

12 The *Naco* in Mexican Film

La banda del carro rojo, Border Cinema, and Migrant Audiences¹

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Modern cinematic technology has become a weapon in the struggle for social justice . . . (Cine-Aztlán, 1992: 275)

My childhood memories sometimes seem unsettling to other people. I remember helicopters hovering overhead as I labored in fields of fruit, spending the night in a sleeping bag in the hallway of a two-bedroom apartment shared by my thirteen family members, storing all of my earthly belongings in a *cajón* (cardboard box), watching two of my sisters get caught by the INS as I hid in an orchard, sitting terrified in a moving vehicle after my cousin jumped out of the driver's seat and ran into a field of corn to avoid *la migra* (U.S. Border Patrol). When asked, I always answer that I had a happy childhood. Movies, particularly Mexican cinema, provided a rich refuge for me and for my imagination. I vividly remember a family trip to a dilapidated movie theater in Fresno, California. For the price of admission, my parents got free or reduced-rate counsel from a paralegal in an upstairs office next to the projectionist. While my parents and other Mexican *illegal* immigrants obtained assistance with the challenge of legalizing their status in the United States, we children were captivated by the film being screened—*La banda del carro rojo*/The Red Car Gang (Rubén Galindo, 1976)—a film about four Mexican men struggling to survive in the United States with limited financial, social, and cultural resources. As one of eleven children of a Mexican family of migrant workers, I could well understand the desperation of these four characters that fight by all means necessary to attain a better standard of living, a life free from the hardships of racial or class prejudice, what you call a Mexican immigrant or migrant version of the 'American Dream.'

Although my family did not turn to a life of crime, as did the characters of *La banda*, this and other films like *La mafia de la frontera*/Border Mafia (Jaime Fernández, 1979) and *Asalto en Tijuana*/Armed Robbery in Tijuana (Alfredo Gurrola, 1984) captured elements of our experiences on the Mexico/U.S. border, experiences that make many other Americans uncomfortable. Looking back, I realize how meaningful it was for me to see filmic

representations of my family's journey on the big screen. My ten brothers and sisters and I eagerly consumed such Mexican films as *Maldita miseria!* Damn Misery (Júlio Aldama, 1979), and *Perro callejero*/Street Dog (Gilberto Gazcón, 1980), with actors such as Valentín Trujillo, Rosa Gloria Chagoyán, and Mario and Fernando Almada. These Mexican movies of the 1970s and 1980s, belonging to a genre referred to as border cinema (a subsection of exploitation cinema), often detail the lives of recent Mexican immigrants in the United States and focus on the Mexico/U.S. border region. My family is just one example of the type of audience drawn to these films—an audience of recent immigrants, mostly from Mexico but also from other Latin American countries. This largely ignored audience predominantly works in the service industry as farm laborers, mechanics, maids, gardeners, janitors—people not often represented in American popular culture.

Much critical work on Mexican cinema focuses on the Golden Age (1940–1955), a period that reflected the emergence and development of a state-sanctioned ‘national cinema,’ and which participated in defining Mexican national identity (Mora, 1982; Paranaguá, 1995; Noble, 2005; Tierney, 2007). In recent years, more critical attention is given to what's being called the ‘New Wave’ of Mexican cinema, created by filmmakers such as the former directing/writing team Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo Arriaga (*Amores perros*, 2000), Alfonso Cuarón (*Y tu mamá también*, 2001) and Guillermo del Toro (*El espinazo del diablo*, 2001). This Mexican cinema of the past ten years has captivated international audiences, won critical acclaim in international festivals, and given much deserved attention to cinema south of the border.

