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## *¡Que Naco! Mexican Popular Cinema, La Banda del Carro Rojo and the Audience*

*Adán Avalos*

Contemporary Mexican Film Producers ‘... show little concern for making movies that reflect national issues in an interesting manner.’

(D. R. Maciel, 1990: 29)

I vividly remember those hot summer weekends when our parents and my older siblings would go to work and leave us kids tuned in to Channel 21, the only Spanish-language television station in California’s Central Valley. We would watch with excitement the old black and white films of Mexico’s Golden Era with stars like Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, and María Félix. This was the cinema of our parents. It was the cinema that played in the background after my mother’s 12-hour shift at one of the local grape-packing houses. As she made tortillas and prepared food for the family, she would steal a glance at the television to see her favourite movie stars sing about love, heartbreak, separation, and home. My mother lived for these precious moments when she could escape her reality to live in the world of movies, where, no matter how difficult things appeared in the end, a beautiful sunset fell on the face of her beautiful Pedro.

Later on, when my sisters began dating, my younger brother and I would chaperone them. In search of a semi-private, air-conditioned place during a midday weekend, they would find refuge in the local movie theatres with a bucket of chile popcorn, a few stolen kisses, and the film on screen. We were all captivated by the pistols that Mario and Fernando Almada, the main characters in *La Banda del Carro Rojo/ The Red Car Gang* (1978) would pull out to fend off the *soplón* (whistle-blower) and his cronies, and by the bullets that never seemed to end as the red 1976 Pontiac Bonneville roared and slewed side to side along the vast openness of the Texas countryside.

These were the border films or *popular* Mexican films of the 1970s and 1980s, whose scenes, we were certain, reflected the dramas of our lives and experiences as migrant workers. Residing illegally in the United States, we were considered 'criminals' in the eyes of the law. We were seen as the 'bad guys' who would run from *la migra* (the border patrol), when they tried to stop us. Pistols in their hands, they would bark through their loudspeakers to us to get out of the car slowly and show our papers. Salvador, my first cousin, would say that *la migra* was like the *rinches* (Texas Rangers) and we were like *Cortez*.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The naco in popular Mexican cinema***

Either written off as trash or completely ignored by both film critics and the academic community, the writing about this cinema of my youth tends to focus on the genre's common conventions of low production value, stock characters, stilted performances, cheap and fast production processes, and straight-to-video distribution as indicators of its limited cultural and artistic value. Film scholar David Maciel, who has carried out extensive research on Mexican and border cinema, rightfully points out 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: 211–12). Even in Mexico, this border cinema is considered to be *naco* (low culture) by the Mexican elite, who prefer Hollywood films.

While I agree with David Maciel's argument that the producers' focus is profit-motivated,<sup>2</sup> I disagree that this 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 Norma 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). Rather than stifle us, these films engaged my family by reflecting our experiences, repressed fears, desires and concerns as a working-class migrant family dealing with issues of displacement in a foreign country. Unlike other films, they told stories from the perspective of people we could relate to – the undocumented, the marginalized, the disenfranchised. The very fact that these films are so wildly popular with recent Mexican and Latino immigrant audiences,

the fastest-growing demographic in the US, suggests that it is worth undertaking a new investigation into the genre.

Although most critics call these films *popular* or 'border cinema', I would like to rechristen this genre '*naco*' cinema. *Naco*, according to cultural historian Claudio Lomnitz, is a derogatory term, originally used as a slur against Indians, peasants or anyone who stood for the provincial backwardness that the Mexican state<sup>3</sup> was trying so hard to dispel (2001: 58). As Lomnitz suggests, 'The *naco* was the uncultured and uncouth Indian who could only be redeemed through an international culture' (p. 111). *Naco* aesthetics denote impurity and hybridity, but, above all, as Lomnitz argues, 'a special kind of kitsch' (p. 112). I appropriate this negative term to open debate on what is worthy of academic inquiry. For the purposes of this study I define *naco* films as a transnational popular cinema that questions, reflects, and creates the identity of a displaced cultural group consisting primarily of recent Mexican immigrants in the United States, a group that is constantly transgressing real and symbolic boundaries.<sup>4</sup>

