

Social Problems as a Backdrop for Filmography - Contemporary Mexicans in the Eyes of Foreign Film Directors

Karolina Baraniak

Abstract: Foreign film directors point out in their movies, that the problems of Mexicans arise, to a large extent, by the fault of the factors independent of them, what reflects in numerous examples – e.g. drug and human trafficking, corruption or human rights abuses.

Keywords: Mexico, social problems, movies

„[...] The film is, as a mythogenic carrier (the area of continuation, transformation and "renewal of meanings") and as a record of the present (custom, gesture, movement, patterns of beauty, beauty, fashion, thematic tendencies, mental structures of a given time described in the movie), and also because of its reflection of distinctness or confusion (or leveling down) cultural diversity - the film meets a specific sensorium formed in the circle of cultural anthropology [...]" [Zb. Benedyktowicz, Wprowadzenie [in:] Zb. Benedyktowicz (ed.), Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty, nr 3-4, Warszawa 1997, p. 3] - assumes Polish cultural anthropologist Zbigniew Benedyktowicz. In addition to these words, Russian semiotician Yuri Lothman states, that: „[...] Everything, that belongs in the movie to the arts, has a meaning, carries this or any other information. The cinematic suggestion lies in composite diversity, in a complex way of organized and maximally concentrated information understood in the broad Wiener sense: as a whole the various intellectual and emotional structures conveyed to the recipient and interacting with it in a variety of ways - from filling its memory cells to rebuilding its personality structure [...]” [J. Łotman, *Semiotyka filmu*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1983, p. 97]. What kind of message about Mexico do the foreign films show?

Contemporary film industry considers the situation of today's Mexican state on several levels. The first one relates to the problem of drugs. Mexico, especially its villages located near the border with the United States, like Tijuana, is perceived by filmmakers as one of the world's biggest drug cartels, where profits from the sale of drugs are derived not only by the traffickers themselves, but also by the corrupt representatives of authority [J. Cotten (dir.), *The Line/La Linea*, Mexico, USA, 2009]. The members of drug mafia, in an attempt to increase and stabilize their power in this area, hire paid killers to effectively eliminate the fellows of competing groups without taking into account the consequences of their decisions [According to data collected by the Polish journalist Artur Domoslawski, more than 28,000 people died from the war in Mexico in 2006 and 2010, with a large percentage of casualties being casualties. The journalist in his article also argues that Mexican drug trafficking itself originated from the northern part of the country - from the agricultural state of Sinaloa, located between the Gulf of California and the Sierra Madre mountains, where

less affluent residents cultivated marijuana and smuggled it to the United States. See more in: A. Domoslawski, *Meksyk we krwi skapany* [in:] Official website of Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza - http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,8277175,Meksyk_we_krwi_skapany.html?as=1&startsz=x]. They play a high rate - drug trafficking is taking place not only between the USA, Mexico and cross-border countries, but, as James Cotten put it in his film [J. Cotten (dir.), *The Line/La Linea*, Mexico, USA, 2009], this includes also the Middle East. Hence, often, narcobusiness passes, like a fall, from father to son, which is like an extension of family tradition. In order to stay as active as possible on the market, they also have to maintain good relations with the Mexican state, and they are generously financing the construction of new public facilities such as hospitals, supporting the Church's missionary work, and assisting the state in carrying out its undertakings. They are creating themselves as the exemplary citizens of the country [C. Carrera (dir.), *El Crimen del padre Amaro/ The Crime of Father Amaro*, Argentina, Spain, Mexico, 2002].

The next point of reference is the issue of women in Mexico. The film directors, including Marco Kreuzpaintner [M. Kreuzpaintner (dir.), *Trade*, Germany, USA, Mexico, 2007], depict it as follows: young girls from America and Europe (i.a. from Poland [Ibidem]) with the help of "employment agencies" come to the Mexican country - their stop on the road to a better life in the United States. The dreams turn out to be a nightmare. The "representatives of the employment agency", in fact, members of organized, international, criminal group dealing with female prostitution, take the passports of women, who have arrived to Mexico, under the guise of checking something, and when these women have known, in which kind of situation they found themselves, the criminals charge them with force to the car, and kill resistant girls [Ibidem]. Abducted women go to the criminal hollows, where together with other girls of all ages, from many countries, through shameless photo sessions are prepared, under duress, to offer their sexual services at foreign online auctions. In the meantime, they serve as toys to meet the needs of those involved in the crime, e.g. corrupted officials. Any attempt to oppose ends with the beating, at once, with the threat that something bad will become their loved ones [Ibidem].

