

**VOYEUR:
VIOLENCE AND REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN FILM**

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1. INTRODUCTION

In spite of the general consensus of dictionaries and encyclopedias to give the term voyeur a sexual intention, I will use it in a different way, to label an idea that embodies the illusion of ownership over a thing by the appropriation of an aspect of its image. I will deal with the tension between reality and representation in the context of film creation, describing the relationship of seduction between filmmakers and the people they deal with in order to build the context that will frame their vision. From this point of view, the Voyeur is closely related to what I have learned is a principal concern of contemporary theory: how to turn the study of the subject into a conversation with the subject, still claiming a degree of universality. The theorist aims to explain or locate cultural activity, whether the filmmaker's goal is to recombine culture in order to convey character. The filmmaker is looking what aspects of culture might fit the emotional common ground of his audience, even if he will only use them as a starting point to build a representation that has no other relation to the original thing than the theme. Since most of my observations are derived from the examination of my own personal experience within the film crew, I will use material collected over 10 years of shooting and researching for films to explain my claims. This makes double sense, since its both fueled by my subject (film), and the projection I am using as a center point of my discussion (the Voyeur).

Most of my work has been used in a style of cinema that perhaps found a niche in the commercial mainstream after the second half of the past decade, as a reaction to the overproduced, artificial, predictable and idealized commodity films manufactured by the big corporate studios in hollywood. Lars Von Trier and the early Tarantino are two early examples of this trend; using limited production resources, they concentrated the value of their cinema in the script and cast, with heavy loads of drama in one case and action in the other, but carefully remaining true to the more gritty, almost unprofessional look of reality. It made sense for the lower budget Latin American directors to quickly incorporate these resources to claim a style of their own, taking advantage of the extreme conditions of social contrast that can be experienced in all Latin American cities. This is where my question finds an interest, in the way this generation of filmmakers enhance the credibility of their distortions of reality by making them look more real than what a distortion should look like, because the way this is done defines an almost ethnographic tradition of blending into the communities that are going to host the story, using their real houses as locations for the appropriate sequences, borrowing their clothes, their furniture, their family pictures and their past, and sometimes even inviting them to participate as cast in the movie, suddenly transporting them from their shack in a slum to a close interaction with a handful of stars and a production crew whose resources and equipment for the week are far beyond what they will ever see in their entire lives. After all, it can be very expensive to carefully redesign reality to add the right amount of glamour.

The Voyeur is the filmmaker that, for example, takes over this image of poverty, turns it into spectacle, and deliveries it to a public that will never experience the true people represented, thinking that they own the experience of having been there

because the film is real enough, believing they understand social groups that are continually segregated.

I am concerned that the celebrity status of some of the films I worked on can affect the perception of my work in the wrong direction. I don't want a reader to identify them because my subject is the story on the other side of the camera, and not from the point of view of the making of a movie, but from the point off view of what happens between filmmakers and the selected members of other communities as they deal with each other. I am somehow looking for a way to reach beyond the Voyeur, looking for the place where the relation between filmmakers and people is more than just utilitarian.

It is also there where the space for my activity has usually been defined. As an art designer, I have been responsible of conducting the necessary research to understand and shape the places and things that support the characters' environments. However, much of what is most interesting to me doesn't come from the film itself, and has more to do with the interactions that result from getting the locations ready for shooting, the position of power the production projects over the people, and how this influence permits a particular form of communication between the crew and the people that is based in the natural admiration most people feel for anything that has to do with movies. I am also going to take advantage of the nomadic (or migratory) nature of the film production to point out social and cultural contrast by overlapping essentially different cultural practices when following the threads of the film community, that effortlessly navigates through the barriers of class, language, religion and nationality. I will look at filmmakers as an international community. Because of my personal experience, I will restrict myself to explore the interactions across the borders between Mexico and USA.

2. THE MEXICAN IN MEXICO

More than seven years ago, when traveling in a ferry between two little islands in my way to spend a year in Vancouver learning the craft of animation, perhaps feeling nostalgic of the past I was leaving behind, I wrote a few pages about some of the most vivid memories I could recall from my previous work in film. I couldn't see what was driving my pen back then, still not fully understanding the complicated set of interactions between the film crew and the people that have a relation with them for the duration of the production, and I couldn't do better than just react against the social contrast I had to witness and deal with in order to get my job done. I started writing about a man called Don Ysidro.

Don Ysidro used to live in Tacuba, one of the oldest neighborhoods of Mexico city, a few blocks away from the legendary tree where the spanish conqueror Hernan Cortes cried all night after being defeated by the aztec warriors. This famous tree was called "the sad night tree" and remained a historic landmark until a few years ago, when a few unidentified vandals showered it with gasoline and set it on fire. It is known that the spanish soldiers were wearing thick belts of molten gold they

made out of all the stuff they stole from the aztec temples, and that they had to get rid of most of it to escape from the aztec hordes that pursued them. Mexico City is built on top of a lake surrounded by a ring of volcanoes, and back then most of the lake, rivers and swamps were still not underground like they are now. The legend claims that most of that gold remains buried underneath the houses of Tacuba, waiting to change the fortune of the poor people that live there.