### Methods for studying the unruly subject

For this study, I used ethnographic media research methods, relying particularly on the ethnographic model of audience studies influenced by anthropology and sociology. I formally began preparing for this qualitative ethnographic study of *naco* audiences in the fall of 2007. I designed my study to investigate the audiences of *naco* cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. I focused on *naco* films inspired by *corridos* (folk songs), and *narco-corridos* (drug-ballads), particularly those made popular by the Mexican-American band *Los Tigres del Norte*. Specifically, I used the film *La Banda del Carro Rojo*, a film that, as I have argued elsewhere (Avalos 2009: 190–1) is pivotal in this genre, as a case study for assessing the ways in which working-class Mexican migrant audiences consume, interpret, and interact with *naco* films. In this essay, I use this fieldwork to assess whether and how the audience of *La Banda del Carro Rojo* actively engages this film, rather than remains, as it has been assumed in previous discourses, passively and simply entertained.

While ethnographic methods have generally been used for studying culture as a whole, ethnographic media research focuses on specific and complex relationships between audiences and the media (Seiter, 1999: 10). The ethnographic audience research applied in this chapter is based on in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interviews. Marie Gillespie, a television scholar who has carried out extensive work in

the field of media studies, writes that this model ‘requires long-term immersion and investigation: eighteen months is the standard length of fieldwork required to attain the “emic” or “native” point of view’ (1995: 55). Ellen Seiter, who has undertaken substantial studies on audiences, points out that because a true ethnographic study is so time-consuming, relatively few have been done (1999: 5). I borrow from Gerry Connor’s idea of ‘cultural competencies’ (2007) to address the specific experiences and viewing environments that undoubtedly affect the way films are seen and perceived.

### Setting the stage: Made in Madera

I conducted my field research in Madera, a culturally depressed, small agricultural community located in the Central Valley of California, where I grew up and where my family still resides. I decided to focus on this area because historically the Central Valley always served as an important relocation area for many Mexican immigrants in search of agricultural jobs and because many early *naco* film distributors set up shop to cater to this influx of recent arrivals there. It is also here where César Chávez and the farm workers movement flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. A richer familiarity with the town’s history and its inhabitants gave me a privileged understanding of the study participants. I conducted most of my interviews in the homes of predominantly poor, recently arrived, working-class Mexican immigrants. I conducted ten focus group screenings at one of my participants’ residences, who graciously offered to make interview space available for me. Mario’s ‘screening room’ was equipped with a huge television in a cold, dimly lit converted two-car garage with wood-panelled walls. A blanket blocked out the light from the large window. A full-size couch and many foldable chairs made the perfect place for small groups to view the film together.

My study consisted of individual interviews and focus groups made up of Mexicans who regularly consume *naco* films of the 1970s and 1980s. Since the legal status of some of the participants is questionable, I have decided to use pseudonyms when identifying any of my participants. All the participants were born in Mexico and identified as working-class or migrant workers, with ages ranging from 18 to late 40s. Each focus group was made up of two to five participants, and a total of 32 participants. Two focus groups consisted exclusively of women, two other focus groups were only men and the others were mixed gender groups. The main criteria for selecting individuals was previous viewing experience of the film *La Banda del Carro Rojo*.

General questions were asked before the beginning of the screening but most of the questioning was conducted throughout the screening. I quickly learnt that my participants were more interested in watching the movie than discussing it. During the screening the participants made comments about the action on screen. At these points I would sometimes ask for further explanation or ask more direct questions. My informants told me that talking during the movie screening was the normal and common way of watching these films. Participants agreed that these movies served as a social event, providing a chance to get some 'alone time' with a partner or catch up with old friends while the film was being shown.<sup>5</sup>

My questions were semi-structured, open-ended and very fluid, set in the homes and familiar surroundings of an extended network of Madera community members, neighbours, and friends. All questions were asked in Spanish and audio recorded. I later transcribed and translated these interviews personally. I asked audiences to address the kind of movies they watch and why, to discuss their movie-going experiences, and the first time they saw *La Banda del Carro Rojo* or heard the *corrido* on which it was based, and to describe their identification with the characters in the movie.

