

# EL NORTE:

THE U.S.-MEXICAN BORDER  
IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

by  
David R. Maciel




PN  
1993.5  
M4  
M33  
1990  
RBR


alain c



Front cover: Movie poster from *El Norte* (Sinecom International Films).  
Back cover: Movie poster from *Murieron a Mitad del Río* (Alianza Cinematográfica Mexicana).



**El Norte**  
**The U.S.-Mexican Border**  
**in Contemporary Cinema**



**BORDER STUDY SERIES**

**Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias**

**General Editor**

**Paul Ganster**

**3**

**EL NORTE**

**El Norte:  
The U.S.-Mexican Border  
in Contemporary Cinema**

by  
David R. Maciel

Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias  
San Diego State University  
San Diego, California 92182-0435

1990

Copyright © 1990 by David R. Maciel  
Published by  
Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias  
San Diego State University  
San Diego, California 92182-0435

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED  
ISBN 0-925613-03-7

## Dedication

To Martin Ridge and Carlos Monsiváis, dear friends and maestros of many years.





# CONTENTS

## Illustrations / ix

Film Stills and Posters / ix

Tables / x

## Acknowledgements / xi

### I. Introduction / 1

### II. La Frontera: Mexican Contemporary Border Cinema / 7

A. The Politics of Culture / 7

B. Pochos and Other Extremes: Chicanos in Mexican Films / 9

*Chicano* / 11

*De Sangre Chicana* / 14

*Soy Chicano y Mexicano* / 16

*Somos del Otro Laredo* / 17

*Hermanos del Viento* / 17

*El Chicano Justiciero* / 20

*Raíces de Sangre* / 22

C. Mexican Cinema and the Sexenio System / 24

The Immigration Issue and Mexican Cinema / 25

Film Policies of the López Portillo Regime / 26

Cinema under President De la Madrid / 27

Contemporary Mexican Film Producers / 29

D. Across the Rio Grande Lies Paradise / 30

*Mojados* / 30

*Deportados* / 34

*Mojado Power* / 36

*La Ilegal* / 37

*Las Braceras* / 37

*La Jaula de Oro* / 38

*Murieron a Mitad del Río* / 41

*Tiempo de Lobos* / 41

*Santo en la Frontera del Terror* / 42

The Content of Mexican Immigration Films / 42

E. Reefer Madness and la Mafia de la Frontera / 45
<i>Lola la Trailera</i> / 47
<i>Siete en la Mira</i> / 47
F. Mexican Government Censorship and Border Films / 52
III. The Border According to Hollywood / 55
A. The Cavalry ( <i>La Migra</i> ) Rides Again / 55
<i>Borderline</i> / 55
<i>The Border</i> / 58
B. Dirty Harry at the Border: <i>Extreme Prejudice</i> / 61
C. The Three Caballeros, Pancho, and the Latin Señoritas / 63
<i>Losing It</i> / 63
<i>Viva Max</i> / 65
<i>The Three Amigos</i> / 67
D. Exemplary Border Comedy: <i>Born in East L.A.</i> / 68
IV. Cinema from a Border Perspective / 71
A. <i>Alambrista</i> / 71
B. <i>El Norte</i> / 73
C. <i>The Ballad of Gregorio Cortés</i> / 76
D. <i>Break of Dawn</i> / 79
V. Conclusion / 83
Notes / 85
Bibliography / 91

## Illustrations\*

### Film Stills and Posters

Reies López Tijerina, portrayed by actor Manuel Cantú, leading his men in a citizen's arrest. Loosely based on the famous Tierra Amarilla raid. From the 1974 film *Chicano*. / 13

Movie poster from *Hermanos del Viento*. / 19

Carlos Rivera (Richard Yñiguez) and *maquiladora* workers on strike. From the 1976 film *Raíces de Sangre*. / 21

Juan García (Jorge Rivero) and other undocumented workers in the agricultural fields of Texas. From the 1977 film *Wetbacks/Mojados*. / 33

Rafael (Julio Aldama) captured by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. From the 1978 film *Deportados*. / 35

Two corrupt and evil U.S. Border Patrol agents physically abusing a Mexican *indocumentada* in *Las Braceras*. / 39

Movie poster of *Murieron a Mitad del Río*. / 40

*Campesinos* discussing bitterly the loss of their farms and fields because of the lack of support by federal authorities. From the 1977 film *Tiempo de Lobos*. / 43

Movie poster from *Santo en la Frontera del Terror*. / 44

Movie poster from *Siete en la Mira*. / 48

Movie poster from *Lola la Trailera*. / 49

Charles Bronson and other U.S. Border Patrol agents breaking up a ring of *indocumentado* smugglers. From the film *Borderline*. / 57

Jack Nicholson fighting both Mexican immigration and border corruption in *The Border*. / 59

Main characters Nick Nolte, María Conchita Alonso, and Powers Booth in conflict. From the 1987 film *Extreme Prejudice*. / 62

Tom Cruise and other North American youths in a bar in Tijuana. From the film *Loosing it*. / 64

Peter Ustinov as a Mexican general who attempts to recapture the Alamo in *Viva Max*. / 66

Rudy Robles, portrayed by Cheech Marín, as a repatriated Chicano in Tijuana in the film *Born in East L.A.* / 69

Rosa (Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez) and Enrique (David Villalpando) briefly enjoying their life as *indocumentados* in Los Angeles in the film *El Norte*. / 75

Gregorio Cortés (Edward James Olmos) and his wife (Victoria Plata) as he is about to be sent to prison in *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortés*. / 77

*\*All illustrations, posters and stills, are from the collection of David R. Maciel.*

## Tables

Table 1. Mexican Films about Chicanos. / 11

Table 2. Mexican Films about Immigration. / 31

Table 3. Mexican Films about Drug Trafficking and Crime. / 46

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those members of the film community in Mexico and the United States who graciously shared their ideas and experiences with me. Their perspectives and insights were invaluable to me in the completion of this essay. I would also like to thank my colleagues Juan Gómez Quiñones, Martin Ridge, Roger Cunniff, and Paul Ganster for their careful reading of this essay and the suggestions that they provided. Lastly, I would like to thank Heather Bennett and Frances Rico for their help during the final production of this essay.

David R. Maciel



## I. Introduction

The United States-Mexican border in the contemporary period has become an area of critical importance and priority for both countries. Together, the border states constitute one of the most complex, dynamic, and vital regions of the world.<sup>1</sup> The Mexican-U.S. border, *la frontera* as it is known in Mexico, represents the major zone of convergence, conflict, dependence, and interdependence of the national economies, state authorities, nationalities, and cultural traits of the two countries.<sup>2</sup>

As an aftermath of the changes brought about because of World War II, the neighboring border states were transformed into areas of national prominence.<sup>3</sup> The sunbelt migration and its counterpart on the Mexican side has made the border zone grow demographically by record numbers. Economic growth and expansion, newly created employment opportunities, and internal and international migration have insured the continued key role of the border area.<sup>4</sup> As a result, certain contemporary border issues and conflicts such as contraband, migration, ecology, health, labor, and commerce have become more complex and problematic in the broader framework of U.S.-Mexican relations.<sup>5</sup>

The U.S.-Mexican border has been an area of prolonged historical conflict, constant population migration, an evolving unique culture and society, ethnic interactions, and the growth of tourism as an important aspect of the border economy—a zone conducive to a frontier setting. It is this ambience which has led to popular myths, perceptions, and stereotypes of *la frontera*.

Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing throughout the 20th century, writers and media production specialists have portrayed the U.S.-Mexican border as a lawless, rugged, individualistic, and perilous area populated by men and women of action, criminals and crime fighters, settlers, and others who sought a last frontier.<sup>6</sup> The treatment of the border by the cinema of both countries has been particularly influential. Since early in their developmental histories, numerous cinematic productions have focused upon the U.S.-Mexican border either as the setting of the story or as the basic theme of the film.<sup>7</sup> While other cycles or subject matters in North American or Mexican cinema have come and gone, the depiction of *la frontera* in films has been continuous over time. There is no greater cultural manifestation of the general image and widely held perceptions of the U.S.-Mexican border than the cinema. The impact of the cinema on society is widely recognized to be significant.<sup>8</sup> Today, with the advent of television and video cassettes, movies receive even wider distribution and viewing than ever before.

Cinema is much more than art or entertainment. In the contemporary world, cinema has, in fact, acquired a most important social and cultural, and even political, function through its popularity. Films have become larger than life. They are important manifestations of popular culture and mass entertainment. They are attended by large segments of today's society.<sup>9</sup> Generally, they are one of the most inexpensive forms of entertainment. In Mexico, admission prices are regulated by the government which has a policy of low prices. Films have a broad appeal to many age groups. Since, for the most part, they provide a highly entertaining means for escapism, many people flock to the theaters to get away from their everyday problems. Audien-



ces clamor to be entertained, distracted, absorbed, stimulated, or diverted. Yet films are more than just amusement, for movies act as a rich source of informal education and ideas.<sup>10</sup> As such, their content is never free of value judgments or ideological or political biases.<sup>11</sup> Its messages, themes, images, and ideologies have an important societal impact.<sup>12</sup> As one recent critic observed:

Whether we like it or not, it is the movies that mold more than any other single force the opinions, the taste, the language, the dress, the behavior, and even the physical appearance of a public comprising 60 percent of the population of the earth. If all the serious lyrical poets, composers, painters and sculptors were forced by law to stop their activities, a rather small fraction of the general public would become aware of the fact and a still smaller fraction would seriously regret it. If the same thing were to happen with the movies, the social consequences would be catastrophic.<sup>13</sup>

The cinema of the U.S.-Mexican border is unique as compared to other national, thematic, or regional cinemas, and it offers a rich area for study and analysis. Border cinema encompasses parallels and contrasts, common expressive modes, and clear differences between three distinct perspectives: North American commercial cinema, independent cinema, and Mexican commercial cinema. Altogether since the 1970s, over a hundred exhibited films have dealt with the U.S.-Mexican border.

The multitude of North American and Mexican border films share certain characteristics. These can best be summarized in the following points:

(1) Both visions of the border, either that of the North American/Hollywood or of the Mexican commercial

productions, have been very similar. Both provide equally stereotypical views of the border region, and are generally devoid of social reality. The portrayal of the border is usually negative and superficial in nature.

(2) These perceptions of the border in commercial productions reflect a chauvinistic, egocentric view of the border, from either a Hollywood or Mexico City perspective.

(3) Related to the previous characteristic, film makers for the most part have not incorporated a border perspective, either through better researched screenplays or by seeking out informed consultants.

(4) Most of the movies dealing with border themes are the "B" type, that is, of secondary billing or *cine negro*.

(5) With very few exceptions, the border films produced and exhibited have been commercial mainstream cinema financed and distributed by the major studios in the United States and Mexico. Generally, the main purpose of these films has been to earn profitable receipts at the box office, not necessarily to provide artistic quality or to stress realism or complex issues.

(6) Independent cinema, that is, films produced outside the confines of the major studios, tends to be more oriented toward aesthetic value or social issues, but for the most part has not addressed significant border issues. This situation recently has changed in the United States with the flowering of Chicano cinema. However, Mexican independent cinema, which has produced a number of outstanding films, has yet to contribute important feature films dealing with the U.S.-Mexican border.

(7) Certain themes in border films have remained static since their initial appearance. These themes are those of westerns, crime, immigration, comedies, and, to a much lesser degree, of historical subjects.

(8) There is a distinct evolution in the production of border cinema which follows certain factors in both countries. These factors include political, economic, artistic, and business considerations.

(9) The boom of border films in terms of quantity and large scale productions has been particularly important from the mid-1970s to the present.

(10) Mexico has produced the most movies, with over a hundred commercial films dealing with border issues. Hollywood, although not competing in numbers with Mexico, has produced big-budget films on the border with such major stars as Jack Nicholson, Charles Bronson, Nick Nolte, Tom Cruise, Shelley Long, Steve Martin, Chevy Chase, and María Conchita Alonso.

(11) Not only are the plots of border films repetitive, but equally revealing is the absence of screenplays which treat such contemporary critical border issues as labor, women, border society, and regional politics.

(12) The cycle of U.S. border cinema seems to have run its course in the 1980s, while for Mexican cinema the U.S.-Mexican border continues to be a principal theme.

This study focuses on these recent film productions. Three distinct cinematic perspectives are discussed in detail: commercial North American films, commercial Mexican

movies, and independent U.S. productions. Research was conducted through review of primary and secondary materials, a content analysis of films, and interviews with prominent members of the film-making community in the United States and Mexico. In many ways, this work is a first step. While a few articles have appeared which trace individual aspects of U.S.-Mexican border films, to date this essay is the first comparative analysis of both U.S. and Mexican movie productions that deal with *El Norte* the border.

The selection of movies discussed here was made by taking into account the representativeness, importance, and overall popularity of each film. Many more film productions were received for this study than appear in the text. More discussion is devoted to Mexican commercial border productions than to U.S. commercial films because of their greater number and diversity. As well, Mexican films receive more attention here since Mexican cinema is so little known and studied in the United States. The critical evaluation of each film centers on the structure, ideology, characterization, artistic craft, and depiction (or lack thereof) of social reality.

## II. La Frontera: Mexican Contemporary Border Cinema

Since the early 1970s, Mexican commercial cinema dealing with the U.S.-Mexican border has followed three distinct thematic and chronological cycles:

- 1) the Chicano border experience,
- 2) Mexican immigration to the United States, and
- 3) crime on the border.

### A. The Politics of Culture

Initially, in the period 1970-1978, Mexican contemporary border films focused on the Chicano community. This trend of Mexican border cinema was produced by a two-fold unique circumstance: the policies of the Luis Echeverría Alvarez administration and the rediscovery of "el México de afuera" (the Chicano community) by various Mexican sectors. President Echeverría, upon taking power in 1970, faced a formidable task: to restore confidence in the state and bring together the fragmented political and social sectors, and to integrate the intellectual opposition to the state by lifting censorship and repression. To appear genuine, Echeverría did in fact lessen restraints on the media, free certain political prisoners, campaign for Third World unity, and foster nationalism through political rhetoric and the arts.<sup>14</sup>

The cinema was to be central in Luis Echeverría's internal nationalistic policy. In no other contemporary regime did

the movie industry receive the interest and financial support that it did during the years of his presidency (1970-1976). Four essential factors dictated this attitude: (1) The movie industry had reached a grave economic crisis that was counterproductive to both the state and the private sector. If film production was going to survive as a national industry and art in Mexico, it was imperative to resolve the economic situation.<sup>15</sup> (2) Central to Echeverría's "apertura democrática" was to incorporate those intellectuals and artists who had been a powerful opposition group against the government so as to now work within the existing system. (3) Movies could be used to promote cultural nationalism, to reflect critical issues, and to give an overall impression of a new direction in the Mexican state. (4) President Echeverría's brother, Rodolfo Echeverría, was a professional actor and had been an actors' guild director for many years.

The restructuring of the film industry began with the naming of Rodolfo Echeverría as head of the Banco Cinematográfico. He was to use all his experience and abilities to revitalize the movie industry and effectively move it in the direction of "apertura democrática." Soon thereafter, as was to be expected, the state began to exert more influence and more directly participate in all aspects of the industry. Three official production companies with extensive financial resources were established: Corporación Nacional de Cinematografía (CONACINE), Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica de Trabajadores y Estado I (CONACITE UNO), and Corporación Nacional Cinematográfica de Trabajadores y Estado II (CONACITE DOS).<sup>16</sup> In essence, all three companies functioned as producers and co-producers of films. Following the creation of the three production companies, other major innovations took place.

Enormous economic resources were made available for the renovation of the studios, new equipment was purchased, the construction of additional laboratories was completed, the advertising and promotion of films was improved both internally and externally, and increases in the salaries of the actors' union workers were negotiated.<sup>17</sup>

Another significant change for the better was in the overall distribution and screening of Mexican-made movies. During the decades of the 1950s and 1960s when audiences had turned away from Mexican cinema to U.S. and foreign films, the showing of Mexican movies had been restricted to the "cines de segunda categoría." This policy dramatically changed during Echeverría's years since "cines de primera" were opened to the screening of national films.<sup>18</sup> Other important innovations took place during the Echeverría regime. Film directors were encouraged to portray social and political themes. Not only established directors were given new opportunities, but lesser-known, younger directors also shared in this policy.<sup>19</sup>

The upgrading of films, the diverse and critical subject matter, and the promotional campaign for Mexican movies resulted in a return of audiences to the Mexican cinema. With this new development and continued government backing, producers and directors turn their attention to international themes of particular interest to Mexico.<sup>20</sup>

## **B. Pochos and Other Extremes: Border Chicanos in Mexican Films**

President Luis Echeverría's Latin American agenda, clearly evident during his presidency from 1970-1976, included linkages with Chicano organizations and leadership.