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The murder of women in Juarez, captured in film frames, i.a. by Gregory Nava in *Bordertown* [G. Nava (dir.), *Bordertown*, USA, Mexico, 2006], is another aspect of mentioned issue. Girls, coming from a variety of Mexican states, whose families have been forced to migrate because of taking their land by the government, move to the agglomerations close to the US border, e.g. Juarez, and they are hired in frontier factories [Under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of 31.12. In 1992, the United States "succeeded in" shifting its environmentally damaging industries, including factories, to Mexico. See more in: M. F. Gawrycki, *Strefa Wolnego Handlu Ameryki (FTAA) – koncepcja integracji regionalnej, Stosunki Międzynarodowe- International Relations*, t.29, N^o 1-2, Warszawa 2004, p.108], to financially support their families. Lonely, strangers in the new place, fall, just as women from this district, victims of macabre crimes, their battered bodies are found in the suburban area. A few of them manage to survive. The perpetrators of these crimes remain unpunished, year by year, harming more and more defenseless people, of whom tragedies are witnessed by subsequent cemeteries or memorial sites [The canvas for the Navy's movie was a book titled *La città che uccide le donne. Inchiesta a Ciudad Juárez* - the fruit of a journalistic investigation on the women of Juarez, conducted by M. Fernandez and J. Ch. Kampala. According to them, the official launch of the "Dead of Juarez" case is the year 1993 when the first corpses of two brutally murdered women in Colonia Alta Vista were found, and another 25 bodies were discovered by the end of the year, an average of two bodies per month. See more in: M. Fernandez, J.-Ch. Kampal, *La città che uccide le donne. Inchiesta a Ciudad Juárez*, Fandango Libri, 2007].

The motive of Mexico as a stop on the road to a better life has come to its own consideration, as exemplified by Cary Fukunaga's *Sin Nombre* [C. Fukunaga (dir.), *Sin Nombre*, Mexico, USA, 2009]. The citizens of Central American countries (in the case of Fukunaga it is Honduras) and South, encouraged by the information flowing from the daily news programs and relatives who have high living standards in the USA, decide to take one of the longest journeys in their past experience to feel the happiness associated with American dream [Ibidem]. They travel hundreds of kilometers on foot, just to get to Mexico, where they will get the train that will take them to the United States. Arriving in the Mexican state, however, is connected with the beginning of their troubles. Immediately after crossing the demarcation line, if they are not caught on the spot and deported to their homeland by border guards, they are robbed of valuable possessions and money by local criminal groups patrolling the periphery of neighboring states [Ibidem]. When they arrive at the designated train station, it turns out, that the train is running only at certain times, and must wait for its arrival for even a few days, spending the nights on the platforms and taking care not to pick up local gangs. Taking on the expected way of transport, because of the large number of people willing to travel, they fight for good seats, often end up on the roof of the vehicle, exposed to bad weather and criminal assaults, and new, bigger dangers lurk on them [Ibidem].

All of the, so far, described levels of Mexico's perception lie in the broader sphere of imagery about this state, which is built by the gangs, or more precisely, the mafias [J. Cotten (dir.), *The Line/ La Linea*, Mexico, USA, 2009]. They control the human trafficking, which took place in Mexico and the United States [See more in: G. Nava, (dir.), *Bordertown*, USA, Mexico, 2006; M. Kreuzpaintner (dir.), *Trade*, Germany, USA, Mexico, 2007]. They exchange information between themselves, they carry out joint actions [See more in: H. Rodriguez (dir.), *Nicotina*, Argentina, Spain, Mexico, 2003]. They subdue entire Mexican cities, pay or threaten local communities to make them obedient, use local public buildings, such as bookstores, business meeting rooms or storage rooms. They cover their criminal activity with legal activity, such as running a bar [See more in: R. Rodriguez (dir.), *Desperado*, USA, 1995]. They are betting on the results of races, giving loans at a high percentage to outsiders who, in case of no repayment of the debt, are murdered unscrupulously. Criminals collect indebtedness. They act as the managers of actors or musicians and make them completely dependent, enrich on their work and image [See more in: J. Lee (dir.), *Air I Breathe*, USA, Mexico, 2007]. They kidnap wealthy Mexican children, play on the feelings of the victims, while simultaneously ensuring inviolability for their actions by paying law enforcement officers and entering them into the fraternity. If their financial demands are not fulfilled, they kill the abducted and look for the next precious target [See more in: T. Scott (dir.), *Man on Fire*, USA, United Kingdom, 2004]. In order to enter their group, everyone must meet certain conditions or successfully pass the designated tests. Mafias or gangs treat their members like relatives, giving each one a nickname. Within these criminal groups everything is common, even women. The betrayal of this "big family" or the killing of a „relative" will compensate for the death of "delinquent" [See more in: C. Fukunaga (dir.), *Sin Nombre*, Mexico, USA, 2009]. The bosses of the described criminal organizations treat themselves with respect, accept the range of their territories, and pay debt for saved lives to their rescuers until death [See more in: G. Verbinski (dir.), *The Mexican*, USA, Mexico, 2001].