In spite of these current trends in Mexican film scholarship, the border cinema, which so captivated me and other migrant audiences, is currently being ignored by both film critics and the academic community. While acknowledging the popularity of these films with recent immigrants, critics and scholars tend to focus on the genre's low production values, stock characters, stilted performances, rampant sexism and misogyny, cheap and fast production processes, and straight-to-video distribution as indications of its limited cultural and artistic value. Film scholar David Maciel, who has done extensive research on Mexican and border cinema, rightfully points to the fact that the private producers of border cinema are motivated by profits, “. . . with little regard for creativity, aesthetics, or even professional standards” (1990: 29). Prominent cultural critic and film scholar Norma Iglesias confirms Maciel's assessment of border cinema and also maintains that it “tends to standardize forms of representation, thus avoiding the complex cultural, social, and political realities of the border region” (2003: 211–212). Even in Mexico, this border cinema is considered to be *naco* (a derogatory term which I discuss later).

In writing about Mexican popular films, Maricruz Castro Ricalde brings up the issue of “worthiness”—noting that most Westerners reserve the word *art* for what is considered the ‘best’ and “most worthy” (2004: 195–196).

Ricalde addresses the inherent hierarchy of culture, one in which in the case of popular and thereby exploitation films occupies a low position. In her discussion of María Elena Velasco's (*La India María*) films, which she uses as a case study of popular films of the 1970s and the 1980s, she notes the manner in which public taste takes a back seat to media reception; it is the critics, she argues, that determine aesthetic achievement, not the box-office records (2004: 196–97).² Exploitation films are equally ignored by the privileged classes and the academic elite, who construct their own “mediating imaginary” that excludes the popular classes (Ricalde, 2004: 210). Ricalde's concerns share a point of contact with Andrew Higson's work on national cinemas. He argues that the context of consumption is as important to the discussion of national cinema as the site of production, and that we should focus our attention more “on the activity of national audiences and the conditions under which they make sense of and use the films they watch” (Higson, 1989: 36).

I agree with Ricalde's analysis that it is a serious mistake for critics to lose sight of the popular audience, and to dismiss the importance of popular genres such as exploitation cinema. While agreeing with Maciel's argument that the focus of the producers of border cinema is profit-motivated, I disagree that this in and of itself justifies his conclusion that “it is difficult to find many artistic, cultural, or social values in these contemporary films” (1990: 29). Furthermore, I take issue with Iglesias's statement that “the manner in which border cinema has simplified and decontextualized a complex border reality and the migration process, has served to stifle border residents' critical engagement with their reality” (2003: 198).³

In this essay, I reclaim the controversial term *naco* and apply it to the genre of border cinema; specifically, films produced from 1976 through the present. The term *naco*, as previously defined, was originally used as a slur against Indians, peasants, or anyone who stood for the provincial backwardness and who could only be redeemed through an international culture (Lomnitz, 2001: 111). Although I acknowledge the rampant violence and misogyny—hence the term exploitation—of the *naco* genre, I re-semantize this negative valence to challenge the conventional understanding of a marginal cinema that is disavowed and derided by dominant critical discourse. I define *naco* cinema as a transnational cinema that reflects and creates the identity of recent Latino immigrants into the United States, a group that is constantly transgressing established boundaries. From here on in, I will refer to border cinema as *naco* cinema. All *naco* movies are mass-produced quickly, cheaply, and primarily for profit. As such, *naco* cinema belongs to the genre of exploitation cinema, and encompasses many sub-genres, among them: action, western, comedy, brothel (*cabaretera*), horror, science-fiction, wrestling, and *fronterizo* films.

Following Ricalde's footsteps, I hope to contribute to the agenda of cultural studies in democratizing the study of culture by revaluing the ‘low genre’ of *naco* cinema, and reevaluating it critically. The very fact that these

films are so wildly popular with recent Mexican and Latino immigrant audiences, the fastest growing demographic in the United States, suggests that it is worthwhile to undertake a second look at the genre.⁴ Studying these films can give us a means to access the histories, dreams, and realities of the audiences that consume and find meaning in them. These films, much like the *corridos*, as María Herrera-Sobek has argued, “will yield valuable information as to the ideology, world view, political, economic and social situation of the Mexican people” (1979: 49). By exploring how these films represent immigrant stories on the Mexico/U.S. border region, we can gain a more complete picture of the audience’s experience as new immigrants in the United States. Furthermore, we can learn about the ways in which *naco* cinema speaks to migrant communities’ “. . . struggle for social justice . . .” (Cine-Aztlán, 1992: 275).⁵