During several of President Echeverría's trips to the United States, individual meetings were set up with Chicano leaders.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Chicanos began to have access to diverse, high-level government circles in Mexico.<sup>22</sup> For the first time in their history, Chicanos received wide attention from the Mexican press and the media.<sup>23</sup> Important Mexican publishers translated into Spanish books on Chicanos and released them in inexpensive paperback editions. In addition, Chicano authors were encouraged by leading Mexican journals to submit articles and reviews for publication.<sup>24</sup>

Not all of this recent interest in the Chicano community stemmed from governmental or intellectual circles. Continued undocumented immigration to the United States brought attention to the already existing large Mexican-origin community in the United States. Press coverage focused on current and historical situations of the Chicano community. The Chicano movement and its early leaders—César Chávez, Reies López Tijerina, and José Ángel Gutiérrez—received exceptional press coverage.<sup>25</sup> Along with the discovery of the Chicano community, the media and commercial interests began to perceive the potential of a market in the United States for Mexican products and entertainment. The Mexican cinema lost no time in bringing to the screen the theme of the Chicano experience in an attempt to combine the nationalist ideology of the Echeverría regime with the commercial potential of such movies in Mexico and, more importantly, for the market in the United States.<sup>26</sup> Before the demise of this trend, over thirty full-length commercial films that deal specifically with the theme of the border-Chicano experience were produced and exhibited in Mexico, the United States, and



elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> Various Mexican film titles about Chicanos are listed in Table 1.

---

Table 1

Mexican Films about Chicanos

Film Title	(Title in English)
<i>Chicano</i>	
<i>Contacto Chicano</i>	(The Chicano Connection)
<i>Johnny Chicano</i>	
<i>De Sangre Chicana</i>	(Chicano Roots)
<i>Soy Chicano y Mexicano</i>	(I'm Chicano and Mexican)
<i>El Chicano Justiciero</i>	(The Chicano Avenger)
<i>El Karateca Chicano</i>	(The Chicano Karate Kid)
<i>Hermanos del Viento</i>	(Brothers of the Wind)
<i>Somos del Otro Laredo</i>	(We Are from the Other Laredo)
<i>Raíces de Sangre</i>	(Roots of Blood)
<i>Los Ilegales en la Frontera Sangrienta</i>	(The Illegals in the Violent Border)

---

A discussion of the most popular Chicano-related movies will illustrate the purpose, ideology, merits, and limitations of these productions. As might be expected, the Chicano movement was the first theme to receive special attention from Mexican film producers and directors. Two films that focused specifically upon the Chicano struggle are *Chicano* and *De Sangre Chicana*.

*Chicano*

*Chicano*, written and directed by Jaime Casillas, attempts to

depict the land reform movement in New Mexico headed by Reies López Tijerina. This production is truly lamentable from all perspectives. Historical incoherence, wooden and immobile characters, unreal scenography, and artificial and static acting distract from the very few positive attributes of the film. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that this picture presents a historical and political problem that is not taken into account by the majority of films produced on the Chicano, that is, the regional variations of the Chicano experience. *Chicano* was the only Mexican production about the land struggle.

The plot centers around Manuel Cantú, who organizes meetings and rallies where he attempts to exhort and unite his companions to fight for their stolen land. At one of these gatherings a *campesino* is brutally beaten by the authorities. Subsequently, Manuel and his followers break through a fence and proceed to settle on land owned by one of the largest land grabbing companies. Thus, the rebellion begins. The police proceed to burn the squatters' tents; three men are killed and Manuel is jailed. He escapes and flees to the desert but is recaptured. The media twists the facts around and accuses the Chicanos of being a motley group of common thugs and drunks. After a dramatic court battle, Manuel offers his own defense and is ultimately acquitted on all charges. The end of the film finds Manuel a free man who continues with his land reform movement. By now the struggle for land rights has gained considerable momentum and support from both inside and outside the community. It is understood that the Chicanos are finally going to regain their lost lands.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, what had the makings of an exciting and dramatic story never materialized. Although Reies López



Reies López Tijerina, portrayed by actor Manuel Cantú, leading his men in a citizen's arrest. Loosely based on the famous Tierra Amarilla raid. From the 1974 film *Chicano* (CONACITE DOS).

Tijerina participated in the project from the outset, his only contribution to the entire film seems to have been that he negotiated for his daughter to play herself in the movie.<sup>29</sup> The land struggle is never made clear, either historically or in the context of the movie. Jaime Fernández's portrayal of Tijerina is totally ineffective. The charisma, boldness, and idealism of Tijerina are nowhere to be seen. Much of the story is cluttered with needless sensationalism and subplots involving Manuel's brother, who is a drug-pusher and a hustler. Tijerina was never fully consulted on the final script or specific details of the story, nor were his suggestions implemented.<sup>30</sup>

### *De Sangre Chicana*

*De Sangre Chicana* dramatizes the life of a Chicano family in a barrio of a southwestern city (San Antonio, Texas). The Martínez family consists of the parents, Refugio and Elena, and two sons and a daughter, Raúl, Juan, and María. The parents own and operate a small Mexican restaurant-hotel-boarding house where they work diligently trying to make a decent living. They are represented as a "typical" Chicano family struggling hard in America. Both sons also represent "classic" Chicanos from a Mexican view. Juan simply "drinks and parties," and is involved with gangs and drugs. Raúl is the Chicano militant, a medical student who abandons his studies and dedicates himself to becoming a professional wrestler in order to raise money for his family and for the Chicano struggle. María changes her name to Mary Martin because she is ashamed of her heritage and traditional upbringing. She only dates Anglo men and totally disassociates herself from her family and Chicano friends. She has a short-lived affair with an Anglo wrestler who is her brother's rival. When she is abandoned by him after becoming pregnant, she comes to grips with her iden-

tity and returns to her family and the barrio. Juan, who has been involved with a criminal street gang, encounters serious problems of his own. He has a series of quarrels with his associates and the end result is the wanton and unnecessary vandalism of the family restaurant by the gang members as a lesson to him. In an attempt to stop the gang and break with them entirely, Juan is seriously wounded and dies at the end of the movie.<sup>31</sup>

It is obvious that the plot has little or no relation to reality even in the most elementary sense. The exaggerated stereotypes of the main characters are highly improbable and the plot has little to do with the most basic social issues affecting the present-day Chicano. The importance of *De Sangre Chicana* is that the subplots developed and the caricatures represented in the story are reflective of past general Mexican attitudes toward Chicanos.<sup>32</sup> The film conveys much more about Mexican stereotypes of Chicanos than about the contemporary Chicano reality.

Until recently, general Mexican views of the Chicano were consistently negative. They characterized all Chicanos as descendants of those Mexican immigrants who were of the popular classes and, as such, were poorly educated, unskilled or semi-skilled, and of meager means. Mexican society, in the post-Revolution years, did not understand the plight of their compatriots who had chosen to settle permanently in the United States. Mexicans were unaware of the economic exploitation and cultural oppression that the Chicano had to endure. In stereotyping Chicanos, Mexicans applied a type of culture of poverty, mixed with sentiments of superiority and condescension, in their interpretation of the Chicano community.<sup>33</sup>

Although these two films are not the only Mexican movies that touch upon the Chicano movement, it is surprising that despite the press coverage that the Chicano social struggle and its leaders received, no other Mexican films focused solely on the Chicano struggle of the late 1960s and 1970s. Mexican cinema almost totally ignored a major social movement that took place largely in the Southwest of the United States and touched its own northern border.

### *Soy Chicano y Mexicano*

Rather than substantially important works, inconsequential comedies with a Chicano twist were abundant during the Echeverría years. *Soy Chicano y Mexicano* is representative of this category. Briefly, *Soy Chicano y Mexicano* deals with the experiences of Efrén Torres as a typical *mojado*. In contrast to the usual economic reasons for an undocumented worker to try to enter the United States, Efrén Torres does so because, above all else, he wants to learn English, hardly a believable motive. He is deported several times and on one occasion he is even accused of rabble-rousing and instigating a serious fight. Finally, he returns to the "old country" where he obtains a good job, primarily due to having learned English in the United States.<sup>34</sup>

*Soy Chicano y Mexicano* is sheer fantasy and shows great naivety and romanticism about the daily existence of "illegals" or Chicanos in this country. Efrén Torres is a contrived and highly glamorized character who bears little or no resemblance to most undocumented workers laboring in the United States or to the Chicanos he encounters. An extremely tragic and complex situation is portrayed through slapstick comic vignettes that in no way illuminates the Mexican-origin community in the United States.

### *Somos del Otro Laredo*

Similar in every way to *Soy Chicano y Mexicano* is *Somos del Otro Laredo* (Chicanos Go Home), starring the comic-musical team "Los Polivoces." The names of the two principal characters, Dinamita Manzano and Speedy Cuenca, set the tone for a totally stereotypical and lifeless film. The plot involves the misadventures of two "Butch Cassidy, Sundance Kid types" who carry on in Arizona after the U.S.-Mexican War. A series of unconnected and uninspired episodes involving the two characters make up the film's entire plot. These subplots have little or no relevance to the 19th-century Chicano experience. Again, the illusion of Chicanos is contrived purely for commercial purposes. The film is neither humorous nor socially relevant.<sup>35</sup>

Most of the other comedies involving Chicanos are similar, both in quality and plot. Not a single worthwhile Chicano-theme film of a humorous nature was produced during the Echeverría years. Unlike the wonderful comedies of the 1940s and 1950s, which creatively focused their humor at social satire or sensitive circumstances, these comedies attempted to evoke their laughs at the expense of Chicanos through ridicule and stereotypes. The characters and plots of these contemporary comedies are representative of and consistent with the previous Mexican perceptions of Chicanos who were seen as buffoons, silly, not very bright, and not to be taken seriously.

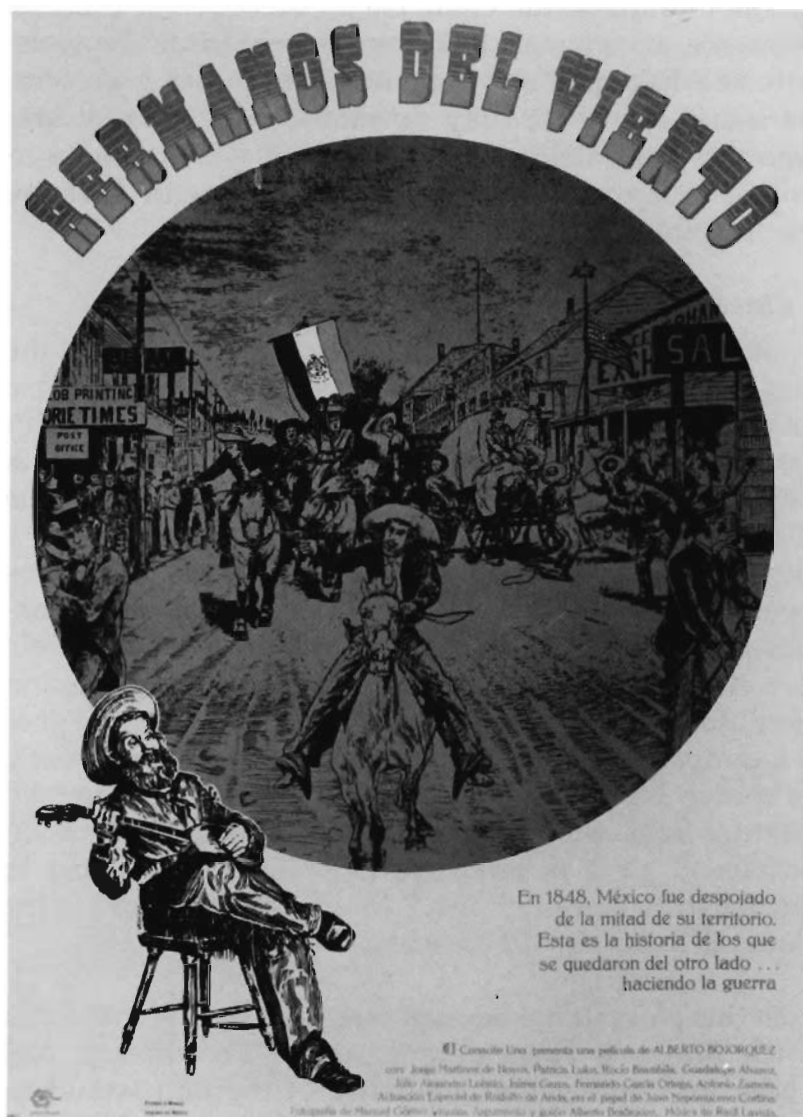
### *Hermanos del Viento*

The western, which has a long tradition in Mexican cinema from the *comedia ranchera* to the imitation of "spaghetti westerns," also incorporated Chicano themes. *Hermanos del Viento*, directed by Alberto Bojórquez, falls into this genre.

Film maker Bojórquez, in an interview, stated that he had always been fascinated by the theme of the western and he wanted to write and direct at least one during his career. Bojórquez also indicated that after several trips to Los Angeles and San Antonio, he became interested in the plight and the history of the Chicano community.<sup>36</sup> After some superficial reading on Chicano history he decided to combine his two interests and film *Hermanos del Viento*.

The plot concerns two brothers' quest for revenge against the Anglo landowner who murdered their father in order to take his land. The action takes place in the years following the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848). All the makings of a traditional western seem to be present including the rapacious land baron, with the corrupt sheriff at his side, fighting to take over all the land in the valley. It is the classic *Shane* plot revived and now augmented with the Anglo colonization and takeover of Texas at the expense of the Chicano. As the opening credits roll, a *corrido* narrates the legend of Juan N. Cortina, the Chicano social revolutionary who fought the Texas Rangers and other oppressors in defense of his community.<sup>37</sup> From the *corrido* narrative at the beginning of the film, one would expect to view the story of the oppression and the resistance of Chicanos in Texas following the United States takeover. However, the rest of the film has little to do directly with Cortina's movement or Chicano-Anglo conflicts in the Texas-Mexican border area. Unrelated dull adventures involving the two brothers make up the entire plot. The film closes with Juan N. Cortina riding at the head of his army to the rescue of the brothers in a dramatic battle. The evil landowner is defeated and killed while Cortina rides off, making declarations of Chicano unity in the struggle against Anglo injustices.<sup>38</sup>





Movie poster from *Hermanos del Viento* (CONACITE UNO).

Despite good intentions of the director, what could have been an important film commentary on the early Chicano experience, a tragic story unknown by most in Mexico, turns out to be a disjointed, slow-moving, and confusing western. The issues are never fully developed and the plot and characters are totally simplistic, all of which results in another disappointing Mexican western with a vague Chicano plot.<sup>39</sup>

### *El Chicano Justiciero*

A contemporary western, more precisely an offshoot of the classic Lone Ranger or masked avenger theme, is *El Chicano Justiciero*, directed by Fernando Oses. The plot unfolds with a group of undocumented workers returning to Mexico. They never arrive at their final destination because the villain of the story, El Bobo, has planted a bomb in the truck carrying them. The bomb explodes and all the passengers appear to be dead. El Bobo cleans out the truck and abandons the bodies. One of the workers, however, is barely alive. A young Chicano finds him, tends to his wounds, and offers him shelter. The survivor swears vengeance and goes on a campaign against the evil *coyotes* and criminals along the border. He becomes a government agent, helping both countries fight crime. After numerous adventures the main contraband gang is captured, El Bobo is killed, and *El Chicano Justiciero* triumphs.<sup>40</sup> In actuality, the name of the villain, El Bobo, should have been the title of the film.

From this plot outline one can ascertain that the main goal of the film was sheer entertainment. The director and producers felt that the popularity of the film would be assured by the combination of the two themes: immigration and an imitation of the masked avenger. But neither was



Carlos Rivera (Richard Yñiguez) and *maquiladora* workers on strike.  
From the 1976 film *Raíces de Sangre* (CONACINE).

done well. It is no wonder the movie was not well received by the public.

