



Photogram taken from the documentary.

Narco Cultura (2012, directed by Shaul Schwarz).

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How Documentaries See The “War on Drug Trafficking” In Mexico

It is often taken for granted that Mexico’s security crisis sparked by the so-called “war on drug trafficking” began with a well-defined a date and event: December 11, 2006. On that day, the newly sworn-in President Felipe Calderón ordered a joint operation deploying more than 5,000 troops to counter the escalation of organized-crime-linked violence in his home state, Michoacán. The reasons behind this already long, unfortunate episode in recent Mexican history, however, are less recognizable, and many of them are not derived only from internal security dynamics. Rather, they stem from the conflictive relationship with the United States around issues such as the

high demand for illegal substances or arms trafficking on the border, to mention only two.

From the start of this conflict, bellicose language became entrenched in Mexico to refer to the facts: words like “war,” “enemies,” “fight,” and “sacrifice” proliferated in political and journalistic discourses and everyday conversations. This tendency shows up not only in terms of vocabulary, but also in the narrative, and was woven together based on President Calderón’s statements to the public and in official documents like the National Development Plan. In this widely-disseminated official version, the war pitted an “us,” which conflated the civilian population and the armed forces, against the “others,” agents of organized crime. The latter were blamed for high rates of violence and the break-down of society, and were thought to prey on Mexican children and youths. In the United States, it

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was also said that violence in Mexico was the result of a war: both the Bush and Obama administrations recognized the “bravery” of their Mexican counterpart in the fight against the drug cartels, which they compared to terrorist cells, as shown, for example, in the justification of the Mérida Initiative.

However, given the clearly asymmetrical conditions, it should come as no surprise that the interpretations of a given phenomenon would be so different, depending on which side of the border they were formulated on. Almost three six-year Mexican administrations have passed since the violence in Mexico began to escalate and government actors in both countries continue to explain the reasons for the crisis. They point to them either as an imminent threat to U.S. security—remember Governor Greg Abbott’s recent executive order about Mexican cartels—, or as a problem that has emerged from long-standing political and territorial disputes for which the United States has not yet taken responsibility, as is the case of Mexico’s lawsuits against U.S. arms manufacturers.

These discrepancies are also clear in other spheres, such as the way the “war on drug trafficking” is depicted in a wide universe of symbolic production: music, apparel, soap operas, architecture, film, etc. The diversity and complexity of the spectrum called “narco-culture” makes it difficult to define intrinsic characteristics or an aesthetic of all its cultural manifestations. However, it seems clear that all its elements, actors, and dynamics are interlocked and feed and depend on each other. In the sphere of audiovisual representations, fictional film has explored the issue of violence using different tones: from humorous movies like *El infierno* (Hell) (2012) or *Salvando al soldado Pérez* (Saving Private Pérez) (2011), to the dramas *Sin señas particulares* (No Distinguishing Marks) (2020), *La civil* (The Civilian) (2021), or *Noche de fuego* (Night of Fire) (2021), to mention just a few.

Non-fiction representations, on the other hand, have documented the violence using their apparent realism and making affirmations about the world they film. In

contrast with fiction, documentaries establish a contract of trust with viewers and propose subtle or evident interpretations of the problem in question. To recognize at least some of the characteristics of these documentary views about the “war on drug trafficking,” I will look at two early examples of productions, one from the United States and the other from Mexico, that took on the task of bringing to the screen aspects of the organized-crime-related security crisis in its initial stage.

Border Wars, or the Invasion Of the Barbarians

In the long history of stereotypical representations of the Mexico-U.S. border, documented at least since the nineteenth century, the escalation of violence in Mexico beginning in 2006 significantly contributed to the reactivation of processes of reborderization (closing borders) on both material and symbolic levels. Productions like the documentary series *Border Wars* (2010-2016) propagated a discourse of fear in which the region was represented as an ungovernable war zone, at the mercy of traffickers in illegal substances. For seven seasons, the National Geographic Channel cameras followed different Department of Homeland Security agents in their border protection work. Despite its apparent realism, the program tended to dehumanize migrants, present the majority of people detained as potentially violent criminals, and use militaristic language to describe these arrests, as the very title of the program suggests.

According to the producers, the television series is filmed in documentary style, presenting real experiences of border agents in action. However, its treatment of reality is a far cry from the transparency expected from this form of representation. *Border Wars* can be considered a hybrid because it also deploys other film and television genres’ use of spectacle to heroically present its protagonists’ feats. It is part of the media’s propensity to depict social processes like migration in a biased way. The production’s immensely widespread reach, on the one hand, and the fact that the channel that broadcast it presents itself as an objective, legitimate, knowledge-based medium, on the other, lead to the spread of anti-immigrant sentiments that, in the political sphere, are highly beneficial to figures like Donald Trump.¹

Now, despite the spectacle used in presenting the Border Patrol's job and that the series's introduction and trailers announce operations against traffickers of illicit substances, in most of the episodes, the agents' tasks consist of detaining undocumented migrants attempting to cross into the United States. Most of their job, then, is to contain and not confront, and is very far from the border wars advertised in the series title.