The overthrow of power seems to be an overwhelming level of analysis of the Mexican country's image in the films. Gangster, dissatisfied with the lack of cooperation with the President of Mexico and with his legitimate government [It is worth emphasizing, according to I. Kisiełowska and M. Sten, that the nature of Mexico's political life is widespread belief that nothing in this state will happen without the will of the president. Both when there are accidents seemingly favorable to him as well as those that make appearances to be against him. See more in: I. Kisiełowska, M. Sten, *Meksykańskie ABC*, wyd. Iskry, Warszawa, 1977, p.86], wants to kill him. He gets along with a senior commander-in-chief of the state, thirsty for unlimited government in the country, and together they are plotting a conspiracy. At the same time there is a fourth player - a corrupt CIA agent, who hires a paid murderer to prevent the death of a president of the Mexican state [See more in: R. Rodriguez (dir.), *Once Upon a Time in Mexico: Desperado 2*, USA, 2003].

There are also images of the future of Mexico in foreign movies. Alex Rivera II suggested in *Sleep Dealer* [A. Rivera II (dir.), *Sleep Dealer*, Mexico, USA, 2008] the following idea: The population of border Mexican towns due to their unsatisfactory life prospects and limited access to drinking water (large industrial corporations have subdued river estuaries by building dams, and they charge very high fees for using water) are moving to larger agglomerations in their country, like Tijuana, where they work in factories called "sleep dealers" [Ibidem]. Through advanced technology, an innovative discovery of the future - "knots" - using its power and energy, they direct virtual machines in the United States, separated by a large and carefully guarded wall from Mexico [Ibidem].

The filmmakers emphasize, that the citizens of the Mexican state are already exploited in the least expected field- in religion. A young girl deeply devoted and dedicated to the Church, is in love with new priest [C. Carrera (dir.), *El Crimen del padre Amaro/ The Crime of Father Amaro*, Argentina, Spain, Mexico, 2002. Paradoxically, the name of priest- Amaro- means in Esperanto *bitterness*], She recognizes him almost as a saint. He in turn, knowing this fact and being impressed by the beauty of the maiden, uses the situation and starts to meet her. With the passage of time, the girl become his lover. Everything goes well until she becomes pregnant [Ibidem]. A frightened monk, convinced of the importance of his priestly mission over taking responsibility for his actions, impels future mother to abortion, which she refuses to do. However, the clergyman manages to change girl's decision and he take her to a clinic, where illegal abortion occurs. Unfortunately, as a result of badly performed surgery, the girl dies [Ibidem]. Excessive religiousness, combined with the merging of the original Mexican beliefs with contemporary Catholic faith, is seen as an eccentricity, retardation, and even blasphemy, as exemplified in *The Crime of Father Amaro* by a figure of Dionisia - a woman recognized by the local community for a madman, a witch [Ibidem]. Religion is also explained by the social exclusion, caused by the disease - one of the heroines, of the already mentioned film, from birth suffers from epilepsy and psychological ailments, hence the environment gives her the name "Gomorra" [Ibidem].