This chapter focuses on those *naco* films belonging to the subgenre inspired by *corridos* (traditional ballads) and *narcocorridos* (drug ballads), specifically films based on the songs of the Mexican-American superband *Los Tigres del Norte*. I begin with a brief historical overview of the origin and development of *naco* cinema, starting with what I will refer to as the first phase (from the Golden Age to 1976), which saw the emergence of ‘*naco* taste,’ followed by the second phase (1976–1989), which consolidated the genre, and finally, the third phase (1989–present), which saw the genre transform in new ways. As a case study, I will revisit the classic *naco* film *La banda del carro rojo*, a film seminal to the genre of *naco* cinema and formative in the development of my own identity as a new immigrant, and later, as a Chicano thinker. I will explore how audiences read films such as *La banda del carro rojo*, and others. I argue that rather than being cursorily dismissed, *naco* films such as *La banda del carro rojo* should be validated and seen as important cultural documents that merit serious academic inquiry.⁶

SETTING THE STAGE: THE BIRTH OF NACO TASTE IN CINEMA (1950–1976)

This period, which I refer to as the birth of *naco* taste in cinema, began towards the end of the Golden Age. During the Golden Age, Mexican national cinema showed the country as a glorious developing nation with romanticized peasants and campesinos (e.g., Emilio ‘El Indio’ Fernández’s *María Candelaria*, 1943, and Fernando de Fuente’s *Allá en el rancho grande/Out on the Big Ranch*, 1936). These films and others like them were made to build national character and to educate citizens. Mexican national cinema was the political and cultural re-visioning of a national identity alongside the development of the vibrant cinema industry (Hershfield, 1999: 81). However, due to the withdrawal of U.S. financial support post-1946 and the aggressive competitive tactics of the Hollywood film

industry, which forced the Mexican state to recant on some of its protectionist measures, by 1950 Mexico's state-sponsored cinema was in crisis, and it took twenty years for any major changes to occur (Tierney, 2007: 160–161). A new period of Mexican cinema was ushered in by the governmental policies of Luis Echeverría's *sexenio* (1970–76). Filmmakers like Felipe Cazals, Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, Arturo Ripstein, and others of the *Nuevo cine* movement switched to a more realist and less idealized vision of the country (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 46–52). It was during this period that Mexican filmmakers moved into previously unexplored territory that would take them further and further from the centralized, romanticized idea of the nation.

Towards the end of the 1940s, in an attempt to save the film industry, private producers began making low-budget genre films that placed the plot in an urban setting (De la Vega, 1999: 166). What was born in this transitional period was a model of production that was cheap, fast, and made primarily for profit. Film scholar John Mraz has referred to this as the development of the *churro* in the early 1950s. A *churro* is a cheap, mass-produced, sugary, fried pastry—in Mexican film it describes any piece of work hastily made, poorly done, and created purely for the “fast buck” (Mraz, 1984: 23). Although *churros* alienated the Mexican middle-class audience, who turned to Hollywood movies instead, they were very popular with the urban working populace (De la Vega, 1999: 167).

These genre pictures were comedies, romances, melodramas, adventures, and musicals (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 7). They were characterized by their heroes (Mario Moreno ‘Cantinflas,’ German Valdez ‘Tin Tan,’ and ‘El Santo’ the masked wrestler). These popular heroes were outsiders and reflected the same characteristics of the audience who eagerly consumed their films. El Santo physically wrestled with the oppressors whilst Cantinflas and Tin Tan (in films like *Ahí está el detalle/Here is the Point*, 1940; *El rey del barrio/The King of the Neighborhood*, 1950) outwitted them through verbal sparring. These new heroes challenged and unmasked the social problems of Mexico's inner city (inequality) and also addressed global fears (the cold war, etc.).