### *Raíces de Sangre*

Toward the end of the presidential regime of Luis Echeverría, *Raíces de Sangre* by the noted Chicano director Jesús Salvador Treviño was filmed. This movie is an outstanding Mexican full-length commercial film on the Chicano. It also represents a first in many respects. It was the first time a Chicano director was invited to write and direct a Mexican commercial movie with the full support of both the Mexican government and the film industry. It was also the first time that Chicano and Mexican actors worked side-by-side on such a large-scale film effort.<sup>41</sup> The movie was filmed entirely on the U.S.-Mexican border in the Calexico-Mexicali area. Later it was edited at the Estudios Churubusco in Mexico City and released for public distribution in late 1976.

*Raíces de Sangre* deals with labor and inter-ethnic conflict along the U.S.-Mexican border. As Jesús Treviño said of his film:

*Raíces de Sangre* es una película de ficción en la realidad de los chicanos y los mexicanos que viven en la frontera. Los hechos principales de la película, huelgas obreras en compañías multinacionales, ataques por parte de los policías, la discriminación y la vida hogareña y peligrosa que han ocurrido y que ocurren actualmente. Espero que *Raíces de Sangre* pueda concientizar un poco y ayudar a que las cosas cambien y mejoren para los chicanos y los mexicanos que viven en la zona fronteriza.<sup>42</sup>

[*Raíces de Sangre* is a fiction film about the reality of the Chicanos and Mexicans who live in the border. The principal actions of the film—labor strikes in multinational companies,

attacks by the police, discrimination, and home life and dangerous life—have occurred in the past and continue to occur. I hope that *Raíces de Sangre* might raise the consciousness a bit and help so that things might change and improve for Chicanos and Mexicans who live in the border region.]

The plot focuses on Carlos Rivera, a Chicano lawyer, played by the well-known actor Richard Yñiguez. After completing a law degree at Harvard University, he returns to his hometown to work temporarily at the community center, El Barrio Unido, managed by his *padrino*, or godfather. The main task of El Barrio Unido is to unionize workers on both sides of the border against the powerful and oppressive *maquiladoras* (labor intensive border assembly plants) which keep the workers divided against each other in order to exploit them more easily. The Barrio Unido members are led by Pepe Serna, who was the lawyer's best friend during high school. Their initial attempts to form a strong labor union among both Mexican and Chicano workers are met with harassment and violence. After much soul-searching, confrontations with old friends, and falling in love with a Chicana militant, the lawyer resolves his identity problems and discovers his true values and goals. He realizes his place is at home helping his community and loved ones rather than working at the fancy law office in San Francisco where he had been an associate.<sup>43</sup>

*Raíces de Sangre* ends in a dramatic march of solidarity and what is expected to be the beginning of a major strike by workers against the *maquiladoras*. The movie has generally received positive reviews in Mexico, the United States, and abroad. The theme clearly is the solidarity of the Mexican-origin communities in their struggle against imperialism. The political statement did not, however, detract from the movie's artistic value. Richard Yñiguez said: "This is the one

film Roxana [Yñiguez' wife and the film's leading actress] and I are really proud of."<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, *Raíces de Sangre* was completed at the end of the Echeverría years. As a result of the change of cultural policies in the next administration, it received poor distribution within Mexico. In fact, *Raíces de Sangre* has had a greater impact in the United States than in Mexico.<sup>45</sup>

### C. Mexican Cinema and the Sexenio System

Mexican political tradition is such that there are dramatic changes at the onset of every new six-year presidential term. Since one of the pillars of the Mexican Constitution of 1917 is that of no presidential succession, there is a break in continuity from one term to the next. Thus, upon taking office, each president divorces himself from the previous administration by introducing different programs and agendas including those affecting cultural matters. This is the case even though all the presidential administrations have been from the dominant political order since 1917.<sup>46</sup>

This situation affects the cinema in a number of ways. The Mexican president is extremely powerful and names officials who directly determine cinema policies including production, exhibition, and censorship. Political power in Mexico is so concentrated in the executive office that the prerogatives, personal agenda, and attitudes of the president were virtually law and little was disputed or overturned.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the priorities of the president regarding cinema are directly reflected in the content of Mexican film. This important consideration would be a major reason why Chicano themes in Mexican cinema faded with the close of the Echeverría regime in 1976. Another factor was that given the poor quality of the films made, their limited

exhibition within Mexico, and the lack of response from audiences which resulted in monetary loss for the films within the Mexican distribution circle.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, this was not the case with United States' distribution of the films. Chicano and Latino audiences did view these films, mostly out of a desire to see Spanish-language movies that touched their reality. Most of the films did not receive advanced reviews or commentary before they were shown. Chicanos had little knowledge of the poor quality of the films until they actually saw them.<sup>49</sup> There has been little written on contemporary Mexican cinema in the United States. Mexican cinema has been largely ignored by U.S. critics, media, and scholars in recent times. In addition, Mexican film makers have not done much to publicize their films.

### *The Immigration Issue and Mexican Cinema*

By the late 1970s, the film trend of the Chicano in Mexican cinema would be replaced by a record number of different border films based on the theme of immigration to the United States. Undocumented Mexican immigration to the United States had now become a major issue in U.S.-Mexican relations. Estimates of the undocumented Mexican workers in the United States ran from one million to twelve million. With the downturn of the North American economy in the late 1970s, undocumented workers were signaled out as partially responsible for such economic ills as keeping wages low, taking jobs away from native workers, contributing toward an increase in the crime rate, increasing the number welfare recipients, and so forth.<sup>50</sup> Both countries included the subject in high-level official meetings. Politicians on both sides of the border responded to national concerns on the subject. Commissions were established and policy studies were undertaken by both

countries to study the complexities of immigration, render more critical information, and offer recommendations. Scholars published important findings and provided hypotheses on immigration questions.<sup>51</sup> Printed and visual media devoted considerable attention to Mexican immigration to the United States. Almost all newspapers and magazines in the border states as well as major cities in Mexico and the United States carried extensive coverage on Mexican migrant workers and related issues.<sup>52</sup> Public opinion on immigration in both countries clearly displayed preoccupation and even alarm within certain U.S. circles.<sup>53</sup>

### *Film Policies of the López Portillo Regime*

It was natural that this sudden awareness and national concern be incorporated into commercial movies by film producers and studios. The Mexican film industry was at the forefront in producing movies with the theme of immigration. The new wave of these films in Mexico coincided with the general politics of the administration of President José López Portillo (1976-1982).<sup>54</sup> An important development for the Mexican film industry was that of the newly appointed officials responsible for the supervision, production, and distribution of media and cinema. The President named his sister, Margarita López Portillo, as supreme director not only of the cinema industry, but of radio and television as well. This carried on a practice from the previous administration when President Echeverría named his brother director of cinema. However, under López Portillo the post was upgraded and called the Dirección de Radio, Televisión y Cinematografía.<sup>55</sup>

A persistent critic of the themes of films produced earlier, Margarita López Portillo repeatedly spoke out against political or social issues in the cinema.<sup>56</sup> The official policy



toward the cinema ranged from her vague comments such as "the need for family-oriented films" to expensive and poor co-productions with Spain and the Soviet Union.<sup>57</sup> She attempted to dismantle the state's lending institution for film production, the Banco Cinematográfico. Early in her administration she withdrew all funding for the two "official" production companies, Conacite I and Conacite II, thus eliminating almost all state-sponsored film production.<sup>58</sup>

Shortly before the close of the José López Portillo's regime, the Cineteca Nacional, the major depository of films and film sources in Mexico, caught fire. Before the blaze was extinguished, over five thousand prints and most of the film archives were lost.<sup>59</sup> It was a cruel legacy that the López Portillo's regime left not only to the cinema industry but to Mexico itself. The country would be swept by its most powerful economic, social, and political crisis of the 20th century.

### *Cinema under President De la Madrid*

With the advent of the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1986), the film community, as other sectors, expected major reforms and a more positive direction. Changes did occur and initially there was optimism. The Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía, which repeatedly had been called for, was created. Its main function was to oversee cinema policy including production, exhibition, and distribution.<sup>60</sup> Its first high official named was the respected film director Alberto Isaac. It was believed that because the officials in charge of cinema affairs were members of the film community, the overall situation would improve. It was not to be so. Even the best of intentions could not triumph against the structures, corruption, and vested interests now institutionalized within Mexican cinema.<sup>61</sup>

Although Alberto Isaac attempted to stimulate productions that would elevate the quality and creativity of Mexican cinema, he received poor support from the central political administration.<sup>62</sup> The "state-produced" films did not break new ground and, for the most part, were major disappointments. Not a single "state-produced" film focused on a border theme in this period.

In 1984, Alberto Isaac resigned, only to be replaced by Enrique Soto Izquierdo, a second-rate PRI politician whose only familiarity with Mexican cinema was his short-lived marriage to a little-known actress. His administration plunged the state cinema to an even lower level.<sup>63</sup>

Soto Izquierdo's tenure as head of the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía was characterized by corruption, authoritarianism, a total lack of direction, and favoritism. He used almost all of the state-allocated film production resources for one ill-fated film project, *El Último Túnel*, directed by fellow Chihuahuan Servando González. Soto Izquierdo and his associates were accused of violating copyright laws by providing original film negatives of state-produced cinema to U.S. video companies for mass distribution without proper authorization.<sup>64</sup> It should be noted that most of these videos were not distributed in Mexico. The original film makers did not receive a cent of the profits from the distribution of their films. Enrique Soto Izquierdo and his staff in no way helped or improved the condition of state cinema initiatives but, in fact, aggravated and deepened the crisis. In addition, Azteca Films, the major Mexican state film distributor in the United States, totally collapsed and finally closed operations under his administration because of ineptness and mismanagement.<sup>65</sup>

The deepening of the general crisis in Mexico had serious repercussions. Inflation ran close to a 100 percent yearly increase from 1982 to 1986. Film production costs reflected a parallel increase. With the capricious and personalist policies of Soto Izquierdo, state film production was greatly reduced. Independent films continued to be made financed with great sacrifice and there were important efforts by cooperatives, universities, and other centers. Now, it was the private sector that dominated film production, distribution, and exhibition.

With the worsening of the crisis of the state film industry and the decrease of its overall production, the private sector once again became the principal source of funding in the production of Mexican films. This process was accomplished at the cost of film quality and artistic value. The private sector producers seemed interested solely in the profit aspect of film making with little regard for creativity, aesthetics, or even professional standards. It is difficult to find many artistic, cultural, or social values in these contemporary films.

### *Contemporary Mexican Film Producers*

The recent generation of Mexican producers differs considerably from the producers of the 1940s and 1950s, the golden age of Mexican cinema. Even though, in some cases, they are the offspring of the earlier producers, they do not display the originality or creativity toward film production of the previous generation. Whereas the producers of the golden age directed their productions toward all sectors of society, the Mexican producers of today tend to be complacent, narrow, and content with turning a profit. They show little concern for making movies that reflect national issues in an interesting manner. All aspects of private sector

production have shown a marked decline in film quality, acting, direction, photography, screen-writing, and editing. It is not that talent has declined in the film community, but rather it seems that the private sector does not want to invest the resources needed for more polished and interesting films. Since their profits have been assured by a large attendance of the popular sectors, they want only to continue mass producing films, sticking to a successful formula by making sequels, and not attempting novel departures. It is the exception when a film produced by the private sector departs from these characteristics.<sup>66</sup>

In the period from 1976 to the present, Mexican film makers produced approximately sixty commercial films based entirely upon the theme of immigration to the United States. The most widely viewed immigration films are listed in Table 2.

#### D. Across the Rio Grande Lies Paradise

With very few exceptions, these cinematic productions encompassed common characteristics and followed a much too familiar set formula. This trend was much more widespread in terms of the number of films produced than in previous cycles and has yet to end. For the sake of brevity and because this wave of films is quite repetitive, only a few will be discussed.

##### *Mojados*

Alejandro Galindo of *Espaldas Mojadas* (1954) fame returned to the theme of immigration in his 1977 film *Mojados*. This film, unlike his previous effort, is most representative of this contemporary trend. The plot concerns a group of Mexican migrant workers who, unable to secure employment in

---

**Table 2**
**Mexican Films about Immigration**
**Film Title (Title in English)**


---

- Ilegales y Mojados* (Illegals and Wetbacks)  
*Tumba del Mojado* (The Tomb of the Illegal)  
*Nos Reímos de la Migra* (We Laugh at the Border Patrol)  
*Arizona*  
*Mojados de Corazón* (Illegal by Choice)  
*Tarjeta Verde* (Green Card)  
*Sin Pasaportes* (Without Passports)  
*Pasaporte a la Muerte* (Passport of Death)  
*Mauro el Mojado* (Mauro the Wetback)  
*Contrabando Humano* (Human Contraband)  
*La Jaula de Oro* (The Golden Cage)  
*La Ley Simpson Me Vale Wilson* (The Simpson-Rodino Law Is a Laugh)  
*Los Pobres Ilegales* (The Tragic Illegals)  
*El Remojado* (The Recurring Wetback)  
*Ni de Aquí ni de Allá* (From Neither Here Nor There)  
*Mojados* (Wetbacks)  
*Los Desarraigados* (The Uprooted)  
*Memorias de un Mojado* (Memories of an Illegal)  
*Santo en la Frontera del Terror* (Santo in the Frontier of Terror)  
*Deportados* (The Deported Ones)  
*Murieron a Mitad del Río* (They Died Crossing the River)  
*Las Braceras* (The Women Illegals)  
*Maldita Miseria* (Cruel Poverty)  
*La Illegal* (The Illegal Woman)  
*Mojado Power* (Wetback Power)  
*Tiempo de Lobos* (The Time of the Wolves)  
*Braceras y Mojados* (Women Illegals and Wetbacks)  
*Primero el Dólar* (First the Dollar)  
*Ilegales y Mojados* (Illegals and Wetbacks)  
*Un Camino* (The Road North)  
*El Puente* (The Bridge)

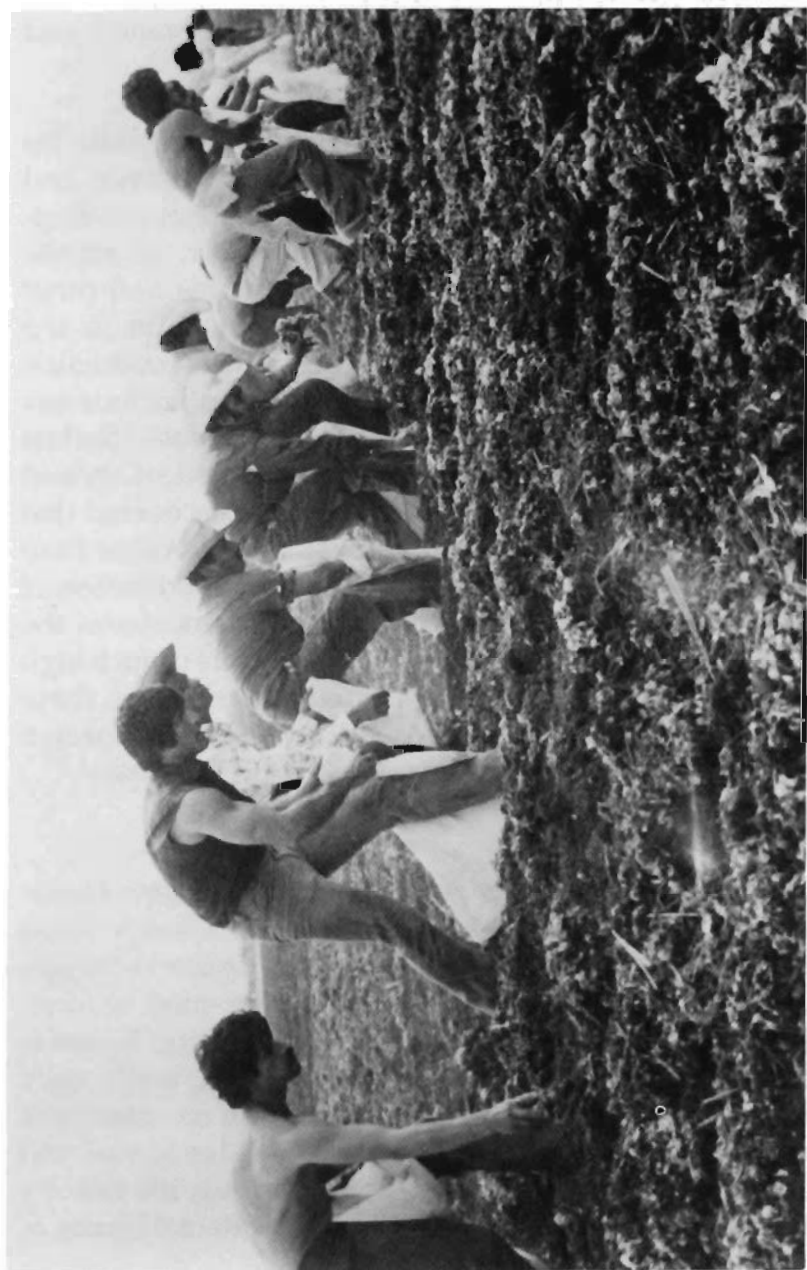
SOURCE: See note 67.