Gomorra, next to Sodom, was identified with the habitat of the vice, the nest of debauchery, immorality, sin, and trespass. According to the biblical tradition, Sodom and Gomorra were the two cities destroyed by God with fire and sulfur to punish their sinful inhabitants. See more in: Wł. Kopalinski, *Gomorra*, <http://www.slownikonline.pl/kopalinski/70922716BF885680C125658F0005836D.php>. On the other hand, religion or broader faith, in the eyes of the filmmakers, gives the people of Mexico hope to survive - wealthy Mexicans send their children to reputable Catholic schools, trusting, often fruitlessly, that they will be protected there against the wave of kidnappings for ransom, flooding the whole country. Former CIA assassin, soldier of various armies, now guardian of a rich Mexican girl, reads the Holy Bible in his freetime, searching for unsuccessfully solace and justification for the deeds made in the past [See more in: T. Scott. (dir.), *Man on Fire*, USA, United Kingdom, 2004]. A Mexican criminal, who works in a group taking up prostitution, kneels in front of the cross on the border with

the United States and prays for the success of the exchange, which he is to perform [See more in: M. Kreuzpaintner (dir.), *Trade*, Germany, USA, Mexico, 2007]. The church also becomes a place of coup for the life of the "uncomfortable" people [See more in: R. Rodriguez (dir.), *Once Upon a Time in Mexico: Desperado 2*, USA, 2003], it is identified as another scene of mutual, interpersonal, fighting.

In foreign productions dealing with Mexico there is a clear division into rich and poor Mexicans. The first ones, often people coming from other countries, have their own companies [See more in: T. Scott. (dir.), *Man on Fire*, USA, United Kingdom, 2004] or continue to work in business, inherited from relatives [See more in: G. Nava, (dir.), *Bordertown*, USA, Mexico, 2006; M. Kreuzpaintner (dir.), *Trade*, Germany, USA, Mexico, 2007], in both cases employing many workers, becoming the sole source of income for whole families. They enter into agreements with local criminal groups [See more in: T. Scott. (dir.), *Man on Fire*, USA, United Kingdom, 2004], take up gambling and illegal betting on the results of races [See more in: J. Lee (dir.), *Air I Breathe*, USA, Mexico, 2007]. They fulfill their needs and, in addition, they often decide on the lives of others. Less wealthy people work from morning to night, all the time, but it's not enough to make a fortune. Life experience teaches them, that in order to be someone and to win a beloved woman, they need money and arrangements, to occupy the right position, without these attributes they mean nothing [See more in: H. Rodriguez (dir.), *Nicotina*, Argentina, Spain, Mexico, 2003]. They can not afford to fulfill their dreams or little pleasures [See more in: J. Lee (dir.), *Air I Breathe*, USA, Mexico, 2007]. Due to their low state of ownership, they do not even try to seek help from the authorities, they tackle their problems on their own [See more in: M. Kreuzpaintner (dir.), *Trade*, Germany, USA, Mexico, 2007]. They live in poverty and helplessness. They start working at the age of few years [See more in: R. Rodriguez (dir.), *Desperado*, USA, 1995]. The strong asset differentiation is also reflected by the filmmakers' pressures on the living conditions of the heroes - beautiful, spacious villas with gardens and private pools in rich neighborhoods contrast with the cabins of sheet and brick, that do not meet the basic conditions of protection, located on city corners, occupied by poorer representatives of the social layers.

Social inequalities are particularly evident in the gender issue, depicted in international films relating to the Mexican state. As long as men enjoy their full legal rights- they have high office positions or focus on their own business [See more in: T. Scott (dir.), *Man on Fire*, USA, United Kingdom, 2004], they perform important state functions, earn for their families, completely subordinated to them, especially wives [Like the pharmacist in the movie *Nicotina*, who must react to every call of her husband. See more in: H. Rodriguez (dir.), *Nicotina*, Argentina, Spain, Mexico, 2003], manage the property [See more in: J. Cotten (dir.), *The Line/ La Linea*, Mexico, USA, 2009]- and the privileges of women are limited. They work for long hours in factories [See more in: G. Nava, (dir.), *Bordertown*, USA, Mexico, 2006], and if they do not find jobs there, they prostitute for money to protect their own and relatives' fate [See more in: J. Cotten (dir.), *The Line/ La Linea*, Mexico, USA, 2009]. They are