Although the abovementioned films were sponsored by the state, they were made according to the new model of film production, and reflected the emergence of the themes that would come to characterize *naco* cinema. These themes were a direct result of the influx of working poor into the cities due to the accelerated process of industrialization that had begun years earlier (De la Vega, 1999: 166). Films that dealt with these themes are Ismael Rodríguez's two huge melodramatic successes *Nosotros los pobres* and *Ustedes los ricos* (*We the Poor*, 1947, and *You the Rich*, 1948) as they showcased the famous Pedro Infante but without his trademark *charro* (cowboy) outfit and his horse, which had gained him immense popularity and a place in national identity. He now wore clothes and spoke like the vast majority of new arrivals in the city. His singing still matched his

persona in the film, but he was now depicted as a poor working-class hero, living in a Mexico City slum where most of the inhabitants have to deal with the daily struggle of survival.

Several factors led to the consolidation of the *naco* genre in the mid-1970s. One was the beginning of video production and later straight-to-video cinema, which changed the established traditional forms of production and distribution. But the most significant were the governmental policy changes made after President Luis Echeverría Álvarez left office. The gains that the industry saw during Echeverría's tenure were wiped out when President José López Portillo came to power in 1976 (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 30). Portillo considered Echeverría's term a disaster, both to the country and to the film industry, and he began reversing the trends of his predecessor by eliminating the state's direct involvement in the film industry (Ramírez Berg, 1992: 51). By 1977 the private sector's production of *naco* film was already much greater than that of the state-sponsored sector. At this point most themes of low-budget film productions had moved from Mexico City to the northern parts of the country, particularly to *la frontera*, following the large population migration to the northern border region.⁷ Even though most of these seasonal workers made the trip back home to towns in rural Mexico, many stayed in the border region. Here they found work and maintained hope for alternative ways to enter the United States. The increased population in the lawless border region made the area ripe for corruption. Recent arrivals from the countryside were often naïve and gullible. Another group of new arrivals came to take advantage of the country folk—drug smugglers and *coyotes* (guides taking people illegally across the border). There had always been corruption, but the increased population and opportunity for dishonesty pushed the problem into the open, making corruption an expected part of daily life. Corruption ran rampant in the government as well, from federal officials to police on the street. The border thus became a transitional area or a 'holding cell' for Mexicans hoping to eventually settle permanently in the United States. As migration became more and more a part of the reality of Mexico's poorer class—and as people moved from the south to *la frontera* (the border)—their lives were characterized by new experiences, new problems, and new dreams. It was these new experiences of people on the border that provided the foundation for a great majority of themes in *naco* cinema's second stage.

THE NACO IN MEXICAN FILM, 1976–89: *LA BANDA DEL CARRO ROJO*

By the mid-1970s, with the consolidation of the genre of *naco* cinema, the plots of *naco* films focused on the hardships of leaving home, corruption, city life, working in a foreign country, drug and alcohol, and other struggles of day-to-day addiction. The dark subject matter offered an

element of realism combined with exaggerated glamour and violence. Like in *telenovelas* (soap operas), emotions in these *naco* films ran high and tensions are built up with soundtracks engineered to evoke suspense. The films popularized during this period were action movies revolving around drug dealing and the border as a place controlled by the drug cartels. This period also saw the direct merger between *corridos* (traditional ballads) and films. Many narratives were based upon and driven by *corridos*. Popular musical groups sang about common drug dealers in *corridos*, catapulting them to the status of local and regional heroes. The audiences of this *naco* cinema could identify directly with the experiences depicted on screen; the narratives were contemporary to their own. While the viewers may have been far removed from drug trafficking and other illegal activities, they certainly experienced crossing the border, racial prejudice, and financial hardship. Audience members may have known family members or friends that experienced the dramatic stories of this early *naco* cinema; this was a world familiar to them that was unavailable in mainstream cinema.