---

Mexico, decide to cross the border into the United States to seek jobs. They plan their crossing at night and are successful in their initial attempt to reach the United States. Feeling secure, the group continues on its march not knowing that the U.S. Border Patrol lies in waiting. The officers open fire without any warning or attempt at apprehension. The entire group falls under the hail of bullets. All are left for dead, although the film's hero, Juan García (portrayed by the well-known actor Jorge Rivera), escapes after being severely wounded. He manages to get to a nearby town where he is befriended by sympathetic Chicanos. Rumors of this incident and other acts of violence have become common occurrences at the border.

A Mexican lawyer enters the picture as a dedicated civil servant attempting to uncover those responsible for the atrocities. He tracks down Juan García and the two form a partnership. As the story unfolds we learn of the Mafia connection with certain officers of the U.S. Border Patrol in the trafficking control, and placement of undocumented workers throughout the southwestern United States. With a good plan and execution, Juan García infiltrates the ring. He gains their confidence by acting in a ruthless and cunning manner. He is given a leadership role by the coyotes within the Mafia and, as such, is in a position to learn firsthand of the activities and the people involved in the ring. An elaborate scheme is implemented and after a furious shootout in the final trap, all the major criminals are either killed or captured.

After receiving congratulations, Juan García reveals the fact that he is a special government agent of Mexico sent on a mission to defeat and apprehend the border Mafia and like any western hero he rides off into the sunset after defeating



Juan García (Jorge Rivero) and other undocumented workers in the agricultural fields of Texas.  
From the 1977 film *Mojados* (Producciones Fílmicas Agrasánchez).

the villains. However, the film ends on a tragic note; both he and his partner are ambushed by Mafia members and killed on their return to Mexico.<sup>68</sup>

As the director admitted, this film in no way resembles his previous efforts. The emphasis here is on violence and action, and there is a total disregard for character development, solid acting, a well-written screenplay, or artistic photography. The producer's formula for this and other such productions is evident: complete the film in the shortest possible shooting schedule to minimize production costs, place one or two major stars in the film, include sex and violence (the more the better), and inundate theaters with such material in the provinces outside Mexico City and in the U.S. Latino movie market. Producers discovered that border films have much more appeal in cities other than Mexico City. Thus, the major distribution and exhibition of such Mexican cinema is directed at the provinces and the U.S. Latino theater chains. Mexico City, in spite of such high population density, is not a primary market for these Mexican productions. North American and other foreign films are the most widely viewed movies in the capital.<sup>69</sup>

### *Deportados*

Another popular production is Arturo Martínez's *Deportados* which traces the hardships suffered by a family when the father Rafael, desperate for work, joins a group of neighbors and friends to become an undocumented worker. Tragedy soon strikes on both sides of the border. Rafael is exploited, deported, and abused repeatedly, while back home his wife Carmela is killed fighting off an attempted rape. His son Rafaelito, left homeless, decides to seek out his father in the United States. Rafaelito finds his father's friends and together they search for him. Rafael learns of





Rafael (Julio Aldama) captured by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. From the 1978 film *Deportados*.

the fate of his wife when he places a call to his village. His only thought is to find his lost son and return to Mexico. On the journey back he is detained by the U.S. Border Patrol. In his grief and desperation, he attempts to flee and is killed by Border Patrol agents while trying to escape. Rafaelito and the two friends return to Mexico to rebuild their lives and start again, this time in their native land.<sup>70</sup> The moral of the story is: "Mexicans—don't cross to the United States illegally because you will only face exploitation and tragedy. Stay in Mexico even if you starve."

### *Mojado Power*

Alfonso Arau, an experienced actor in various comedy roles, produced, wrote, directed, and starred in *Mojado Power*. The light-hearted film attempted to incorporate comedy with a political message. The story centers on an undocumented worker, who after various escapades, constructs a plan to unify *indocumentados* (undocumented persons) and Chicanos. His emblem is a decal advocating "mojado power," that is, the unity of all persons of Mexican origin in the United States. Although the theme and message are valid and important, the story and characters of *Mojado Power* are not. Arau reverses the Hollywood version of films with Chicano or Mexican characters. In the case of Hollywood, the Anglo main character consistently displays his superiority in a paternalistic manner by outwitting the Mexican and is always the leader and role model. In *Mojado Power*, Alfonso Arau's Mexican character assumes the traits of Anglo heroes, thus presenting the same version as Hollywood.<sup>71</sup> The difference is that in his film, it is a Mexican illegal who must show the weak Chicanos the way toward organization and strength. Overall, and in spite of a few good moments, *Mojado Power* is an opportunistic and super-

ficial film. Humor is again attempted at the expense of Chicanos

### *La Ilegal*

Women immigrants, *indocumentadas*, also became central characters in border films. A recent production consistent with this trend is *La Ilegal* starring the popular actors Pedro Armendáriz, Jr., Fernando Allende, and the equally popular television and film star Lucía Méndez. The director is the talented and respected Arturo Ripstein. In spite of such talent, the film is nothing more than a familiar and dull soap opera. The heroine, played by Lucía Méndez, is seduced by Armendáriz's character who abandons her after she becomes pregnant. After having her baby, she decides to follow him to his hometown, Los Angeles. She crosses illegally (therefore the movie title) and finally tracks him down. She has serious setbacks in her encounters with both her ex-lover and his wife. After being framed, she ends up in jail with no money, documents, or friends. Yet when all seems lost, she is helped by a sympathetic Chicano lawyer who emerges as her champion and new romantic interest. Retribution is accomplished, the heroine finds love north of the Río Bravo, and a happy ending concludes the film. In no way is the tragic experience of undocumented workers ever explored by this movie. Absolutely nothing is learned from the film about Mexican undocumented immigration issues. No apparent social or political message exists. The usual copyright statement at the end of the credits which states that all characters in this film are fictitious and that any resemblance to actual persons is purely coincidental, is certainly the case here.<sup>72</sup>

### *Las Braceras*

One of the very worst of recent Mexican immigration

movies is *Las Braceras*, an exploitive, violent, and demeaning film. The story concerns two sisters who immigrate illegally in an attempt to uncover the details of their father's mysterious death. The father in actuality was murdered by two corrupt and evil U.S. Border Patrol agents. The two agents learn of the daughters' presence and systematically eliminate the persons aiding the two women. They trap one of the daughters, and rape and kill her. When the agents finally confront the other daughter she is ready for them. She draws a revolver and shoots them both dead; thus, justice is served, although at a high cost.

As principal stars the film uses the exotic striptease dancer, Lyn May, and the sensual Maritza Olivares for cheap thrills and selling power. The result is one of the most degrading, sexist, and violent contemporary Mexican films ever produced.<sup>73</sup>

### *La Jaula de Oro*

Addressing the impact of the newly enacted immigration reform bill or better known as the Simpson-Rodino law,<sup>74</sup> director Sergio Véjar produced *La Jaula de Oro*. Based on a popular ballad of the same name, the film focuses on two families of *indocumentados* living in Los Angeles. The main characters are played by the ever-popular brothers Mario and Fernando Almada. After a series of tragic circumstances involving their children, one brother, Fernando, decides to file for amnesty and to remain in the United States legally. The other brother cannot accept the humiliating conditions imposed by the Simpson-Rodino law and his treatment as a second-class citizen in the United States and, with his wife and youngest son, he ultimately returns to Mexico.<sup>75</sup>



Two corrupt and evil U.S. Border Patrol agents physically abusing a Mexican *indocumentada* in *Las Braceras* (Cinematográfica Grovas).

David. R. Maciel, *El Norte*

**Carlos Vasilio**  
presenta

**HECTOR SUAREZ**

Una película de  
**JOSE NIETO R.**

**JORGE LUKE** **TONY BRAVO**

**MURIERON A MITAD DEL**  
**RÍO**

...La historia  
de quienes van  
a la búsqueda de  
aventuras, éxito,  
dolares y...  
güeritas.

En Estados Unidos  
para muchos...  
ser mexicano  
no es una  
nacionalidad,  
es un oficio.



DISTRIBUIDA POR:

Con  
ENRIQUE LUCERO  
JORGE MARTINEZ DE HOYOS  
CLAUDIO BROOK  
RODRIGO PUEBLA  
ARTURO ALEGRO  
MAX KERLOWE  
PAOLA MORELLI

Basada  
en la novela  
de  
LUIS SPOTA

Música  
JOEL GOLDSMITH

Adaptación y Dirección  
de  
**JOSE NIETO RAMIREZ**

© MEXICAN CORPORATION S. R. L. MEXICO, D. F. 1967. ALIANZA CINEMATOGRAFICA MEXICANA, S. A. D. F. A. - MEXICO, D. F. 1967. MEXICAN CORPORATION S. R. L. - MEXICO, D. F. 1967.

Movie poster of *Murieron a Mitad del Río*  
(Alianza Cinematográfica Mexicana).

Although the intentions are good, the end result is not. The story is much too predictable and overly simplistic. The characters are superficially developed and seem more like contrasts or stereotypes than believable persons. The complexity of the immigration reform act and its implications for the *indocumentados* is treated carelessly.

### *Murieron a Mitad del Río*

Another recent film with similar intentions and end results is *Murieron a Mitad del Río*. The film, based on the precursory border novel by Luis Spota, attempts to focus on character development more than exploitive action or sensationalism. The story deals with the predicament of three *indocumentados* who cross to Texas to seek employment.<sup>69</sup> Instead of securing decent jobs and monetary rewards, two are killed and the one survivor returns to Mexico a humiliated and broken man. The moral of the story is clear—don't go to the United States, stay in Mexico even under difficult circumstances. The cast, headed by Héctor Suárez, is better than in most other immigration films. But even a better than average script, authentic scenery, a well-intentioned director, and a major production did not prevent this film from suffering the same ills as most other Mexican immigration films. The problem is that the focus is upon the constant exploitation of the three main characters with little else. They seem helpless victims with little control over their circumstances or destiny. The events are so repetitive that the viewer loses interest after the first two reels.

### *Tiempo de Lobos*

An exception to the films previously discussed is the movie *Tiempo de Lobos* written and sensitively directed by Alberto Isaac. The plot focuses upon the return of two brothers, who worked as *indocumentados* in the United States, to their

hometown in the state of Colima. The story is not filled with exploitative sex or violence but with character and story development. The socio-economic conditions of rural and agrarian Mexico, generational conflict, and the distance between those working and living in the United States and the family members who still reside in the traditional province, are the main themes of this film. Another element that differentiates this movie from others is the excellent acting by a cast that includes Ernesto Gómez Cruz, Gonzalo Vega, Ignacio Retes, and Carmen Salinas. This story could be applicable to many communities throughout Mexico.<sup>77</sup>

### *Santo en la Frontera del Terror*

Standing in stark contrast to *Tiempo de Lobos* is *Santo en la Frontera del Terror*, the most improbable and farfetched immigration film to date. The well-known and highly popular wrestler El Santo stars in this incredible story of *indocumentados* being killed by a ruthless doctor for the purpose of selling their organs, particularly eyes, to the highest bidder. After many fights with the doctor's thugs and accomplices, El Santo predictably defeats the villains. The mad doctor is killed in a helicopter crash while attempting to escape and the border is safe once more. The film is recommended only for die-hard fans of El Santo who must see every single one of his movies. Needless to say, *indocumentados* and the immigration experience<sup>78</sup> are only a poor excuse for another adventure of El Santo.

### *The Content of Mexican Immigration Films*

Only the titles, minor plot details, and characters vary in Mexican immigration films. They all have much in common and collectively share the following characteristics: (a) production is done purely for commercial and exploitative





*Campesinos discussing bitterly the loss of their farms and fields because of the lack of support by federal authorities. From the 1977 film *Tiempo de Lobos* (Colima Films).*



Movie Poster from *Santo en la Frontera del Terror*  
 (Producciones Geminis).

purposes, (b) there is an excessive use of violence and sex, (c) the plots and action usually take place within the United States, (d) the main emphasis is on violence and oppression directed at Mexican workers by Anglo-American individuals and institutions, and (e) generally, there is a total disregard for the "push" factors within Mexico that are partially responsible for immigration. Never shown are the structural problems, political questions, or the socio-economic effects of the contemporary Mexican crisis upon society.<sup>79</sup> The reason for this is that the producers do not want to test the censorship policies. Rather, they take a safe approach by directing their stories to the U.S. side. Although not directly financed by state film-producing entities, these immigration films nonetheless receive state support in the distribution and the exhibition both within Mexico and abroad.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the Mexican state must take credit for the form, themes, and content of the genre of these films. Finally, the earning power of these films derives in large measure from the Hispanic market in the United States and, since these films return a good profit for producers, they are encouraged to produce more of the same.<sup>81</sup>

### **E. Reefer Madness and La Mafia de la Frontera**

Traditionally, the U.S.-Mexican border has been a center of illicit activities. The illegal flow of people, contraband, and drugs has reached alarming proportions.<sup>82</sup> Because of scarce economic opportunities in certain border regions, contraband has been the lifeblood of many border communities.<sup>83</sup> The process of contraband has created a network that requires bribery, payoffs, and corruption within various levels of officials and law enforcement officers.<sup>84</sup> In the last two decades, drugs have become the single most important item of contraband. With the demand for drugs

### Table 3

## Mexican Films about Drug Trafficking and Crime

#### Film Title (Title in English)

---

*La Muerte Cruzó el Río Bravo* (Death Crossed the Rio Grande)

*Siete en la Mira* (Seven Under Gunsight)

*Tijuana Caliente* (Hot Tijuana)

*La Cárcel de Laredo* (The Laredo Jail)

*Rosa de la Frontera* (Rose of the Border)

*Camelia la Texana* (Camelia the Texan)

*Mataron a Camelia la Texana* (They Killed Camelia the Texan)

*Camelia la Texana Contra Emilio Varela* (Camelia the Texan against Emilio Varela)

*La Hija del Contrabando* (Contraband Daughter)

*Asalto a Tijuana* (Assault on Tijuana)

*Contrabando del Paso* (Contraband Pass)

*Operación Marihuana* (Operation Marijuana)

*El Aduanal* (The Mexican Border Patrol Agent)

*Ratas de la Frontera* (Border Criminals)

*Río de la Muerte* (River of Death)

*Lola la Trailera* (Lola the Trucker)

*El Secuestro de Lola* (The Kidnapping of Lola)

*La Mafia de la Frontera* (The Mafia of the Border)

*Narcotráfico: Sentencia de Muerte* (Drug Trafficking: Death Sentence)

*Gatilleros del Río Bravo* (Gunfighters of the Rio Grande)

*Frontera Brava* (Rugged Border)

*Contrabando y Traición* (Betrayal and Contraband).

SOURCE: See Note 86.

---

in the United States growing at a disturbing rate, drug processing and smuggling has become a multi-million dollar business.<sup>85</sup>

As a result, Mexican border cinema has turned its attention to this theme. Although crime and detective stories in

Mexican cinema resulted in exceptional productions during the 1940s, the contemporary wave is very different. The titles of this recent crime cycle reflect their character, as can be seen in Table 3.

Two of the most representative and popular films of this cycle are *Lola la Trailera* and *Siete en la Mira*. These two productions broke the contemporary high gross record at the box office.<sup>87</sup> Their popularity was equally evident in Mexico City, the provinces, and the video market in the United States. The two films refined a set formula that would be emulated by numerous films that followed.