The documentary series shows only one aspect of a crisis that already had thousands of deaths to its name by the time it was broadcasting on the other side of the border. The presence of "the traffickers," more than demonstrated, is suggested, imagined, and invented in the persons of migrants, but the violence is real and is documented by National Geographic Channel cameras. Despite these and other signs of alarm in the representation of sensitive issues like violence, *Border Wars* set a generic precedent that has been repeated in later years in programs like *Border Live* (Discovery Channel, 2018), *Inside the Real Narcos* (Netflix, 2018), *Narcoworld* (Netflix, 2019), *Borderforce USA: The Bridges* (NatGeo, 2019-2020), and *Narco Wars* (NatGeo 2020-2021).

***Estado de shock* (State of Shock), Or the Documentary's Critical Vocation**

Dealing with a reality as close as it is well known, the way the drastic increase in violence in Mexico, starting in 2006, is dealt with a far cry from the spectacle of U.S. documentary programs. And, although violent hotspots have exploded under the three federal administrations in different parts of the country due to the dynamics of illegal exchanges that happen there and to the accumulation of a good part of the total homicides arising from this conflict, the northern border has been a reiterative focus for filmmakers. Thus, not all documentaries have centered on the border, but it is possible to recognize that they do make constant reference to the problems there as well as their consequences in the rest of the country.

Toward the end of President Felipe Calderón's administration, Carlos Mendoza directed one of the first approaches to the issue in a documentary, *Estado de shock, industria del narco y guerra espuria* (State of Shock, the Narco Industry and a Fake War) (2011). The film, created under the aegis of the independent production company

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Canal 6 de Julio, draws a balance sheet of security during Felipe Calderón's six years in office. The film's explanation of the background and development of the crisis of violence gives an important place to the United States for its influence as a sponsor of the armed conflict. Above all, it positions it as a society that, impacted by the experience of terrorism and war, has ceded individual freedoms and guarantees in order to give the government more power over its citizens to ensure peace.

If, as pointed out, the asymmetries between Mexico and the United States have been determining factors for formulating their respective representations of organized-crime-related violence, we should note that this inequality is a determining factor in the economic conditions in which they are constructed. The NatGeo emporium is a far cry from Canal 6 de Julio, which defines itself as a self-managed project that distributes its documentaries person-to-person on non-commercial circuits like bookstores, universities, and open-air forums.

Mendoza's documentary does not hesitate to depict the brutal reality of the violence on screen: journalistic footage shows bodies, blood, and torture. Its arguments must be understood in its specific context: a presidential term "marked by a history of systematic violation of human rights, enormous social discontent, a profound lack of credibility of institutions, and a long association of drug trafficking and the executive branch."² The documentary's evaluation is that Calderón's security strategy brought with it innumerable wrongs, many of them also the result of U.S. interventionism. Canal 6 de Julio does not disguise its political will in this production: it aimed to impact the 2012 federal elections in favor of the leftwing candidate.

Estado de shock has been followed by other documentaries that reinterpret documentary activism and seek their own impact by other means, not taking an explicit position or proposing an academic interpretation of the causes of violence in Mexico. Rather, they document the texture and depth of the consequences of that violence in concrete stories: in the search for the disappeared (Re-

tratos de una búsqueda [Portrait of a Search], by Alicia Calderón, 2014; Soles negros [Black Suns], by Julien Elie, 2018); in presenting the voices of victims and perpetrators (*Tempestad* [Storm], by Tatiana Huezo, 2016; *La libertad del diablo* [Freedom of the Devil], by Everardo González, 2017); or in the vicissitudes of forced displacement on the Mexico-U.S. border (*El guardián de la memoria* [The Guardian of Memory], by Marcela Arteaga, 2019).

Final Considerations

Other documentary approaches to organized-crime-related violence deserve attention from activists, academics, and public policy-makers. *Narcocultura* (2012), *Cartel Land* (2015), and *Lo que reina en las sombras* (What Reigns in the Shadows) (2015) are productions that depict stories from both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border in the same narrative. They are as terrifying as they are predictable: the international border between the two countries is a hinge that keeps two worlds together that would otherwise be separated by a deep abyss called asymmetry. While one side can count its dead in the hundreds of thousands

due to violence, the other side can do the same, but due to drug overdoses. While one tries to reinvent strategies that are proven failures in the fight against those who generate the violence, the other continues to suffer the consequences of customs and traditions deeply rooted in its national history. In the broad filmography of the so-called “war against drugs,” documentary representations stand out because of their apparent realism. While this by no means assures ethical or objective productions, the fact is that their visions of the world we live in are important because they come to us, the audience, invested with a certain authority that only the documentary genre is capable of giving to the images on a screen. **MM**

Notes

- 1 Graciela Martínez-Zalce, “Frontera México-Estados Unidos: ¿Cómo enfrentar un espectáculo de guerra que entretiene mientras deforma?” in Alberto Vital, ed., *Educación, cultura, información* (Colección Problema-Solución) (Mexico City: Coordinación de Humanidades, UNAM, 2019), pp. 15-30.
- 2 Liliana Cordero Marines, “Confluencias y divergencias en Norteamérica a principios del siglo XXI: un análisis desde el documental de denuncia política,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales*, no. 243 (September-December 2021), pp. 369-396.



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