Starting in the mid-1970s and continuing through to the present moment, many *naco* films base their plots on the lyrics of *corridos* and especially on a subgroup of ballads called *narcocorridos*, which celebrate and eulogize the life of drug traffickers on the border. Beginning in the mid-1970s, the popular Mexican-American band *Los Tigres del Norte* (The Tigers of the North) sang *narcocorridos*, which became the foundation for a series of *narco* films (*La banda del carro rojo*, *Treinta segundos para morir/Thirty Seconds to Die* (Rubén Benavides, 1981), *Un hombre violento/A Violent Man* (Valentín Trujillo, 1986), *La jaula de oro/The Golden Cage* (Sergio Véjar, 1987), *La camioneta gris/The Grey Pickup* (José Luis Urquieta, 1990). The audience's familiarity with the songs made these films easy to follow, since they were primarily functioning as an extended video to accompany the music.

La banda del carro rojo is the first *Los Tigres narcocorrido* to be made into a film. The film follows a plot outlined in the *corrido*, but adds elements to fill out subplots. There are four principal characters, or *nacos*, in the film that make up the red car gang. At first, each seems to follow the stereotypical formula of this genre, but a closer reading of the characters reveals that they are much more complex. The audience may not only identify with each character in the way they dress and talk but also in the ways they think and react when confronted with life-changing decisions. They are open to reading depth into these characters even though each character was created according to a stereotype, and within a formula that remains the same throughout most of these films. Because many audience members have personally shared the experiences of the characters, or at the least know of someone (a loved one, friend, relative) who has, the audience is not simply passively enjoying the entertainment or easily manipulated by the stock characters and formulas; I argue that this audience is actively engaging and ascribing new meanings to situations and characters on the screen.

In the film *La banda del carro rojo*, the character Pedro, played by Pedro Infante Jr. (the son of Golden Age actor Pedro Infante), is a naïve and newly arrived illegal immigrant to the United States. While the actor's father had huge critical success and was seen as a national icon, Pedro Infante Jr. can be seen as an *unofficial* national icon, representative of the experiences of displaced Mexicans. Unlike his father, he is ignored by the critics because of his participation in *naco* films. In this film, Pedro exhibits all the dreams of the first-generation migrant: he expects easy wealth and fame to fall into his hands. Pedro insists that in the United States “they recognize talent” and he believes that he will successfully become a Hollywood actor. When we first see Pedro, he is wearing the typical and simple outfit of a humble Mexican worker (worn-out jeans, T-shirt, and tennis shoes), but through the course of the film, he abandons them and instead adopts entirely new attire, consisting of hat, boots, and three-piece suit that display a northern influence. The audience may quickly read his new American attire as a sign of his loss of national identity. While Pedro may have seemingly acquired the external trappings that would signal he has achieved the financial success part of the ‘American Dream,’ there is a high price to pay for the fortune he made through drug money. By acting illegally, Pedro has in fact betrayed the honest principles of the ‘American Dream.’ But the audience can nonetheless still share, enjoy, and vicariously rejoice in his material success, without having to compromise its own honest identity.

The character Rodrigo, played by Fernando Almada, is a Mexican immigrant who has been in the United States for many years and is already disillusioned with the possibility of ever achieving the financial stability and well-being enshrined in the idea of the ‘American Dream.’ He is in debt and cannot afford to pay for the medical treatment of his terminally ill daughter. He argues with his brother in the film and declares that he is an honest man, but his brother Quintana counters with “what has honesty and hard work given you, a life of misery, a ranch that you can’t afford, a wife that abandons you and a sick daughter. You call that progress?” After some deliberation, Rodrigo decides to help his brother smuggle 100 kilos of cocaine into the United States. He hopes that with the money he can take his daughter to the best hospitals and to the best doctors who can find a cure for her disease. In an earlier scene, Rodrigo and Pedro’s ideologies clash during their conversation. Pedro believes that Rodrigo has ‘made it’ because he has cars and a ranch but Rodrigo counters that he owns nothing and that he cannot even pay for his daughter’s treatment. Rodrigo refers to his own story, a life of hard work resulting in very little wealth or upward mobility.