### *Lola la Trailera*

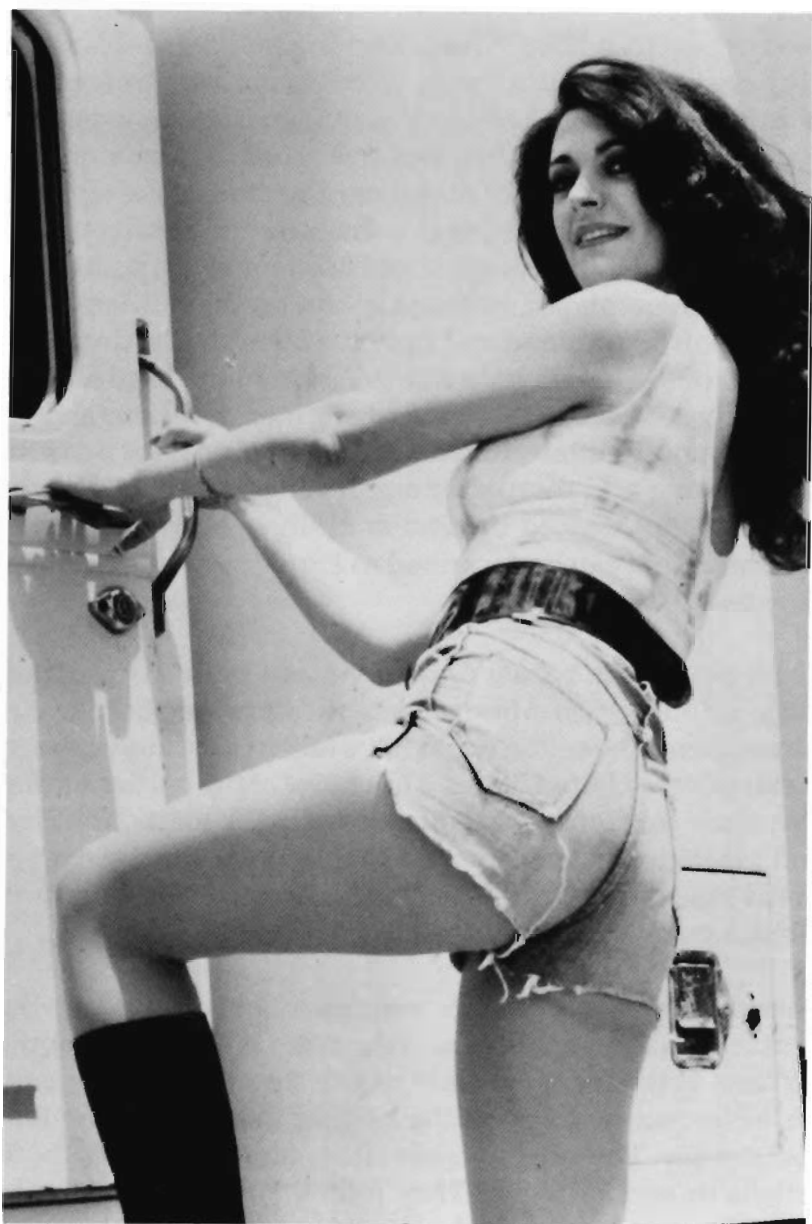
*Lola* deals with drugs, crime, and contraband pitted against a statuesque attractive heroine nicknamed "Lola la Trailera" because of her profession as a trucker. The simplistic plot narrates the struggle of Lola, her compañero, and other honest truckers against a ruthless drug trafficking Mafia. After endless action sequences the heroine and her partner/lover almost singlehandedly defeat the villains. The accent of the film is plenty of action, violence, and sex.<sup>88</sup> The novelty was having a thinly clad Rosa Gloria Chagoyán as a vigilante character on wheels. No doubt, in a macho society, to view a resourceful, aggressive, and attractive woman outwit and outfight the male criminals added to the film's success. The action sequences and the main character somehow surmounted the atrocious level of acting, writing, editing, and directing since *Lola la Trailera* was one of the most popular Mexican movies of all time.<sup>89</sup>

### *Siete en la Mira*

*Siete en la Mira* builds on the set formula of recent Mexican crime films by achieving a level of explicit violence unparal-



Movie poster from *Siete en la Mira* (Miura Pro, S.A.).



Movie still from *Lola la Trailera* (Producciones Fernández).

leled in previous films. The disturbing movie focuses upon a border town in south Texas, which is invaded by a group of sadistic bikers. They carry out numerous aggressions against the seemingly helpless townsfolk. When a citizen retaliates and kills one of the bikers, the others take revenge with violent acts seldom ever witnessed on the screen. The violence is more than graphic and borders on the pathological. Two men, played by the Almada brothers (Mario and Francisco), take a stand and fight the bikers to the death. At the end of the movie only Mario Almada, the local sheriff, is left alive.<sup>90</sup> Given the lack of artistic merits, serious acting, or believable or interesting dialogue, the success of this film is surprising and disappointing. It reflects how audiences have been influenced by similar Hollywood productions. *Siete en la Mira* can be described as *Dirty Harry* or *Rambo a la mexicana*.<sup>91</sup>

The U.S.-Mexican border only serves as a setting of the film. Little in *Siete en la Mira* reflects the complex border circumstances. The action could have taken place anywhere in Mexico or the United States. The choice of the border setting was made for commercial purposes, that is, for distribution and exhibition in the U.S. Spanish-language theater circuit. In the case of *Siete en la Mira*, however, the overall gross in Mexico reached a record high.

These films have much in common. They are not like the excellent *cine negro* of Mexico's golden era (1940s)—crime thrillers of the past that were well-written, well-acted, and well-directed by many of the leading members of the film community. The current crime films, however, are without artistic or social quality. They follow a formula similar to that discussed previously for Mexican immigration or



Chiicano films. It is clear that these films were produced solely for exploitative commercial purposes.

These and most border films are completed in record time; three to five weeks is the average. No time is allowed for additional shooting, nor is much care devoted to the actual filming or the post-production of the film.<sup>92</sup> Although few of the scripts are based on actual facts or interesting stories, the overwhelming majority are pure fiction. The plots display a marked disregard for authenticity or realistic portrayal of true border conditions. The stories, characters, and plots are nearly identical, so much so that the same stars, locals,<sup>93</sup> and even circumstances are repeated time and time again.

The violence in these movies is extremely graphic, constant, and excessive in every way. At times, the criminals who deal in drugs are the Border Patrol and/or Mafia, and are made to look like heroes instead of what they truly are.<sup>94</sup> Many of the highest grossing films of contemporary Mexican cinema have followed this trend. Audiences in Mexico seem to have responded to these types of films because of the attention and sensational nature of media coverage on the drug and crime issue, and also due to the fact that so much of North American cinema exhibited throughout Mexico is similar.<sup>95</sup> Although these and other films with border themes contain graphic violence, gratuitous sex, profanity, and demeaning character types, Mexican censorship policies do not seem to apply.

## F. Mexican Government Censorship and Border Films

Censorship in Mexican cinema has had a long tradition. Formally the "supervision" of films as official policy is a contemporary phenomenon, yet as early as in the 1920s, the post-Revolution governments were quite preoccupied with the content and messages conceived through the printed and visual media. The Dirección General de Cinematografía, a division of the Ministry of Government, is responsible for previewing every film, both national and international prior to exhibition and rendering ratings: "A" for general audiences, "B" for adults and teenagers with parental approval, "C" for adults only, and a stamp of approval for exhibition. Before any film is shown in Mexico, the law stipulates that it must be previewed by a team of supervisors of the Dirección General de Cinematografía and the director's signature is a necessity on the exhibition permit.

Although the criteria for censorship have changed over time, there exist certain constants for a film being censored. There is a general consensus among film makers that three subject areas cannot be filmed in Mexico: films critical of the dominant political party (the PRI), or the President; films that satirize or debunk national myths such as, for example, the Virgin of Guadalupe, President Benito Juárez, and other heroes; and films that are critical of the military. A case in point is the film *La Sombra del Caudillo* based on the celebrated novel of the same name by Martín Luis Guzmán. The film was completed in the 1960s and has yet to be exhibited. It remains frozen because of strong military opposition to the supposed showing of a dark episode of military history during the late 1920s. Concretely, the film

deals with the rise to power of Alvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles. When a group of high ranking army officers rebelled they were captured and executed. This episode appears faithfully represented in *La Sombra del Caudillo*, and although the incident is historical fact, the military has not permitted the retelling of this event through film.

There is also the practice of self-censorship by film makers. They are so concerned that their movies might be censored by the authorities that they are most cautious when dealing with political themes or they avoid them altogether.<sup>96</sup> The end result is that generally only independent cinema which addresses social or contemporary issues in a critical manner.

Graphic sex, violence, or profanity, which have been excessive in recent cinema are permitted. While there is no pornography or equivalent of X-rated films exhibited commercially, the sex in certain films is quite explicit. These trends in the Mexican contemporary cinema, unlike those of previous decades, do not seem to concern the officials of the Dirección General de Cinematografía. Only political, religious,<sup>97</sup> or military issues are of interest to governmental agencies.

The fact that the Ministry of Government (Secretaría de Gobernación) is in charge of film censorship reveals the importance mass media is given by the state. In other countries that have strong state ties to the film industry, the ministry of culture or education supervises film issues. It is not so in Mexico, where films and the movie industry have always been under the authority of the Ministry of Government, which by definition deals with national political concerns, including security and surveillance.<sup>98</sup>



### III. The Border According to Hollywood

North American cinema has also focused on the U.S.-Mexican border as an important theme. Border cinema from the United States can be classified in three principal and separate categories:

- (1) major Hollywood commercial productions,
- (2) independent films, and
- (3) documentaries.

Because of space restrictions only the first two categories will be discussed in this essay.

Contemporary commercial U.S. cinema on the border has focused on three main themes: immigration, crime, and comedy. Even though the stars, plots, and orientation differ, in essence and perspective, all three types share similar characteristics.

#### A. The Cavalry (*La Migra*) Rides Again

##### *Borderline*

*Borderline* was the first major contemporary Hollywood movie on the theme of Mexican immigration. It stars the international action-film actor, Charles Bronson, as the hero. He plays a compassionate and honest cop, chief of a Border Patrol office near the San Diego-Tijuana border, who does his job well even though he does not particularly like what he sees or has to do.

The plot is an up-date of the typical "hero of the West in search of the killer of a colleague and close friend" story. When a truck loaded with undocumented workers is routinely stopped by a veteran Border Patrol officer, instead of surrendering, the head of the smuggling gang shoots the officer and a young Mexican witness in cold blood. The entire story revolves around a cat-and-mouse game between Bronson and the killer (Ed Harris). Before the final scene, the climactic duel of which the outcome is as predictable as in any western, other characters are introduced in caricature form: the smuggling ring (the real villains), the defenseless victims (the undocumented workers), the good guys (the Border Patrol), and the deranged killer (a former Vietnam veteran).

There seems to be little doubt that the intentions of *Borderline* are good; the film shows a genuine sympathy for the exploitation of undocumented workers. Yet the social message is never made clear, nor is the dilemma of Mexican immigration really addressed. The ambiguity is reflected throughout by the dialogue. "How can you bust people for trying to better themselves?" Bronson asks one of his men. Yet at the close of the film, statistics appear to suggest that over one million undocumented Mexican workers were apprehended and deported and more than that number escaped detection and are currently working in the United States.

The characters in the movie are secondary to the hero and the villain. The undocumented workers, the subject matter of the story, are the least developed and least known aspect of the film. They have no names, personal histories, motivations, nor feelings. The reasons for their ordeal or circumstances are never revealed. There are countless stories



Charles Bronson and other U.S. Border Patrol agents breaking up a ring of *indocumentado* smugglers. From the film *Borderline* (Associated Films).

that *Borderline* could have told or developed; unfortunately, the film makers were content to use a contemporary issue to exploit the star status of Charles Bronson, hoping the combination would be a commercial success.<sup>99</sup>

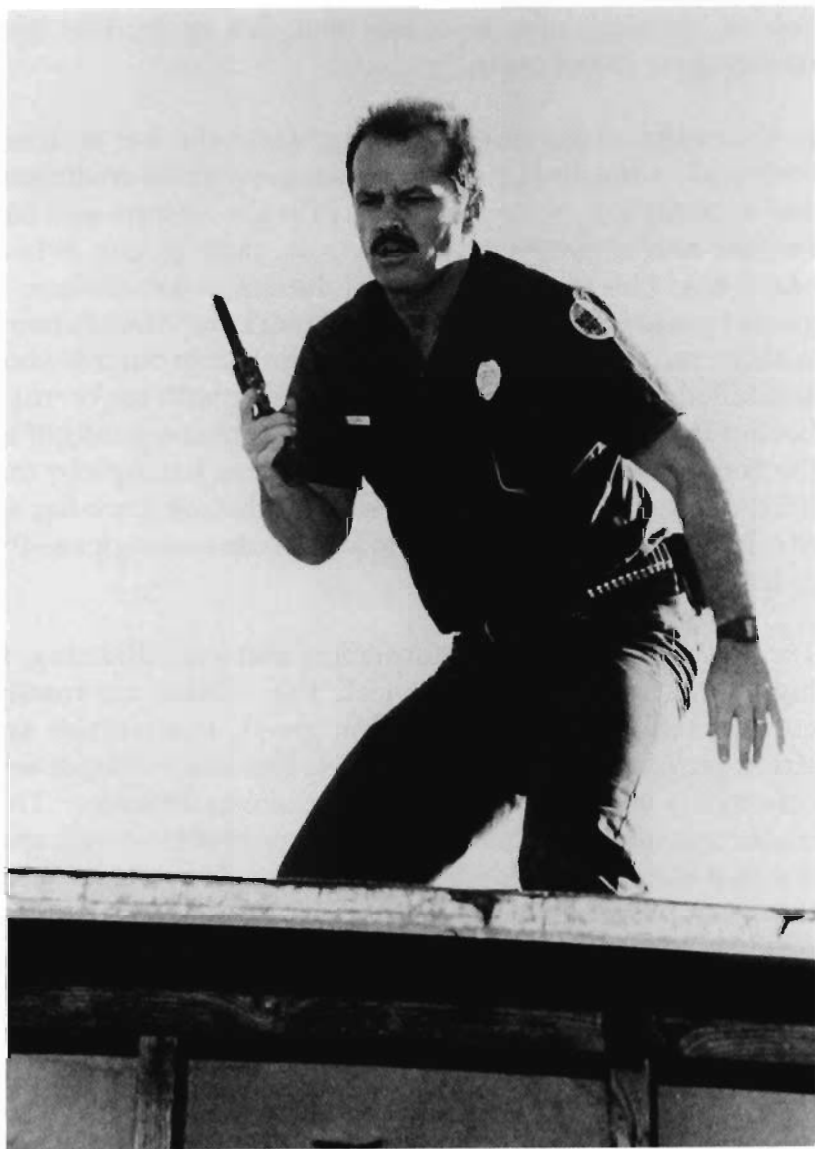
*Borderline* was filmed with the full cooperation of the U.S. Border Patrol. Many agents participated as extras and technical advisors. Its implicit central message is that the Immigration and Naturalization Service needs more resources and stricter immigration legislation to carry out its mission.<sup>100</sup>

### *The Border*

Similar to *Borderline* is *The Border*. Directed by Tony Richardson and starring Jack Nicholson, it is Hollywood's most recent contribution to the topic. As in *Borderline*, *The Border* is nothing more than a vehicle for the acting talent of Jack Nicholson and his characterization of a contemporary, conflictive man at odds with the values and corruption of the system, who has to make a choice between good and evil, accommodation or resistance, and complacency or turmoil.

The plot develops around Nicholson, a Border Patrol agent, who is assigned to El Paso where he joins a former friend, also a Border Patrol officer. After several raids and apprehensions take place, Nicholson learns that many border agents, including his best friend and the chief, are in business with the contractors and *coyotes*, or smugglers of undocumented workers. They are even involved in murder to eliminate competition. Although initially he goes along with the corruption to satisfy his wife's whims, Nicholson rebels against his corrupt colleagues when killing is in-





Jack Nicholson fighting both Mexican immigration and border corruption in *The Border* (Universal RK0).

volved. Symbolically, he states that this is the line (the border) he will not cross.

In the course of the story he meets María and her brother, both undocumented latinos, who face constant ill-treatment and exploitation. Nicholson takes pity upon María and her brother and attempts to aid them in their plight. When María asks him why he helps her, the character answers, "I guess I got to feel good about something I do." María's baby is abducted when she is apprehended. Her brother is shot and killed by the coyotes who are working with the corrupt Border Patrol agents. The predictable climactic gunfight at the border ensues and the equally expected triumph by the hero occurs. The movie ends with Nicholson crossing to Mexico with the rescued baby to join María and supposedly to live in bliss.