### ***The Corrido: From heroic to the common folk***

*Corridos* historically have served many functions. Américo Paredes, known as 'the father of the *corrido*', defines the early *corrido* of the Mexican Revolution as a native folk song that tells a story swiftly (1958: xi). Originally sung by a *corridista* and his guitar around a campfire, locals would gather to hear current events consisting of stories of the heroic men who fought bravely or, as Sam Quiñones writes, 'had done something worth singing about' (2001: 12). They served as a form of recording history and chronologies of events, not only of the US/Mexico border but also of various geographies where Mexicans live. A *corridista* could take any subject matter, particularly of the adventurous kind, and transform it into a *corrido* (Herrera-Sobek, 1979: 49). Mexican scholar Vicente T. Mendoza points out that the *corrido* has been through many phases. Early on it was in its 'proto-epic' ballads that celebrated the deeds of 'pre-revolutionary bandits', then it moved to a second-stage 'epic' phase beginning with the *Maderista* revolution, which started in 1910 (Nicolopoulos, 1997: 115). After the 'epic' phase, *corridos* evolved to written form and sung about local events and common people rather than revolutionary heroes (Nicolopoulos, 1997: 116).

By the 1970s, the *corrido* had been transformed once again, now with a more aggressive, violent look at society and an entry into popular Mexican cinema. Many *naco* films base their plots on the lyrics of *corridos*, especially on a subgroup called *narco-corridos*, which celebrate and eulogize the life of border drug traffickers. It has been argued that *corridos* are valuable resources to study because, according to José Limón, they are 'deeply implicated in the social history – in politics, conflict, and social change ... and also address these concerns in their present historical moment' (1992: 56). I would like to extend Limón's argument about the importance of *corridos* and apply that same logic to the *naco* films that are based on *corridos*. *Corridos* often reflect political policies that have influenced people. As the literary scholar Ramón Saldívar puts it, 'The nineteenth and the twentieth-century *corridos* served the symbolic function of empirical events (functioning as a substitute for history writing)' (1997: 40). These *naco* films, much like the *corridos*, offer their version of historical events, often different from historical accounts privileged by authorities. The audience's familiarity with these songs made these films easy to follow, since they were primarily functioning as a video illustration of the music. All participants in this study confirmed that it was the music, the *corrido* of *Los Tigres del Norte*, that brought him or her to see *La Banda del Carro Rojo*.

Jose, age 44, one of the participants, said that he first heard of the song in 1978 when he was 12 years old and living in Mexico: 'Everyone listened to those songs on the radio and we would all sing along.' Mario, age 48, said that it was the *corrido* that fascinated him and he was the first one at the theatre to see the movie: 'The theatre would fill up and people had to wait in long lines to get in', and he added 'it was a hit because more and more people were experiencing what was on those films.' All the participants also said that the *corridos* were based on 'reality'. Jose believed that 'all *corridos* are based on something that really happened, a bit exaggerated but ... still true'.

Elena, age 46, echoed that point, saying that the *corrido*, much like the movie, showed 'our reality'. The stories told in the music and in the movies gave Elena a window to find answers to the unknown. She and her family used these movies to understand what happens when people cross over to the United States and disappear. Elena and her family said they saw those movies because they 'wanted to understand why they [migrant workers who would cross illegally to the US] would not come back ... if that happened to one of those characters [on screen] then we would wonder, maybe that is what happened to someone we knew.' It is as if 'the earth has devoured them', as Rojelio, age 36, put it when

talking about people he knew that came over and got lost ‘never to be heard of’.