victims of murders and rapes, and their tormentors remain at large, blackmailing and threatening them [See more in: G. Nava, (dir.), *Bordertown*, USA, Mexico, 2006; M. Kreuzpaintner (dir.), *Trade*, Germany, USA, Mexico, 2007]. They do not seek help from the authorities because of its frequent involvement in criminal activities and close contacts with the criminal world. Even if they manage to achieve something, get out of the pathological environment, their bosses or managers force them to submission [The example of Trista- the singer, whose manager is the boss of the Mafia. See more in: J. Lee (dir.), *Air I Breathe*, USA, Mexico, 2007]. The best reflection on the social problems of Mexicans, however, are found in organized crime outlined by filmmakers. Young boys pester the local gangs, in order, paradoxically, to secure themselves against other criminals for whom they have no value [See more in: C. Fukunaga (dir.), *Sin Nombre*, Mexico, USA, 2009]. The power in the whole country or in a particular city rests in the hands of mafias and corrupted officials [See more in: G. Nava, (dir.), *Bordertown*, USA, Mexico, 2006; J. Lee (dir.), *Air I Breathe*, USA, Mexico, 2007; J. Cotten (dir.), *The Line/ La Linea*, Mexico, USA, 2009; R. Rodriguez (dir.), *Desperado*, USA, 1995]. Rarely comes to their detention, arrest or conviction for committed acts, they feel impunity, and, strangely, protected under the law, which they break. Activists and journalists who want to change the situation and find out the truth, are intimidated or perished [See more in: G. Nava, (dir.), *Bordertown*, USA, Mexico, 2006]. Criminals use local people to do their business, such as smuggling and storing drugs [See more in: R. Rodriguez (dir.), *Desperado*, USA, 1995]. Man, as a living being, becomes a commodity - his further existence depends on his position in society, the price, that can be earned from his family [See more in: T. Scott (dir.), *Man on Fire*, USA, United Kingdom, 2004] or sellers [See more in: M. Kreuzpaintner (dir.), *Trade*, Germany, USA, Mexico, 2007].

The main characters in international film productions talking about Mexico often represent ethnocentric attitudes. They do not understand the celebrations observed during their stay in the Mexican country, they consider it as trivial, stupid [See more in: G. Verbinski (dir.), *The Mexican*, USA, Mexico, 2001]. They perceive the lack of high-end cars or other facilities "developed civilization" as a backwardness [Ibidem]. They do not realize the importance of primitive beliefs for indigenous Mexicans [Eva, the girl who managed to survive the attack in Juarez, defines her pursuer as El Diablo, associates him with a bad spirit, what journalist Lauren, who helps her, is not able to grasp. See more in: G. Nava, (dir.), *Bordertown*, USA, Mexico, 2006]. The Mexicans, who appear in the movies, also refer with the distance to foreigners [This is probably due to Mexican history, when from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century Mexicans were under Spanish domination within the viceroyalty of New Spain with the capital of Mexico, where the Spanish monarch had appointed officials from the Iberian Peninsula. The Creole population, born and raised in a Mexican state, occupied the lowest levels of state administration. See more in: K. Brzechczyn, *O wielości linii rozwojowych w procesie historycznym. Próba interpretacji ewolucji społeczeństwa meksykańskiego*, Wyd. Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Poznań 2004, p.168- 172],

judging them as descendants of colonizers who came to their place, as "gringos" [See more in: J. Cotten (dir.), *The Line/ La Linea*, Mexico, USA, 2009].

World filmmakers identify Mexico with one of the largest drug cartels in the world, working through the cooperation of corrupt state officials and high-ranking citizens with representatives of international organized crime groups.. They underline the "lawlessness" that governs this state-the power resting in inappropriate hands, smuggled by illegal activities, guaranteeing the inviolability of those, who deliberately break the generally applicable norms in the country. They broadly divide the problem of international human trafficking, taking place, i.e., also in Mexico - bringing women from Europe or kidnapping young Mexicans for ransom, their further sale in different parts of the world or using them in brothels. They point out the identification of the Mexican state by an international opinion with a stopover point on the way to the United States, which does not have anything to offer, does not give any future perspectives. They mark the exploitation of the people of Mexico by prosperous businessmen, who build large factories and companies, employ a multitude of employees, paying them the lowest cash rates, They enrich themselves on the exploits of these people several times or subordinate local resources and sell access to them at an excessive price. They emphasize the treatment of the Mexican community as a commodity, as the people of lower category, with which you can act as you want. They emphasize the ethnocentric attitudes of people arriving to a Mexican state, not understanding their traditions or customs, minimizing their significance or manipulating them for their own benefit.

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