*The Border*, despite fine performances and solid directing, is highly routine and stereotypical. The villains are totally corrupt with a single motivation: greed. The women are either pure, kind, innocent, and helpless like María, or sex ornaments interested only in immediate gratification. The undocumented workers in *Borderline* are objects as well, and not real characters. Nowhere in the film do we learn anything about the Mexicans, nor even about María or her brother. Their plight is never addressed. Whatever social message was intended is obscured by the superficiality of the secondary characters and the plot. Although the performances and direction of *The Border* surpass *Borderline*, its faults and overall purpose are similar.<sup>101</sup>

It is evident, though, that the question about and concern over Mexican undocumented immigration and border issues has gained enough public attention in the United States

for Hollywood, and a significant movie corporation like Warner Brothers, to produce a film on the subject and cast one of its superstars in the film. Important also is the fact that the films reviewed have received wide circulation in the United States in movie theaters, through cable television, and as video cassettes. Because of the popularity of the stars, these two films are the most wide-reaching North Hollywood statements on the issue of Mexican immigration to date. Since the release of these two films, Hollywood has not produced other movies on Mexican immigration. Nor does there seem to be any film projects on this theme in progress.

### B. Dirty Harry at the Border: *Extreme Prejudice*

Hollywood continued the tradition of action westerns with the fair-hair Anglo hero against the sleazy, corrupt, and cruel Mexican villains. From the greaser films at the turn of the century to the films of Sam Peckinpah, this formula was repeated over and over.<sup>102</sup> The latest major production that up-dates this version is Walter Hill's *Extreme Prejudice*. The silly and totally senseless plot depicts Nick Nolte as a contemporary Texas Ranger along the south Texas-Mexican border pitted against the local drug baron (Powers Booth), his former best friend. An additional element in the film is a clandestine renegade swat CIA force that is also in pursuit of Booth for personal reasons.

A number of out-of-sequence scenes build up to the climactic shootout at the border. As in the classic *Wild Bunch*, a small force of Anglos is able to eliminate almost the entire Mexican drug smuggling gang headed by the Powers Booth character. This is an example of Hollywood stereotyping at its very worst. All of the Mexican characters, including the



Main characters Nick Nolte, María Conchita Alonso, and Powers Booth in conflict. From the 1987 film *Extreme Prejudice* (Tri-Star).

romantic role played by María Conchita Alonso, are negative and demeaning. The border and Mexican characters are portrayed in a degrading and repulsive manner. There is not one positive Mexican-type protagonist or positive scene of the border ambience in the film. The Mexican-origin characters in *Extreme Prejudice* are reminiscent of the long history of negative gross stereotyping of Mexicans in Hollywood commercial films of previous decades.

### C. The Three Caballeros, Pancho, and the Latin Señoritas

North American border cinema updated a much overdone tradition—comedy—at the expense of Mexican-origin characters. Reminiscent of the television series "The Cisco Kid and Pancho," "Zorro," and "Sergeant García," three tasteless contemporary film comedies are *Losing It*, *Viva Max*, and *The Three Amigos*. All three share a Mexican border setting and all attempt to secure laughs by directing ridicule at the Mexican border residents.

#### *Losing It*

*Losing It* follows four young Anglo teenagers who head to Tijuana for fun, excitement, and in search of a *bordello* for the obvious reason that the movie title indicates. With the exception of one of the young men (played by Tom Cruise), the rest of the boys are the worst of the ugly Americans abroad and of North American youth characterizations.<sup>103</sup> Tijuana, Mexicanos, and the border setting are the victims as stereotypes of the worst kind abound. *The Los Angeles Times* film critic Kevin Thomas observed:

Never mind that the kids eventually get their comeuppance, because the film spends most of its time smirking and sneering



Tom Cruise and other North American youths in a bar in Tijuana.  
From the film *Loosing It* (Embassy Pictures, Inc).

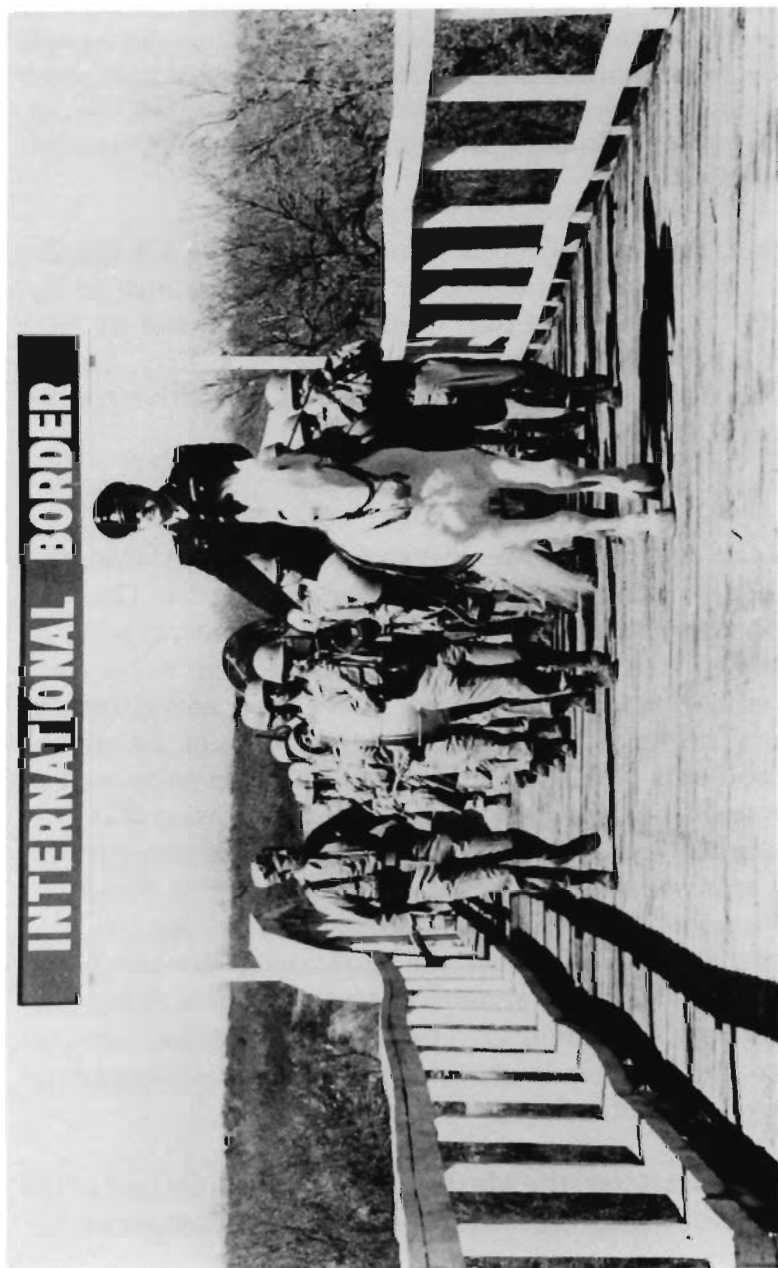
at every conceivable stereotype of Mexican border-town...If sleazy atmosphere were everything, *Losing It* would have it made, for production designer Robb Wilson King...has spared no pains in convincingly passing off Calexico as Tijuana, making it appear as the most garish Sodom and Gomorrah imaginable.<sup>104</sup>

The general view of Tijuana conveyed in *Losing It* is similar to the appearance of the border in films at the turn of the century, in films from the "greaser" cycle, or the in 1934 movie *Bordertown*. Tijuana is portrayed as a dirty, sleazy, criminal, and despicable area. Not a single positive trait of Tijuana is evident in the film.

### *Viva Max*

*Viva Max*, or how the Mexicans reclaimed the Alamo, is a film that is neither good comedy nor good satire. The silly plot portrays Peter Ustinov as a Mexican general who, in dire need of a deed of valor to regain the respect of his men, decides to invade the United States and recapture the Alamo. The slap-stick episodes of the taking of the Alamo and the Texas National Guard attempting to re-capture it are more dumb than humorous. It could be argued that *Viva Max* is really a satire of Texas mythology and stereotypes. Many scenes and types in the film point in this direction. Up to a point, the Texas parody might have been the purpose of the movie. However, the Mexicans do not escape the usual portrayal by Hollywood. And of course, Mexican-origin actors are nowhere to be seen. The Mexican characters are all played by Anglos or actors of other ethnic groups such as Peter Ustinov.

The main character, the Mexican general, and the rest of his men are cast within the classic Hollywood stereotype of the



Peter Ustinov as a Mexican general who attempts to recapture the Alamo in *Viva Max*  
(Commonwealth United Entertainment).



Mexicans—slow, dumb, lazy, and cowardly. What began as an interesting idea with potential, resulted in a superficial, negative, and demeaning film of a classic border historical theme.<sup>105</sup>

### *The Three Amigos*

Bad comedy and gross stereotyping reached new heights even for Hollywood in *The Three Amigos*. Chevy Chase, Steve Martin, and Martin Short play three silent-film stars who made their fame as *Magnificent Seven* types. They call themselves The Three Amigos. One of their films is viewed by the townsfolk of a small Mexican village who are being terrorized by El Guapo and his ruffians. The bandits in the film are reminiscent of the endless Mexican *bandidos* who appeared in hundreds of westerns. As in *The Magnificent Seven*, the townspeople send for The Three Amigos to help rid them of El Guapo. Mistakenly the heroes believe they are sought for a performance or special show. Upon their arrival in town they realize that it is not make-believe. When El Guapo learns of their presence and almost has them killed, they abandon the village but quickly repent and ultimately defeat the villains, save the pueblo, and ride off into the sunset saying that wherever justice is needed, they will be there.

What begins with much promise as a parody of traditional westerns quickly deteriorates into fierce clashes, degrading stereotypes, and a disturbing portrayal of Mexican characters, women, and the border.<sup>106</sup> The accent of the comedy in *The Three Amigos* is again humor at the expense of the Mexican-origin characters. They are either poor, helpless, defenseless, passive individuals who need to be saved by the clever, brave, strong Anglos, or they are no match against "The Three Amigos."

It is no surprise that the Dirección General de Cinematografía in Mexico has barred all of these films. One will never see these border comedies or crime movies shown commercially in Mexico.<sup>107</sup> For once, a justification could be made for censorship on the basis of quality or offensiveness to the nationality, character, and culture of a country.

#### D. Exemplary Border Comedy: *Born in East L.A.*

The one laudable Hollywood border comedy is the recent *Born in East L.A.* Combining parody and social satire, director and star Cheech Marín takes direct aim at various U.S. and Mexican institutions, character types, and perceptions. In the movie Rudy Robles (Guadalupe Rudolfo Robles), played by Marín, is a third-generation Chicano who accidentally gets caught in an INS raid. Because he has no way to prove his U.S. citizenship, he is deported to Tijuana. Unable to speak Spanish, Rudy finds himself experiencing the tribulations of Mexican immigrants. After a series of mishaps while trying to recross into the United States, he begins to creatively adapt to the border circumstance. In Tijuana, Rudy comes into contact with two secondary characters, the coyote and hustler Jimmy (Daniel Stern), who befriends him, and the love interest (played by Kamala López). There is much humor and fun in various scenes, satirizing border-Chicano and -Anglo societal traditions. The film closes with hundreds of undocumented Latinos overrunning the Border Patrol agents, crossing into the United States with the Neil Diamond song "Coming to America" in the background.



Rudy Robles, portrayed by Cheech Marin, as a repatriated Chicano in Tijuana in the film *Born in East L.A.* (Universal).

*Born in East L.A.* won first prize at the Havana International Film Festival in 1987. As in the case of other contemporary Chicano films, it does represent a first. It is a major commercial Hollywood border film starred in, written, and directed by a Chicano artist.

## IV. Cinema from a Border Perspective

While principal studios in the United States and Mexico were producing large-scale commercial border films, other film makers outside the industry addressed the issue from a totally different perspective. Their movies are not only outstanding works of art but also reflect a deep sensitivity toward the border experience. Among these productions *Alambrista*, *El Norte*, *Break of Dawn*, and *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortes* stand out. The principal goal of these films is to portray border themes in cinema through the eyes and actions of the participants themselves, and thus break the distorted images and stereotypes of the border. These film makers offer an alternative cinematic language, style and ideology.

### A. *Alambrista*

The finest English-language film to date on the theme of Mexican immigration is Robert Young's *Alambrista* (The Illegal Wirecrossover). This beautifully acted and directed movie traces the odyssey of a farmworker from his home village in Mexico to the fields of California. Unlike most other treatments of immigration subjects, *Alambrista* opens with the "push" factors that prompt Roberto to leave and cross illegally into the United States.

Roberto receives quite an education during the course of the film. Soon after crossing the border, he arrives at his first place of employment in the agriculture fields of California. There he meets a fellow *indocumentado*, Joe, who serves as a mentor. Joe instructs his new friend in the art of survival in the United States. He gives Roberto lessons on imitating the

mannerisms of *gringos*, from walking to smiling, even to ordering ham and eggs. After a brief stay at this ranch, they decide to migrate elsewhere and hitch a ride on a railroad car. When they are discovered and pursued, they hide underneath the railroad car, barely holding on to the train. When they reach their destination Roberto calls for Joe and, in one of the most moving sequences of the film, realizes that Joe did not make it. Disheartened, he searches for employment. At night he goes into town to eat at a cafe where he meets Sharon, a waitress who takes pity on him when he passes out from exhaustion and takes him to her home. They become romantically involved and, for the only time in the story, Roberto briefly enjoys his life in the United States.

Working in a nearby ranch, Roberto narrowly escapes a Border Patrol raid just prior to payday. His disillusionment and alienation grows as he becomes aware of the exploitation and helplessness of the migrants. Wherever Roberto turns he feels his status as an alien. His affair with Sharon ends one night at a disco, which is raided by the *migra* and he is captured and deported.

The story moves to another time and place in California where Roberto is now working after having crossed the border once more. His loneliness and alienation grow more intense by the hour. He reaches the breaking point and in desperation stops a police car and asks to be returned home. *Alambrista* is truly an outstanding combination of social criticism and film art.

The emphasis of the film is character study. The actors deliver excellent performances. The script is modest and sincere and is most effective in its narration and action.

Human emotion and circumstances are beautifully captured. Although the employers could be viewed as villains, they are not exaggerated or stereotyped. For authenticity, the dialogue is maintained in both Spanish and English, with subtitles. Although sympathy lies with the *alambrista* and the plight of the undocumented workers, its subtle message is left to the viewer to interpret. The film never resorts to simplistic or paternalistic narration, unrealistic heroes, or overdone dogma.<sup>108</sup>

### B. *El Norte*

A second outstanding independent film on a border theme is *El Norte*, directed and written by Gregory Nava and produced by Ann Thomas. It has received wide showing, favorable reviews, and surprisingly high box office success for an independent production. Although not without faults, the movie is remarkable and overall worthy of high praise.

The film traces the plight of a Guatemalan brother and sister (played beautifully by Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez and David Villalpando) who, out of fear of being killed by the military like their parents, are forced to flee their native country and seek refuge in the United States. The story is told in three segments. The first sets the stage for their plight in their village, San Pedro, Guatemala. Their father picks coffee beans enduring the exploitation of the landowners and their tool of oppression, the military. One evening their father, Arturo, played by Mexico's leading dramatic actor Ernesto Gómez Cruz, goes to a secret meeting with other peasants. They plan an agrarian rebellion. Tragically, they are betrayed by one of their own, who informs the landowners of their meeting place. The military ambushes and kills all

the campesinos. In an attempt to save his father, Enrique encounters a wounded soldier and in self-defense kills him. The next day the military arrest Enrique's mother. The only possible salvation for Enrique and Rosa is to flee from Guatemala. With the help of their godparents they start out for *El Norte*, the United States.

The movie then moves to Mexico. Rosa and Enrique have successfully crossed the Guatemalan-Mexican border and are on their way to Tijuana. After further misadventures with a treacherous *coyote*, they find a contact who helps them over their last hurdle. They attempt to cross the U.S. border through a sewage tunnel. Halfway along the tunnel their journey turns to terror as they are attacked by rats. Escaping the rats, they finally reach the end of the tunnel and are reunited with their friend. As they reach the top of a cliff which overlooks the lights of San Diego, they behold the sight with awe and in anticipation of their new life.