The character Quintana, played by the very famous Mário Almada, is familiar to many in the Mexican immigrant community. Mário Almada is one of the most successful working actors in *naco* cinema, having made well over three hundred films. He has worked with respected Mexican directors like Arturo Ripstein and has had critical acclaim. The great majority of the films that he has starred in have always dealt with social issues, even

though most critics find fault with the films for being too simplistic in their approach. In this film he plays the leader of the red car gang who feels forced to venture into illegal business to get out of debt. Although his gambling addiction may make him unsympathetic to American viewers, many Mexicans from the lower socioeconomic strata interpret his behavior as an act of desperation and relate it to his quest to achieve the prosperity that is supposedly available to all (if they work hard) in the United States (i.e., another aspect of the 'American Dream'). His trajectory during the film traces an arc from an honest citizen with a gambling problem, to a drug trafficker, to a dead man. Quintana illustrates the difficult position of desperate, poor immigrants with few avenues for upward mobility, who make the wrong choices and are forced to pay a high price.

The character Boom represents a Mexican-American, or better yet, a *pocho* who is deeply entrenched in the criminal element.⁸ He may be interpreted as a product of Chicano alienation caused by the unassailable consumer culture of the 1960s and 1970s that recent immigrants could not participate in. As a response, many lower-income Mexican-Americans, frustrated and enraged by the impossibility of ever having the money to actively participate in the consumer culture through honest means, turned to wage-earning endeavors that involved crime (Limón, 1994: 109). Boom operates as a *coyote*, ferrying desperate Mexicans across the border. In this act, he exploits others from his home country, charging exorbitant rates for a voyage that may not even be successful. His drug addiction also makes him unreliable and selfish. Boom has long since discarded the idea of making an 'honest' living in favor of making a lucrative income by any means necessary.

What the four characters have in common is their deep desire for freedom. Driven by different motivations into a life of crime, they hope to evade the authorities and make money in order to get out of debt, pay for medical treatment, or simply just for narcissistic reasons. When it becomes clear that their pursuit of money through crime is not sustainable, and the Texas Rangers pick up their trail, they decide to avoid capture at any cost. In the film's climactic finale, when they find themselves surrounded by the Rangers, they decide to take a last stand and die with a pistol in their hand. Feeling victimized by society their entire lives, they decide to take charge in their moment of death. In their eyes, death as free men is better than spending the rest of their lives in prison.

The *corridor*, as well as the film *La banda del carro rojo*, illustrates many of the themes of Mexican immigrants' cultural experiences, beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present, including social inequality, the struggle of migration, the expectations of quick success, the temptation of drugs, limited access to power, and the differences between first- and second-generation Mexican-Americans. The narrative deals with an experience common to immigrants to the United States: the hope of achieving the 'American Dream' quickly destroyed by the realities of discrimination, alienation, and exclusion. New immigrants who enter the

United States illegally are immediately criminalized. They are uncomfortable with authority and feel excluded from the social arena. Some internalize a feeling of criminality. The lack of education and opportunities for social mobility lead people to the drudgery of low-wage jobs and desperate frustration. Often the frustration is centered on the inability to pay for or access basic human needs such as health care. For some, this frustration pushes them towards a life of crime—the only way they feel able to gain control of their destiny.

The characters in *La banda*, who deal with the same feelings of exclusion and disempowerment, choose to empower themselves through crime. They act out the subconscious fantasies of the audience—who get to see themselves mirrored on screen—powerful and courageous, standing against the system. Even if the character dies at the end, at least he has died after his moment of glory. Though most migrants do not lead lives of crime, either because their repressed rage against the system keeps them disempowered or because their religious beliefs warn them against it, they are responsive to the story of *La banda*, and other *naco* films like it. Thus, what appears at first glance to be a simple and uncomplicated narrative that is based on a two-minute song can actually be read as a profound reflection on the complexity of the immigrant experience.