### Reality of the reel: Film as ‘Real’

Like the *corrido*, *naco* films are seen as a visual representation of a ‘reality’ for the study participants. During the golden era of Mexican film (1940–50), this depiction of an unglamorous social reality was first made visible in two huge blockbuster hits, *Nosotros los Pobres* and *Ustedes Los Ricos* (*We the Poor* and *You the Rich*, 1948), starring the legendary national icon Pedro Infante. Directed by Ismael Rodríguez and shot by Gabriel Figueroa, these melodramatic films placed the plot in an overcrowded inner-city, home to the working class. Pedro Infante, previously depicted as a suave charming actor like Cary Grant, was suddenly without his trademark *charro* (cowboy) outfit. In these new films, Infante wore working-class clothes and spoke like the vast majority of new arrivals in the city. His singing still matched his previous persona, but he was now shown as a poor peasant living in a Mexico City slum where most of the characters struggled daily with survival in a high-crime area.

Other heroes of the period, such as Mario Moreno ‘Cantinflas’, German Valdez ‘Tin-Tan’, Adalberto Martínez Chávez ‘Resortes’, and ‘El Santo’ the silver-masked wrestler, similarly began to reflect the outsider status of the audience that eagerly consumed their films. El Santo physically wrestled with the oppressors while Cantinflas, Tin Tan, and Resortes outwitted them through verbal sparring. Although it alienated the Mexican middle-class audience, who turned to Hollywood movies instead, this new cinema was very popular with the urban working populace (de la Vega, 1999: 166).

In the 1970s, *naco* films continued to reflect daily struggles of the working poor, but the issues became more pressing and urgent – representing more of the audience’s current social experiences such as displacement, drugs, violence, corruption, alcoholism, and border crossings. Many study participants commented on the depiction of border crossings in these films. Mario commented, ‘when you see these films you probably think that it is not real ... it looks unreal and fake but that was the way I crossed’. Elena and Luz both said the same thing during a different screening. Elena said that those types of films were popular because ‘that was what people were going through’. Luz, age 42, said that films like *La Banda del Carro Rojo* sometimes did exaggerate or edit out details of the crossing but in general ‘those films showed how hard

and dangerous it was to come here [illegally]'. Manuel, now in his late 30s, remembers watching these films as a young boy in the late 1970s. When Mario's father came back from crossing over illegally to the US, he reported that 'it was just like Pedro [film character] in *La Banda del Carro Rojo*'. When Mario decided to come to the US in the mid-1980s, although many years had passed, his experience was 'the same, just like the movies but even more intense and dangerous'. Jesus, age 43, said that although he did not cross like the character Pedro, who swims across the Río Grande, 'if anyone sees those films and tells me that they are false, I will tell them my story and that will shut them up, because I walked for two days, dressed very much like Pedro and without water'. Border crossing was only one of the many issues that all of the participants talked about when watching *La Banda del Carro Rojo*. The others all had to do with corruption, violence, and drugs.

The film *La Banda del Carro Rojo*, based on the popular *corrido* of the same name, follows the plot outlined in the song but adds elements to fill out subplots. The action film follows four men forced by desperate, personal situations to smuggle drugs into the United States and who are eventually trapped by Texas Rangers in a climactic, suspenseful, shoot-out reminiscent of a Sergio Leone film. The film has four principal characters, or *nacos*, that make up the gang. At first, each seems to follow the *naco* genre's stereotypical formulas, but a closer character analysis reveals that they are much more complex, as noted frequently by study participants. Maricio, age 45, said that all the characters were very familiar to him: 'it's like I knew each and every one of them, like they were cousins or people in my *barrio* (neighbourhood)'. Carlos, who is in his mid-40s, said that all the people in the film were based on real people, just like in the *corrido*, but in the movie form the characters become overly dramatic. When I asked him if the characters were made up and not based on reality, Carlos responded that 'you see the same story over and over in these films, and it seems unreal but it's true. Those stories are so common that we [the audience] don't even think about it, as soon as we see them we know their story.' When I asked if the characters lacked depth, Ruben, in his mid-40s, said that the four characters were very familiar and 'we know their stories just like if it were ours'. He continued by saying that even if this movie does not show the development of each character, 'we know what happened because it happens so much that showing it on screen would be redundant'.