The third and final part of the film opens in Los Angeles. Rosa and Enrique have been able to find housing and employment. However, just when all appears positive, tragedy strikes once more. Enrique loses his job in an immigration raid. Rosa becomes seriously ill and is rushed to a hospital. She is diagnosed as having advanced typhus acquired from the rats. On her deathbed, Rosa sums up her fateful existence for Enrique: "En México solo hay pobreza. Tampoco hay lugar allí para nosotros. En el norte no somos aceptados pues. ¿Cuándo vamos a encontrar un lugar?" [In Mexico there is only poverty. Nor is there a place for us. In the North we are not accepted. When are we going to find a place?] The movie closes with Enrique more assertive in seeking employment but aware of the hopelessness of his situation.





Rosa (Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez) and Enrique (David Villalpando) briefly enjoying their life as *indocumentados* in Los Angeles in the film *El Norte* (Sinecom International Films).

Although beautifully photographed, superbly acted, well-directed, and creatively written, the film is not without certain limitations. It is somewhat melodramatic at times and a number of the sequences are not entirely believable.<sup>109</sup> Certain characters and events are overly stereotypical. The heavies are all of Mexican or Latin origin. On the positive side, the Americans encountered by Rosa and Enrique are generally sympathetic, kind, and good natured. It is clearly a film oriented toward a North American viewing public.

*El Norte* does seem to highlight certain values and character portrayals toward which U.S. audiences would be sympathetic. Rosa and Enrique only display traits of goodness and purity, and have no faults nor serious weaknesses. The main characters are shown as tragic heroes, victims of circumstances, who have little or no chance to control their own destinies. The film also plays on the empathy of the viewer through the dramatic outcome of the story. In spite of these aspects, the film's characters, structure, and subtle political message made *El Norte* one of the most successful and best contemporary films in the United States.

### C. *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortés*

*The Ballad of Gregorio Cortés*, directed by Roberto Young and co-produced by Moctezuma Esparza, is a major achievement in border cinema. The film narrates a tragic episode in the life of Gregorio Cortés who became a folk hero in south Texas at the turn of the century as a result of his escapes from the infamous Texas Rangers and other Texas law enforcement officers.<sup>110</sup> The circumstances of his plight resulted from an attempted false arrest and the shooting of an Anglo sheriff in self-defense. The sheriff, while attempt-



Gregorio Cortés (James Edward Olmos) and his wife (Victoria Plata) as he is about to be sent to prison in *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortés* (Embassy Pictures, Inc.).

ing to arrest Gregorio Cortés without a full explanation or proof of wrongdoing, killed Gregorio's brother who was attempting to intervene on his behalf. As the sheriff was about to fire at Gregorio, Cortés fired, killing the sheriff in self-defense and in revenge for his brother's death. Gregorio Cortés, knowing full well the fate he would receive at the hands of the double standard of Anglo justice toward Mexicans, flees and is chased unsuccessfully by dozens of Rangers throughout Texas and the Texas-Mexican border. His hair-raising escapes captured the imagination and earned him the support and hearts of his people. Ultimately, he had no recourse but to surrender when his wife and children were incarcerated for ransom. He is tried and sentenced to life imprisonment. Sixteen years later and after repeated attempts to reopen his case, Gregorio Cortés was finally pardoned.

The film, although powerful in its message, never loses its sensitivity and artistry. The screenplay stresses story development through the characters and events. James Edward Olmos renders an impressive and unforgettable portrayal of the essence of Gregorio Cortés and his circumstances. The remaining secondary characters are well defined and effective. Totally devoid of stereotypes or good/evil dichotomy, the characters bring out the world views, class interests, prejudices, and contradictions of the region of two societies in conflict.

Roberto Young provides careful and creative directorial mastery. An excellent musical score, photography, and locations make *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortés* one of most accomplished border films to date.

### D. *Break of Dawn*

The most recent North American independent border production is the outstanding *Break of Dawn*, written and directed by Isaac Artenstein and produced by Jude Eberhard. The film is based on the true life of Pedro J. González, the first Spanish-language radio broadcaster in the United States. Later, he became a political and community activist on behalf of the rights of the Mexican-origin population during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>111</sup>

The story opens with Pedro González (played superbly by the distinguished Mexican singer Oscar Chávez) and his wife María (played by María Rojo, a leading Mexican dramatic actress) crossing the U.S.-Mexican border for political reasons in the early 1920s. González had been a member of the army of Pancho Villa, which, when defeated, was subjected to many reprisals in Mexico. Eventually, Pedro and María made their way to Southern California to seek out Pedro's relatives, settle, and secure employment. After a number of odd jobs, he obtained employment at a local radio station advertising products in Spanish. On his own initiative, González attempted not only to advertise, but on one occasion expanded his spots by singing classic Mexican songs. Outraged by the unauthorized actions, the station manager fired Pedro only to quickly rehire him because of an overwhelmingly strong following and a large call-in-campaign from listeners.

Such was his popularity that Pedro González was given a two-hour daily early morning show. He formed his own group, Los Madrugadores, and his program of romantic ballads and radio commentary became a favorite of Chicano/Mexicano listeners as people tuned into his show

every morning at "the break of dawn." His fame and audience grew and he quickly became a local celebrity and an influential voice in his community as well as in other parts of California and the Southwest. His show was picked up by other radio stations. As his social circles expanded, González came into contact with two opposing forces, represented by the Consul General of Mexico in Los Angeles and the District Attorney of Los Angeles. Both men exemplify the conflicting political and legal currents affecting the Mexican origin population in Southern California during the decade of the Great Depression.<sup>112</sup>

The district attorney used the "Los Madrugadores" show for paid political advertisements. The ads were effective in securing important Latino votes for his successful re-election. As the 1930s unfold, the D.A.'s campaign promises to the Mexican origin population are forgotten and a repressive policy of massive repatriation for thousands of Mexicans was implemented with the help of his staff. As violations of civil rights, intimidation, and even violence increase, Chicano civic organizations, the Mexican Consul, and community groups attempt to counter these measures. González, through his radio program, takes a strong advocacy stance and speaks out repeatedly in defence of his fellow Mexicans.

Fearing the impact of the popularity of Pedro González, attempts are made by the D.A. to suspend his broadcasting license. When that fails, more desperate solutions are arranged. A prospective deportee was intimidated into testifying on a phony rape charge against González. After a mock trial, González was convicted and sentenced to twenty-five years in San Quentin, even though the star witness had recanted her testimony.

In response to the absolute disregard for justice and the terrible sentence imposed, his wife María mobilized community groups and gathered strong support for her husband's cause. The film concludes with the release of González six years later. *Break of Dawn* is border cinema at its best. The reconstruction of the historical period is impressive, helped by the use of the actual documentary footage of the period. Filmed entirely in the San Diego border region, the locations selected were most effective in conveying the historical ambience. The script clearly reveals a deep sympathy and understanding of the story and the events. History and film are seldom combined with such outstanding results.<sup>113</sup> Although its political message is straightforward, the film succeeds on the level of art and entertainment due to the combined talents and dedication of director Isaac Artenstein and producer Jude Eberhard. They brought together a splendid cast and a first rate technical crew. Theirs was a work of love which resulted in one of the finest border productions.<sup>114</sup>

The main shortcomings of *Break of Dawn* are related to the lack of needed financial resources in the filming of the work. Additional scenes were omitted from the original script due to financial considerations, and the quality of others could have been improved with more resources. Finally, the ending scene is somewhat flat. These limitations, mainly due to the lack of financial backing, fortunately do not detract from or lessen the overall merit or artistic achievement of the movie.





## V. Conclusion

The U.S.-Mexican border continues to be an important theme for the contemporary cinema. Unfortunately, the views of the great majority of North American and Mexican commercial border cinema have been the most widely exhibited. As has been discussed, movie audiences generally have been subjected to a formula of stereotypes, gratuitous sex, and excessive violence at the cost of artistic values, social statements, or original stories.

Yet, in spite of their poor quality, these films of the border do have a social impact on both countries. These films help perpetuate the standard and dominant perception of Mexican border society through the gross stereotyping of border residents, particularly Mexican-origin individuals. As Gordon W. Allport stated in his study of prejudice:

We have seen that stereotype may or may not originate in a kernel of truth; they aid people in simplifying their categories; they justify hostility; sometimes they serve as projection screens for our personal conflict. But there is an additional, and exceedingly important reason for their existence. They are socially supported, continually revived and hammered in by our media of mass communication—by novels, short stories, newspaper items, movies, stage, radio and television.<sup>115</sup>

Commercial cinema continues to reflect the contemporary U.S.-Mexican border as the "wild west," where civilization confronts barbarism. Not only are border citizens victimized by cinematic images, but the border setting and ambience have been likewise stereotyped. The border continually has been depicted as the lawless, primitive and rugged last frontier of the United States and Mexico. Thus,

in its image in either U.S. or Mexican commercial cinema, the border has not significantly changed over time.

Commercial cinema continues to rely on a long historical tradition of portrayals of the U.S.-Mexican border. From the turn of the century to the present, the cinematic image of the border by both U.S. and Mexican film makers has, with few exceptions, remained static. The cinema of both countries has dismissed the opportunity to produce creative, interesting, or even entertaining films. In fact, the opposite has been true. Border films have, at times, reached the low point of contemporary cinema.

There is one exception to this situation: independent U.S. films and current works in progress. It is hoped that Mexican independent cinema will also address border issues in the near future. An even greater possibility might be independent co-productions. The border has a multitude of interesting and important themes just waiting to be brought to the silver screen. Perhaps in the not too distant future, *la frontera*, the U.S.-Mexican border will receive the fate it merits not only from independent cinema but also from the commercial cinemas of both countries.

## NOTES

1. See the book by Alan Weisman, *La Frontera. The United States Border with Mexico* (New York, 1986). See also Paul Ganster and Alan Sweedler, *The United States-Mexico Border Region: Implications for U.S. Security* (Claremont, CA: The Keck Center for International Strategic Studies, 1988) for a concise overview of the borders' history and socio-economic characteristics.

2. The recent study of Oscar J. Martínez, *Troublesome Border* (Tucson, 1988), examines these themes in detail.

3. The most detailed discussion of this aspect is Gerald D. Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington, 1985).

4. Stanley R. Ross, ed., *Views Across the Border* (Albuquerque, 1975), 1-25.

5. Martínez, *Troublesome Border*, 124-142.

6. An essential analysis of the mystification of the U.S. Southwest is Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (Cambridge, 1950).

7. Arthur G. Pettit, *Images of the Mexican-American in Fiction and Film* (College Station, 1980), 131-135.

8. Two studies by Garth Jostet, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston, 1975) and with James M. Linton, *Movies as Mass Communication* (Beverly Hills, 1980) are essential reading.

9. See the important study by Leo A. Handel, *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience* (Urbana, 1950).

10. Herbert J. Gans, "The Creator-Audience Relationship in the Mass Media: An Analysis of Movie Making," in B. Rosenberg and D. M. White, eds., *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (New York, 1975), 315-324.

11. Andred Tudor, "Film and the Measurement of its Effects," *Screen*, 10:4-5 (July-October 1969), 148-159.

12. Gans, "The Creator-Audience Relationship."

13. Daniel Talbot, ed., *Film: An Anthology* (New York, 1959), 16-17.

14. Carlos Monsiváis, "La dependencia y la cultura mexicana de los setentas," *Cambio*, 4:1 (July-September 1976), 42-54.

15. Alberto Ruy Sánchez, "Cine mexicano: producción social de una estética," *Historia y Sociedad*, VXII (Summer 1978), 74.

16. Paola Costa, *La apertura cinematográfica* (Puebla: Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 1988), 61-85.

17. Interview with Tomás Pérez Turrent, Mexico City, August 23, 1976.
18. Interview with Jorge Fons, Mexico City, September 14, 1976.
19. *Excelsior* (November 14, 1973), 18.
20. Interview with Gustavo García, Mexico City, October 18, 1985.
21. David R. Maciel, "Aztlán y México: Chicano/Mexican Relations. An Overview," unpublished manuscript.
22. Juan Gómez-Quiñones and David R. Maciel, "El México de afuera: los chicanos ante la crisis actual," in Pablo González Casanova and Héctor Aguilar Camín, eds., *México ante la crisis* (México, D.F., 1985), 121-124.
23. David R. Maciel, "El redescubrimiento de Aztlán," unpublished manuscript, and also Tatcho Mindiola and Max Martínez, eds., *Chicano-Mexicano Relations* (Houston, 1986), 20-35.
24. Interview with Carlos Monsiváis, Mexico City, July 12, 1986.
25. Jorge A. Bustamante, "Relaciones chicano-mexicanas: de la práctica a la teoría," in David R. Maciel and José Guillermo Saavedra, eds., *Al norte de la frontera: el pueblo chicano* (México, D.F., 1989), 105-119.
26. David R. Maciel, "Visions of the Other Mexico: Chicanos and Undocumented Workers in Mexican Cinema," in Gary Keller, ed., *Chicano Cinema* (New York, 1986), 71-73.
27. Interview with Gustavo García, Mexico City, May 4, 1985.
28. *Chicano*, original screenplay (México, D.F., 1985).
29. Interview with Jaime Casillas, Mexico City, August 15, 1986.
30. Interview with Reies López Tijerina, Albuquerque, November 6, 1985.
31. *De Sangre Chicana*, original screenplay (México, D.F., 1982).
32. Jorge A. Bustamante, "Los chicanos vistos desde una perspectiva mexicana," in David R. Maciel and José Guillermo Saavedra, eds., *Al norte de la frontera: el pueblo chicano* (México, D.F., 1989), 79-81.
33. Carlos Monsiváis, "Los chicanos," in David R. Maciel and José Guillermo Saavedra, eds., *Al norte de la frontera: el pueblo chicano* (México, D.F., 1988), 71-79.
34. *Soy Chicano y Mexicano*, original screenplay (México, D.F., 1986).
35. *Producción cinematográfica* (México, D.F., 1975), 29.
36. Interview with Alberto Bojórquez, Mexico City, May 18, 1985.
37. Mike Webster, "Juan N. Cortina, defensor de la raza," in David R. Maciel and Patricia Bueno, eds., *Aztlán: historia del pueblo chicano* (México, D.F., 1975), 123-147, discusses the legacy of Cortina.

38. *Hermanos del Viento*, original screenplay (México, D.F., 1974).
39. David R. Maciel, "Chicanos in Mexican Thought and Culture," unpublished manuscript.
40. *El Chicano Justiciero*, original screenplay (México, D.F., 1976).
41. Interview with Jesús Salvador Treviño, Los Angeles, July 12, 1985.
42. *Somos*, March 1977, 14.
43. *Raíces de Sangre*, original screenplay (Los Angeles, 1976).
44. *Somos*, March 1977, 14.
45. Rafael Molina Domínguez, "Cine a través de la frontera," *Uno Mas Uno*, August 12, 1983.
46. A classic study of the evolution of Mexican politics in the post-Revolution period is Arnaldo Córdova, *La formación del poder político en México* (México, D.F., 1972).
47. A perceptive analysis of Mexican presidential power is Daniel Cosío Villagas, *El estilo personal de gobernar* (México, D.F., 1974).
48. David R. Maciel, "Chicano Cinema: Three Perspectives," paper presented at the symposium México en la Conciencia Chicana, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, October 14-26, 1988.
49. Interview with Issac Artenstein, San Diego, June 21, 1987.
50. Wayne A. Cornelius, *America in the Era of Limits* (La Jolla, 1979).
51. Jorge A. Bustamante, "Commodity Migrants: Structural Analysis of Mexican Immigration to the United States," in Stanley Ross, ed., *Views Across the Border* (Albuquerque, 1978), 183-186.
52. See the various essays in the initial section of Antonio Ríos Bustamante's edited work, *Mexican Immigrant Workers in the United States* (Los Angeles, 1981).
53. Mauricio Mazon, "Illegal Alien Surrogates: A Psychohistorical Interpretation of Group Stereotyping in Times of Economic Stress," *Aztlán: International Journal of Chicano Studies Research*, VI:2 (Spring 1975).
54. Judith A. Hellman, *Mexico in Crisis* (New York, 1983) and Pablo González Casanova and Héctor Aguilar Camín, eds., *México ante la crisis* (México, D.F., 1987, 2 vols.).
55. Emilio García Riera, *Historia del cine mexicano* (México, D.F., 1985), 323-325.
56. Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La condición del cine mexicano* (México, D.F., 1986), 521-522.
57. *Ibid.*, 202.