THE NEW NACO: 1990 TO THE PRESENT

By the 1980s, most *naco* movies were made by small independent companies and shot on video. Independent producers slashed costs by relying on family members for casting, sets, and crew. Shooting took place on local ranches owned by relatives. The actors often wore their own clothes, and props consisted of whatever objects were available on site. Producers sometimes filmed two movies simultaneously to save costs. Most films took approximately three to four weeks to shoot at a cost of \$50,000 to \$85,000 per film (Ramírez Berg, 2002: 226). Cheap and quickly made, the films were characterized by low production values and nonprofessional acting. When the VCR became widely accessible in the mid-1980s, many *naco* films became available on video in local Latino markets in the United States. Advertising for these films replicates the flashy nature of the films themselves; posters are very colorful and designed with images of guns, cars, women, and drugs. People could purchase a tape for approximately \$10 to \$20 and rent them for around \$3.

Films of the third stage of *naco* cinema continue to reflect the political, economic, and industrial conditions of the period. They reflect the oppressive daily life in the border region, and explore misery, violence, overcrowding, and promiscuity. The plots of the films continue to deal with the experiences of their intended audience, the recent Mexican and Latino immigrants in the United States, largely poor and lacking in formal education, who cross to the United States to work for little money in

el norte. We can determine a direct line of influence between these *naco* films and the Mexican films that garnered such critical acclaim in recent years. For instance, *La banda de carro rojo* and Robert Rodríguez's *El mariachi* (1992) both comment on the financial crisis of the 1980s, the war on drugs, NAFTA, and the fortification of the U.S./Mexico border. As the United States stepped up actions against the new migrant class, the resentment in the films became more pronounced. As the frustrations of new Latino immigrants increased, the *naco* films became more violent and unrepentant. In the decades after *La banda del carro rojo* was produced, both *narcocorridos* and *naco* films based on them became progressively more violent, showcasing machine guns, omnipresent swearing, and female degradation. What's more, while the characters in *La banda del carro rojo* pay for their crimes at the end of the film (they all die), the criminal characters in the more recent *naco* films often do not pay for their crimes. The character of the drug dealer in the *naco* films has become more of a cultural icon—a cruel modern hero *never* defeated by the system.

With their low production values, unprofessional acting, shoddy sets, melodramatic plots, gratuitous violence, and sex, these films do not have much merit according to the standards of traditional film criticism, which dismisses the importance of films made primarily for profit and mass consumption. Iglesias writes that the films I have dubbed *naco* films are created solely as a response to commercial interests (2003: 211–12). Although producers may have the mighty dollar in mind when making *naco* films, critics are misguided in their quick dismissal of this film genre or in ignoring the films merely because they can be read as 'low' culture. For, in doing so, they fail to see the true value of these films as important social and cultural documents that represent the struggles and dreams of a group of people.

In this essay, I have argued that *naco* films are worthy of the scrutiny of academic study. These *naco* films are cultural documents of social transformation that attest to the developing identity of the migrant class of Latinos. Once one understands the context in which these films are created, and to whom they are addressed, one can begin to appreciate their cultural importance and relevance. When defining Mexico, particularly in the context of today's political and economic climate, it is important to look at all aspects of the cultural spectrum, not simply concentrate on the most palatable ones. *Naco* cinema addresses the unpleasant realities of many immigrants living on low wages outside of their home country.

I would even go so far as to argue that many of the descendants who were born in the United States of recent immigrants privilege *naco* films above mainstream American and Mexican films because they deliberately offend middle- and upper-class aesthetic values. *Naco* films do not attempt to create lasting artistic polemics or deep philosophical thoughts, nor are they interested in capturing a large percentage of the box-office market or Oscar nominations. Audiences celebrate these films because they discard the typical goals of most moviemakers. By deliberately patronizing

'low' culture, audiences chip away at the dominance of the mainstream. By watching the latest *naco* film on DVD, audience members take a small amount of money from big-name directors and the Hollywood circus. This immigrant film consumers seem to take delight in the fact that they are not funding 'high' art when they watch *naco* films; they enjoy participating in the 'low' end of the standard artistic film hierarchy. This economic and social move remains subtle and unrecognized by almost all but the participants, but it does signal a deliberate choice (Avalos, 2007–2008).

