. Yet, despite its enormous popularity and cultural penetration, these films are rarely discussed or debated in mainstream media.

As the rich variety of cinematic responses to and incorporations of the narco suggest, there is a pressing need to incorporate cinema to the public debate on the drug war in Mexico. Unlike the official government discourse and mainstream media representations, these films bring complex insight into the narco as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon. Yet, we also need to create more textual analyses of Mexican cinema, as this body of work will be necessary to discuss the nuances and complexities the films elaborate, for better and for worse.

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Festival, among others. He has served as both expert nominator and panelist for the Rockefeller Fellowship Program for Mexican Film & Media Arts and for The Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative, as well as a screening panelist for the Oscars' Academy Awards for film students. He holds an M.A. in Cinema Studies from New York University and a B.A. in Communications from Universidad Iberoamericana (Mexico City).

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