58. Moisés Viñas, *Historia del cine mexicano* (México, D.F., 1987), 275-281.
59. Interview with Tomás Pérez Turrent, Mexico City, July 9, 1985.
60. Interview with Fernando Macotela, Mexico City, August 4, 1987.
61. Interview with Alejandro Pelayo, Mexico City, January 18, 1986.
62. Interview with Alberto Issac, Mexico City, June 23, 1987.
63. Interview with Gustavo García, Mexico City, July 12, 1986.
64. The leading Mexican political journal, *Proceso*, in the summer months of 1989 carried extensive stories on this aspect.
65. Interview with Eduardo de la Vega, Guadalajara, June 30, 1988.
66. Interview with Andrés de Luna, Mexico City, July 19, 1988.
67. *Anuario de producción fílmica* (México, D.F., in press).
68. Interview with Alejandro Galindo, Mexico City, May 29, 1987.
69. Interview with Carlos Monsiváis, Mexico City, January 12, 1989.
  
70. *Deportados*, original screenplay (México, D.F., 1978).
71. Allen L. Woll, *The Latin Image in American Film* (Los Angeles, 1980), 6-16, discusses Anglo heroes and Mexican characters in detail in Hollywood films.
72. Interview with Arturo Ripstein, Mexico City, November 19, 1986.
73. The best general analysis of women in contemporary Mexican cinema is Jorge Ayala Blanco's *La condición*, 115-139.
74. *El desafío de la interdependencia: México y Estados Unidos* (México, D.F., 1988), 102-106.
75. *La Jaula de Oro*, original screenplay (México, D.F., 1987).
76. Interview with José Nieto Ramírez, Mexico City, May 7, 1987.
77. Interview with Alberto Issac, Mexico City, October 20, 1985.
78. *Santo en la Frontera del Terror*, original screenplay (México, D.F., 1978).
79. Various film makers stated that more emphasis on Mexican factors did not appear in their films due to their apprehension of political censorship in Mexico.
80. Interview with Eduardo de la Vega Alfaro, Guadalajara, June 17, 1988.
81. Interview with Carlos Monsiváis, Mexico City, September 12, 1986.

82. Richard B. Craig, "Illegal Drug Traffic," in Ellwyn R. Stoddard, et. al., *Borderlands Sourcebook* (Norman, 1983), 209-213.
83. John W. House, *Frontier on the Rio Grande* (Oxford, 1982), 177-179.
84. See the well researched study by Richard B. Craig, "La campaña permanente: Mexico's Antidrug Campaign," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*, 20:2 (1978), 107-31.
85. J. Becker, et. al., "The Dope Trail," *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 1 (1972), 413-452.
86. *Producción Cinematográfica* (México, D.F., 1986).
87. Interviews with officials of Películas Nacionales, Mexico City, and Azteca Films, Summer 1988.
88. Interview with Rosa Gloria Chayogán, Mexico City, August 12, 1986.
89. Interview with Tomás Pérez Turrent, Mexico City, July 11, 1988.
90. *Siete en la Mira*, original screenplay (México, D.F., 1978).
91. Interview with Carlos Monsiváis, San Diego, June 3, 1986.
92. Interview with Carlos Savage, Mexico City, August 7, 1986.
93. David R. Maciel, "Mexican Immigration to the U.S. in the Contemporary Cinema," paper presented for Renato Rosaldo Lecture Series, University of Arizona, February 13, 1987.
94. Norma Iglesias, *La vision de la frontera a través del cine mexicano* (Tijuana, 1985), 43.
95. Interview with Alberto Cortés, Mexico City, June 22, 1987.
96. Interview with Emilio García Riera, Guadalajara, June 27, 1988.
97. Interview with Carlos Monsiváis, Mexico City, January 14, 1989.
98. Interview with Héctor Aguilar Camín, Mexico City, June 30, 1989.
99. *The Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1982, VI:4.
100. *The San Diego Union*, October 22, 1980, B-7.
101. *Motion Pictures*, February 13, 1982, A-18.
102. See the last chapter of Woll, *The Latin Image*.
103. *The New York Times*, April 8, 1983, III:4.
104. *The Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1983, VI:4.
105. *The New York Times*, January 23, 1970, 27:1.
106. *The Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1987, 4:3.
107. Interview with Fernando Macotela, Mexico City, June 26, 1988.
108. *The Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1980, 4:5-6.
109. *The New York Times*, January 22, 1984, II 17:1.

110. Américo Paredes, *With a Pistol in His Hand* (Austin, 1958) has written a definitive study of Gregorio Cortés, his life, the epoch, and the famous border ballad.

111. As a complement to *Break of Dawn* the documentary *The Ballad of an Unsung Hero* provides important background information by telling the protagonist's life story through his own memories.

112. For an excellent discussion of these events and the conflictive issues, the study *In Defense of La Raza* (Tucson, 1982) by Francisco Balderrama is most useful. Also important for an understanding of this period and the theme is the article "Piedras contra la luna, México en Aztlán y Aztlán en México: Chicano-Mexicano Relations and the Mexican Consulates, 1900-1920," by Juan Gómez-Quiñones, in James W. Wilkie, et. al., eds., *Contemporary Mexico* (Los Angeles, 1976), 494-529.

113. *The Los Angeles Times*, July 5, 1987, 4:22.

114. Interview with Issac Artenstein and Jude Eberhart, San Diego, October 11, 1987.

115. Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, MA, 1954), 200.



## Bibliography

- Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: 1954.
- Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La aventura del cine mexicano*. México, D.F.: Editorial Alianza, 1986. Second edition.
- Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La búsqueda del cine mexicano*. México, D.F.: Editorial Alianza, 1986. Second edition.
- Francisco Balderrama, *In Defense of La Raza*. Tucson: 1982.
- J. Becker, et. al., "The Dope Trail," *Contemporary Drug Problems*. 1972, 1, 413-452.
- Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La condición del cine mexicano*. México, D.F.: 1986.
- Jorge A. Bustamante, "Los chicanos vistos desde una perspectiva mexicana," in David R. Maciel and José Guillermo Saavedra, eds., *Al norte de la frontera: el pueblo chicano*. México, D.F.: 1989.
- Jorge A. Bustamante, "Commodity Migrants: Structural Analysis of Mexican Immigration to the United States," in Stanley Ross, ed., *Views Across the Border*. Albuquerque: 1978.
- Jorge A. Bustamante, "Relaciones chicano-mexicanas: de la práctica a la teoría," in David R. Maciel and José Guillermo Saavedra, eds., *Al norte de la frontera: el pueblo chicano*. México, D.F.: 1989, 105-119.
- Arnaldo Córdova, *La formación del poder político en México*. México, D.F.: 1972.
- Wayne A. Cornelius, *America in the Era of Limits*. La Jolla: 1979.
- Daniel Cosío Villages, *El estilo personal de gobernar*. México, D.F.: 1974.
- Paola Costa, *La apertura cinematográfica: México 1970-1976*. Puebla: Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 1988.
- Richard B. Craig, "Illegal Drug Traffic," in Ellwyn R. Stoddard, et. al., *Borderlands Sourcebook*. Norman: 1983, 209-213.
- Richard B. Craig, "La campaña permanente: Mexico's Antidrug Campaign," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*. 20:2, 1978, 107-31.
- Aurelio de los Reyes, et.al., *80 años de cine en México*. México, D.F.: UNAM, 1976.
- El desafío de la interdependencia: México y Estados Unidos*. México, D.F.: 1988.

Dora Eugenia Moreno Brizuela and Rosa Adriana Vázquez Gómez, "Políticas cinematográficas de exhibición 1970-1982." Tesis de licenciatura, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas, UNAM, 1986.

Raúl A. Fernández, *The United States-Mexico Border*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977.

Romeo Flores Caballero, *Evolución de la frontera norte*. Monterrey: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 1982.

Alejandro Galindo, *El cine mexicano*. México, D.F.: Edamex, 1985.

Herbert J. Gans, "The Creator-Audience Relationship in the Mass Media: An Analysis of Movie Making," in B. Rosenberg and D. M. White, eds., *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*. New York: 1975, 315-324.

Paul Ganster and Alan Sweedler, *The United States-Mexico Border Region: Implications for U.S. Security*. Claremont, CA: The Keck Center for International Strategic Studies, 1988.

Gustavo García, "Enemigos de las promesas: decadencia y caída del cine mexicano," *Intolerancia*. 1, January-February 1986, 21-28.

Emilio García Riera, *Historia del cine mexicano*. México, D.F.: 1985, 323-325.

Emilio García Riera. *México en el cine extranjero*. México, D.F.: Ediciones ERA, 1987-88, 4 vols.

Juan Gómez-Quiñones, "Piedras contra la luna, México en Aztlán y Aztlán en México: Chicano-Mexicano Relations and the Mexican Consulates, 1900-1920," in James W. Wilkie, et. al., *Contemporary Mexico*. Los Angeles: 1976, 494-529.

Juan Gómez-Quiñones and David R. Maciel, "El México de afuera: los chicanos ante la crisis actual," in Pablo González Casanova and Héctor Aguilar Camín, eds., *México ante la crisis*. México, D.F.: 1985, 121-124.

Pablo González Casanova and Héctor Aguilar Camín, eds., *México ante la crisis*. México, D.F.: 1987, 2 vols.

Leo. A. Handel, *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience*. Urbana: 1950.

Judith A. Hellman, *Mexico in Crisis*. New York: 1983.

María Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience. Eliteloire versus Folklore*. Los Angeles: Latin American Center, 1979.

*Hojas de cine. Testimonios y documentos del nuevo cine latinoamericano*. México, D.F.: SEP, 1988, vol. 2.

John W. House, *Frontier on the Rio Grande*. Oxford, 1982, 177-179.

Norma Iglesias, *La visión de la frontera a través del cine mexicano*. Tijuana: 1985, 43.

William Jinks, *The Celluloid Literature*. Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1971.

Garth Jostett, *Film: The Democratic Art*. Boston: 1975.

Garth Jostett and James M. Linton, *Movies as Mass Communication*. Beverly Hills: 1980.

Gary Keller, ed., *Chicano Cinema*. New York: Bilingual Review Press, 1986.

Mark Kramer, "U.S.-Mexican Border: Life on the Line," *National Geographic*. June 1985, 720-750.

David R. Maciel, "Aztlán y México: Chicano/Mexican Relations. An Overview," unpublished manuscript.

David R. Maciel, "Chicano Cinema: Three Perspectives," paper presented at the symposium México en la Conciencia Chicana, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, October 14-26, 1988.

David R. Maciel, "Chicanos in Mexican Thought and Culture," unpublished manuscript.

David R. Maciel, "El redescubrimiento de Aztlán," unpublished manuscript.

David R. Maciel, "Mexican Immigration to the U.S. in the Contemporary Cinema," paper presented for Renato Rosaldo Lecture Series, University of Arizona, February 13, 1987.

David R. Maciel, "Visions of the Other Mexico: Chicanos and Undocumented Workers in Mexican Cinema," in Gary Keller, ed., *Chicano Cinema*. New York: 1986, 71-73.

Mauricio Mazon, "Illegal Alien Surrogates: A Psychohistorical Interpretation of Group Stereotyping in Times of Economic Stress," *Aztlán: International Journal of Chicano Studies Research*. VI:2, Spring 1975.

Oscar Martínez, *Troublesome Border*. Tucson: 1988.

Tatcho Mindiola and Max Martínez, eds., *Chicano-Mexicano Relations*. Houston: 1986, 20-35.

Rafael Molina Domínguez, "Cine a través de la frontera," *Uno Mas Uno*. August 12, 1983.

Carlos Monsiváis, "La dependencia y la cultura mexicana de los setentas," *Cambio*. 4:1, July-September 1976, 42-55.

Carlos Monsiváis, "Los chicanos," in David R. Maciel and José Guillermo Saavedra, eds., *Al norte de la frontera: el pueblo chicano*. México, D.F.: 1988, 71-79.

Carlos Monsiváis, "Impresiones sobre la cultura popular urbana en México," *Comunicación*. 21, March 1977, 5-15.

Carl Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.

Patricia Morales, *Indocumentados mexicanos*. México, D.F.: Editorial Grijalbo, 1989. Second edition.

*Motion Pictures*. February 13, 1982, A-18.

Gerald D. Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War*. Bloomington: 1985.

Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

Américo Paredes, *With a Pistol in His Hand*. Austin: 1958.

Tomás Pérez Turrent, "El cine mexicano y su doble: la crisis," *Territorios*. 14, January-February 1983, 36-38.

Arthur G. Pettit, *Images of the Mexican-American in Fiction and Film*. College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1980.

*Producción Cinematográfica*. México, D.F.: 1986.

David Ramón, "Un sexenio de cine en México," *Comunicación*. 21, March 1977, 24-32.

Antonio Ríos Bustamante's edited work, *Mexican Immigrant Workers in the United States*. Los Angeles: 1981.

Stanley R. Ross, ed., *Views Across the Border*. Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1978.

Alberto Ruy Sánchez, "Cine mexicano: producción social de una estética," *Historia y Sociedad*. 18, Summer 1978, 71-85.

Alberto Ruy Sánchez, *Mitología de un cine en crisis*. México, D.F.: Premia Editora, 1981.

Celia Shojjet Weltman and Roberto Aschentrupp Toledo, "Cine y poder: La política del gobierno en la industria cinematográfica mexicana 1970-1976, 1976-1982." Tesis de licenciatura, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas, UNAM, 1986.

Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*. Cambridge: 1950.

Javier Solórzano, "El nuevo cine en México: entrevista a Emilio García Riera," *Comunicación y Cultura*. 5, 1986, 7-19.

Daniel Talbot, ed., *Film: An Anthology*. New York: 1959, 16-17.

Jesús Salvador Treviño, "Mexican Cinema: New Directors, New Films," *Somos*. May 1979, 32-37.

Jesús Salvador Treviño, "The New Mexican Cinema," *Film Quarterly*. XXXII:3, Spring 1979, 26-37.

Jesús Salvador Treviño, "Presencia del cine chicano," in *A través de la frontera*. México, D.F.: CEESTEM, 1983, 195-203.

Andred Tudor, "Film and the Measurement of its Effects," *Screen*. 10:4-5, July-October 1969, 148-159.

Moisés Viñas, *Historia del cine mexicano*. México, D.F.: 1987, 275-281.

Mike Webster, "Juan N. Cortina, defensor de la raza," in David R. Maciel and Patricia Bueno, eds., *Aztlán: historia del pueblo chicano*. México, D.F.: 1975, 123-147.

Alan Weisman. *La Frontera, The United States Border with Mexico*. New York: 1986.

Allen L. Woll, *The Latin Image in American Film*. Los Angeles: 1980, 6-16.



**Carlos Vasallo**  
presenta

**HECTOR SUAREZ**

Una película de  
**JOSE NIETO R.**

**JORGE LUKE**

**TONY BRAVO**

# MURIERON A MITAD DEL RIO

...La historia  
de quienes van  
a la búsqueda de:  
aventuras, éxito,  
dólares y...  
gueritas.

En Estados Unidos  
para muchos...  
ser mexicano  
no es una  
nacionalidad,  
es un oficio.



DISTRIBUIDA POR:



Con  
**ENRIQUE LUCERO**  
**JORGE MARTINEZ DE HOYOS**  
**CLAUDIO BROOK**  
**RODRIGO PUEBLA**  
**ARTURO ALEGRO**  
**MAX KERLOWE**  
**PAOLA MORELLI**

© SINDAR CORPORATION N.Y. INC. 1978

Basada  
en la novela  
de  
**LUIS SPOTA**

Música  
**JOEL GOLDSMITH**

Adaptación y Dirección  
de  
**JOSE NIETO RAMIREZ**

Una producción de CARLOS VASALLO. GUION Y DIRECCIÓN: JOSE NIETO RAMIREZ. ASISTENTE DE DIRECCIÓN: PEDRO CRISTÓBAL. S.A. & C.A. - MANEJO CINEMATOGRAFICO: MEXIANA, S.A. & C.A. - TITULO DE COMP. N.Y.

ISBN 0-925613-03-7