Versions of this last statement were repeated many times by most of the males and by a few female participants, who could still read depth into the male characters in this film. Amalia, a seasonal field worker in

her late 40s, agreed that even though this film did not give a full picture of each of the characters ‘you can still make sense of who they are and there is no need to tell you [the audience] what you already know’. Elena said that when people come back home to Mexico after being gone for years, they tell great stories of life in the US, ‘where money grows on trees and all you have to do is go and get it’. Elena believes that returning Mexicans hesitate to tell their true, difficult experience to avoid perceptions of failure, so they make up stories, but ‘this movie is showing that things are not as easy as they seem’.

### ***The Good, The Bad, The Naco: Empathy for the bad guys***

The audience not only identified with each character in dress and speech but also in thought process and reactions when confronted with life-changing decisions. Many participants, like Felipe, a 30-year-old forklift operator, stated: ‘I understand why they are there and why they have to make those hard choices. If I had a sick daughter and needed money I would do anything I could to save her life.’ Felipe felt hesitant about drug smuggling, but thought that a drastic family situation could pressure him to break the law. Javier, a mid-30s field worker, said each character has his reasons for going into the gang: ‘You may not think it’s justifiable, but if you were in their situation you might do the same thing.’ María, a 40-year-old working mother, could relate to some of the characters’ situations because ‘as a parent you know that if you only had the money to pay for basic healthcare, then life would be better and scenes like that would not happen’. Carlos summarized the characters’ situation best: ‘they have very little choices, they have been cornered by society and have to do the only thing they can which is to survive however they can’. When surrounded by the Texas Rangers, they know that giving up is not a solution because ‘they have always been prisoners, so the one choice they do have is to go out their way’.

Study participants declared Boom as the character with the least morals. Luis, a 25-year-old tractor operator and son of a field worker, found more empathy for Boom: ‘Look, even though he is not that likeable because he is a drug addict, you have to ask yourself how he got there. You think he wants to be there? I don’t like him either, but there is more to his story than what we see on screen.’ Luis found Boom unfamiliar and not a ‘very likable guy’, but he recognized that Boom’s intentions, though questionable, emerged from a man who ‘has been kicked too many times’. Mario is critical of Boom’s drug addiction, and finds him

the most tragic character but finds some compassion for Boom, with, 'you have to ask yourself how he got there, because nobody is born that way'. Jaime, 46, believes Boom 'was probably a nice guy and a good worker who somehow got lost'. Of all the participants Elena was most critical of Boom, saying that he 'wants simple money and couldn't care less about others'. She considers him a selfish *coyote* (human trafficker) and a drug addict who 'takes advantage of everyone'. She asserted that Boom probably exploits immigrants by charging them exuberant fees to smuggle them into the US, noting that Boom charged Pedro even though Pedro needed the money more than Boom. Jaime agrees with Elena, but asks 'why is Boom that way? It seems that he has no family and lives with his sister who he probably raised when he was very young.' Jaime implores the other study participants to fully consider Boom's situation and read more than what is shown in the film. Jaime finishes by stating that 'life has been hard for him [Boom] and he made bad choices that [because of his addiction] he doesn't even think about it'.

Lino Quintana, the main character and leader of *La Banda del Carro Rojo*, played by the famous *naco* star Mario Almada, feels forced to venture into illegal business to escape debt. Although his gambling addiction makes him unsympathetic, many of the participants interpreted his behaviour as an act of desperation and showed empathy towards him. Jose believes that Quintana has a problem but is not a bad person because he chooses drug smuggling: 'Quintana had no choice because he was in a jam and if he didn't pay, his family would be killed.' Luz found Quintana a sick man in need of help with his illness, but assistance would be unlikely, because their desperate financial situation could not provide treatment for Quintana's sick niece. Victor, now in his early 20s, remembers watching this movie a few years ago with his father and articulated an interesting character reading: Quintana may seem unlikable and selfish because of his problem but 'he is a tough guy who stands up to the authorities and points out there are bigger problems than him'. Although Victor would not traffic drugs, he finds the problem outside Quintana: 'the problem is our society who demands the drugs'. When asked for elaboration, Victor argued that this 'great nation' would focus on solving the desire for drugs, then 'people like Quintana would not have a choice but to find another way to get out of debt or whatever problem they have'. He said that he knows of a few people like Quintana who are seen as heroes back home [Mexico] because even though they are doing something that is considered illegal, they are doing what they can to provide stability for their families. He echoes the film: 'With money you can do the impossible.' For

Victor, as for many of the participants, Quintana represents a man who commands respect but is also respectful of others.