It seems that my childhood memories of a low-income Mexican family living on the border of the United States and Mexico have become compelling subject matter for the critically acclaimed 'New Wave' of Mexican films, such as *Babel* (González Iñárritu, 2006). However, it is important to remember that these stories have been told for decades to a largely ignored audience of migrant workers. Academia and popular culture recognize the public's interest in these 'new' stories and in this 'new' form of storytelling, but may not understand its ancestry. I would like to give credit to the *naco* films as part of the foundation for this new movement. I believe that this new cinema is not entirely 'new' but relies upon a foundation of quickly produced, critically dismissed *naco* movies: both share attention to the border region, as a place of opportunity and self-invention; both feature grainy, low-quality film style and high melodrama. In an investigation of *naco* films, we may trace a continuum between the Golden Age and the current crop of incredibly popular Mexican directors. Instead of a cultural desert during the last half of the twentieth century, we observe a trajectory of films leading to a 'New Wave' of Mexican Cinema, first exploring the underside of Mexico by focusing on struggle and strife in urban centers, then in the border region. By examining the *naco* film era, we may observe the evolution of the aesthetic celebrated by the Mexican auteur directors of today.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the editors for their helpful suggestions for revisions. Thanks also to Curtis Marez, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Amy Bouse, Susana Chavez-Silverman, Ilana Lapid, and Gabriel Avalos, who read and commented on various drafts of this chapter.
2. Originally developed for television in the early 70s, María Elena Velasco's character quickly became a sensation and the subject of more than twenty films. Some of her film titles are *Tonta, tonta pero no tanto* (*Dumb, dumb but not that dumb*, 1972), *El coyote emplumado* (*The Plumed Coyote*, 1983), *Ni de aquí, ni de allá* (*Neither from Here nor from There*, 1988). The character is portrayed as a typical southwestern Mexican Indian who dresses in traditional costume consisting of ribbons on her braided hair and colorful native blouse and skirt. Her films are socially conscious, slapstick comedies about a woman out of her element.
3. In my own experience, these border films spoke to me and to my brothers and sisters. Instead of 'stifling' us, they engaged us because they reflected our

experiences and concerns as a working-class migrant family dealing with issues of displacement in a foreign country. Unlike other films available for our consumption, they told stories from the perspective of people we could relate to—the undocumented, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised.

4. Another aspect to consider about exploitation films is the fact that when there are only a few production people to please, the director enjoys a great deal more freedom in artistic choices. As Jeffrey Sconce points out, in his well-read essay on cinematic tastes, Hollywood films require endless meetings with lawyers, accountants, and corporate boards, while low-budget films may become wildly eccentric, even presenting unpopular and politically incorrect views (1995: 381–382). The filmmakers may also approach current and unusual subject matter: the taboos that scare Hollywood away from unpopular and radical views do not hold the same power over producers who do not expect to see their films reviewed in national newspapers and academic journals.
5. For instance, Ricalde sustains that these films often tell the stories of working- and lower-class characters exhibiting resistance to and negotiation with dominant cultures, but Mexican critics largely ignore this resistance (2004: 199).
6. In doing so, I hope to echo the reappropriation of a word once used to express disapproval.

There is a long history of this: the term *impressionism*, first coined in 1874, expressed the critics' disfavor with the emerging painting style; 'impressionism' first denounced the short attention span of the painters, who are now among the most beloved in art history. Once a term of derision, *impressionism* now conjures up the most popular and well-known movement in art of the nineteenth century.

7. This demographic shift was due in part to the end of the U.S. Bracero program in 1964. Begun in 1942, it is estimated that this program contracted more than four million guest workers during its twenty-two year period (Alba, 1998: 22). Another factor that pushed people northwards was the Border Industrialization Program that the Mexican government began in 1965 to encourage companies to move to the border region. The government wanted to assert control of the 'wild' border provinces by building industry, including the maquiladoras (sweatshops).
8. Generally, a *pocho* is a derogatory word used to describe a Mexican who was born in the United States but has rejected or has no sense of his Mexican heritage or the Spanish language.