Fernando Almada (also the real-life brother of Mario Almada) plays Rodrigo, Quintana's brother, a disillusioned Mexican resident who has been in the US for many years. He is in debt and cannot pay for his daughter's medical treatment. All the study participants read this character as a person with high morals and could empathize with his situation. Francisco, 48, found Rodrigo the most familiar because, being a father, he understands the trauma of a sick child and the lack of funds for treatment to save your daughter's life. He also relates to Rodrigo's feeling of failure or 'disillusionment', at not being able to attain the American Dream: 'like Rodrigo, I am in debt and barely able to pay my bills. Rodrigo has been here in the States for many years and can't even pay for his ranch.' Francisco adds that, 'my dream and the dream of many who came here is to progress. ... Rodrigo worked hard and led an honest life, but when he feels that enough is enough, he decides to join his brother and dishonestly attain what he could not attain honestly.' Mario, also a parent, repeated Francisco's fatherly concerns and added another testament to Mario's high moral value. The US medical system provides 'some help but if you have something major like Rodrigo's daughter then it's harder to get help'. He said that public hospitals are expensive and 'even though we don't pay for them out of our pockets, we do pay in the form of taxes. But when we need medical care, we won't get the same care as someone who is rich. ... Rich people go to private hospitals where they have the best doctors but those cost a lot of money and we can't afford them.' As Mario sees it, Rodrigo had no choice but to prioritize his daughter's needs, as anyone in his situation would do. Although study participants found Rodrigo's drug-trafficking immoral, they believed it was justified because, before his death, he provided financially what he could not attain by adhering to an honest life.

While most participants found value in Rodrigo's actions, many of them were able to see a part of themselves reflected in Pedro, played by Pedro Infante Jr (the son of the great Mexican golden age actor Pedro Infante). Mario found identification with Pedro because 'he just came here to work but he got in with the wrong group'. He says that Pedro, being naive and having no green card, 'doesn't have much of a chance and is grateful to have anything, even if it is morally wrong'. Other people in this study repeated Mario's statements and added that Pedro's intention was not to get into drugs but to go to Hollywood, where he believes he will find success. Sandra, a stay-at-home mother in her late 30s, said that 'Pedro represents the great majority of immigrants who come to the States with

the idea that once they get here, things will be great and they will succeed'. She adds that, 'they see themselves as hard workers but are clueless as to how hard it is to get a good job without papers'.

When I asked the question of which character changed the most throughout the film, almost all of the people in this study replied that it was Pedro. Almost all of them made reference to his change of clothes as indication of losing his naivety and his moral codes. When we first encounter Pedro, he is wearing a pair of worn-out jeans and a stretched-out old t-shirt, but later in the film he has traded in his tethered clothes for a three-piece suit. 'See,' points out Luis, making reference to when Pedro goes and buys a suit, 'you know that something bad is going to happen to him because he has made it in a dishonest way.' When I asked Luis to elaborate, he said that, 'Pedro thinks that he has achieved the American Dream but he is so wrong because all he has is an illusion that will soon end.' I asked him how he knew that and he said, 'Well, when you see someone like Pedro who just arrived and is illegal, and then all of a sudden they have nice new clothes and other things like jewelry and a car, then you know that they are up to something illegal and that they will soon get caught and end up in jail or dead.' Luis reported that he has seen this happen to many people he knows. Like other people who responded to this question, he took pleasure in seeing Pedro change because access to nice clothes might represent a better world for the next generation, providing citizenship, education, access for the children. All study participants suggested the characters' actions are 'bad', but maintained that their intentions are 'good', or, as Rogelio put it, 'they are good people who have to do bad things because that is the way life really is'. Rogelio and other participants state that they would not commit the character's crimes, but that they do have empathy and understand the reasons for their actions.

### ***Agency in La Banda del Carro Rojo?***

Norma Iglesias, David Maciel and others have rightfully pointed out that most of these popular Mexican films tend to be misogynistic – treating women as either a virgin, a saintly mother serving to a man in the domestic realm, or a whore available to the protagonist and the audience for visual pleasure by providing her body to the man whenever he sees fit.<sup>6</sup> When I told Elena that critics have argued that women are positioned in the victim role in these films, and I pointed to Boom's constant tirades against his sister Teresita, Elena said, 'not all women are victims – you are only a victim if you allow yourself to be

one. Boom's sister is not always a victim, she is rebelling – just look at what she is wearing. If I wore something like that, my dad would beat me.' Elena and later Luz pointed out that 'Teresita has agency because she dresses however she wants and even wears make-up, which was strictly prohibited because only women of the street would do that.' Elena said that Teresita had freedom that 'many of us did not have, so we could look at her as a model and someone we could emulate'. Although the roles of women in *La Banda del Carro Rojo* are marginalized in comparison to other films like *Lola la Trailera* (*Lola the Truck Driver*, 1983) or even *La Hija de Nadie* (*Nobody's Daughter*, 1976) most women in my study felt that the women in *naco* films do have agency even though they are mostly depicted as sexual objects. Surprisingly enough, even in this film where I thought such a reading was impossible, I was proven wrong. Even if the *naco* films catered to the male audience, female viewers read more into the female characters in the film, much like the males did with the male characters.

## Conclusion

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 dismiss the importance of films made primarily for profit and mass consumption. Norma Iglesias writes that the films dubbed here as *naco* 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 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 chapter, I have argued that *naco* films are worthy of the scrutiny of academic study. Underneath the cover of kitsch, a perceptive viewer can read the repressed rage of the Latino immigrant. These *naco* films are cultural documents of social transformation that attest to the developing identity of the migrant class of Mexicans. Once we understand the context in which these films are created, and to whom they are addressed, we can begin to appreciate their national 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* film addresses the unpleasant circumstances of

many Mexican immigrants living on a low wage inside and outside of their home country. Even if the contemporary Mexican film producers, as Maciel points out, ‘show little concern for making movies that reflect national issues in an interesting manner’, I respectfully point to other ways that these films address complex issues that affect millions of Mexicans and Latinos.

## Notes

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1. Gregorio Cortez, a legend and a symbol of resistance is considered a hero to many Mexican-Americans. The story of Cortez was popularized and disseminated through various ballads called *El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez*, starting as early as 1901. Writing in the 1950s, folklorist and historian Américo Paredes exposed a wider audience to the legend with his seminal book *With His Pistol in Hand*, 1958.
2. However, it might be noted that, across the globe, all commercial films are made with profits in mind, at least to some degree.
3. After the Mexican Revolution (1910–20) the nation began its modernization phase with a cosmopolitan agenda, embracing an international culture and more specifically a US model.
4. *Naco* is a commonly used term to define this genre of films by both the Mexican elite and the people who consume these films. Even within the community that consumes these films, there is an understanding that they are ‘bad’ but also enjoyable.
5. Participatory audiences were very common among *naco* filmgoers of the 1970s and 80s. Since many of the theatre audiences would attend the same screening more than once, it was common practice to have full conversations during the slow moments of the film and to engage actively in the experience by shouting during the high points or moments of disagreement throughout the film.
6. While I tend to agree that this is the case in most *naco* films, there are those exceptions where the woman does have agency and even if she has to use her body to attain her goals, she does it knowing very well what she is about to do. The films and female stars that were mentioned by a few of the participants were the classic example of the action film *Lola la Trailera* (*Lola the Truck Driver*, 1983) with Rosa-Gloria Chagoyan who in her very revealing outfits, single-handedly brings down the Mafia after her father is murdered by the gang of drug-smugglers. The other female film star that was brought up was Yolanda del Rio in *La Hija de Nadie* (*Nobody's Daughter*, 1976) where a very independent female singer rejected at birth by her alcoholic father for being born female loses her mother and is obligated to care for her blind twin sister. Both of these women play very unconventional roles that depict agency to the female audience members and showed a new version of women onscreen to male audience members.

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