Don Ysidro found his molten gold in the form of a movie that later became an international success. In Mexico, we call the people like him Pepenadores. Their profession is to deal with other people's garbage and recycle as much as they can from it. They are wanderers. They can be usually seen walking down the streets of Mexico in the company of their dogs, pushing a wooden cart the size of a small mattress where they have their collected goods. A lot of them are homeless, and live underneath the highway bridges or in the sewers, but not Don Ysidro. He happened to own a lot in Tacuba where he lived between two buildings with his dogs and his garbage. A location manager found Don Ysidro's lot and pile of trash worth showing in a production meeting, because one of the main characters of the film she was working on was a freelance gunman that lived disguised as a Pepenador. Don Ysidro couldn't really take advantage of his molten gold, because he was never able to figure out what was going on. It is interesting that after a few weeks, his offspring showed up, and took over the negotiations with the production entirely. None of them looked like they shared anything about Don Ysidro's life with him, perhaps having moved away from their father years ago, when they found a more decent place in society for themselves. They can't be blamed for that, it's hard to imagine anybody having a passion for garbage, dirt and isolation. A nearby house was used to host an underground dogfighting arena. Located inside a maze of alleys behind a giant grocery store, the house and its surroundings were sheltered from law and order, making it a perfect hideout for all kinds of illegal activities, most of them related with drug dealing, specially coke and crack. During the following months I spent building the necessary structure for making it look like a realistic dogfighting arena, with shacks for growing dogs in the roof and everything, I used to look down from the roof to the street with my coffee in my hand and look at the kids from the neighborhood taking the purses away from ladies that could be their aunts every day.

This house got chosen in a similar situation, when we were scouting on it for the first time, and a gang of 8 or 10 twelve year old kids ambushed us in the alley with guns, taking all our cameras and cellphones with them. The director said: "this is what I want, we are taking this location". The violence, like in most major cities, is real, but for the filmmaker, this real violence is nothing more than an aesthetic resource that can be used to bring character into another subject.

A lot of field research was conducted around the subject of dogfights, because they were a major story element in this movie, and all the research pointed to the conclusion that real dogfights in Mexico City were not at all what the film needed. The scene was dominated by suburban middle class male dog breeders, that would join over the weekends in their garages to make their pitbulls fight while they would drink a budlight and watch the television as their dogs would chew each

other's ears off. The average dogfight aficionado, with their gray sweatpants and their Toyotas, looked like everyone else's neighbor. Not interesting. Dogfights were needing an urgent injection of character, and we did it by taking the dogfighting scene into the drug dealing, gun smuggling world of the slum near Don Ysidro's lot.

The reason for this distortion is called Action. The key moments of tension during a dogfight are not many, what will hold the drama in such a scene is not the dogfighting itself but what is happening around it. The human action around the dogfight would need to be as kinematic as the dogfight itself, and more threatening, since it dealt with human subjects. The ethnographic nature of the filmmaker's research was reviewed, the interviews fragmented, and the useful parts taken out from it. How to breed dogs, how to hold them before a fight, how to infuriate them, how to take care of their wounds. The rest, the human details of the dogfighting culture, were put aside and forgotten about.

Don Ysidro was not put aside by any means, because he represented exactly what the director was looking for, in terms of how the pepenador gunman character should look like, move and talk. Extensive reference material was taken from his shack, the way he dressed, the way his hair and skin collected dirt, and the way he would take care of his dogs and deal with all his trash. I even took a few garbage collecting walks with him, looking for interesting landscapes underneath the highways and documenting the way he would push his cart around. Like true Voyeurs, the film community were at the same time disgusted and fascinated with him, to the point where the producer decided to supervise over the negotiations conducted with Don Ysidro's offspring, making sure that they would not take away from him whatever he was being paid for his participation in the movie, which involved the training of his dogs to use them as actors in the movie, the complete alteration of his lot into a suitable place for the few actions it would host, and the process of making a professional actor learn how to be him.

The distortion of Don Ysidro's persona took place when he was re imagined, and represented, as a retired ex communist leader from 1968 that became a hermit and a professional killer. The success of hyper violent filmmaking during the 90s is a theme that deserves a lot of attention on its own, as if finds it's roots in a renaissance of realism that is mostly inspired by the problems encountered after exploring the contemporary city. As a space exposed to global media, the contemporary city is influenced by the world's dominant markets, and it makes sense to think of measuring how much of this influence can bias the vision of a filmmaker, making him shape his distortions accordingly. How much of his vision is preconditioned by what is already there and by his personal goals. In the realm of realism, this is of key importance, because in today's media driven cultures, the idea of what a particular community or human space might be can be defined by what is depicted in movies for a majority of people, and it becomes increasingly important to locate the roots of trends like violence to start understanding what they might mean beyond their superficial appearance of action driven entertainment.

3. THE [NORTH]AMERICAN IN MEXICO

The mexican film industry is underdeveloped. Most of the people that work on movies have to make a living on alternative similar areas, like television and advertisement, or working for American productions that visit Mexico looking for a cheaper deal. It is common that when a production becomes too big, like *Titanic* or *Apocalypto*, the expensive fares in Hollywood and USA make it impossible to shoot them there, and they often look for third world countries to migrate their productions. *Titanic* was around 200 000 million dollars even though most union rates in Mexico are at least 5 times smaller than the union rates in USA, and the cost of construction materials is considerably smaller too. Historically, this situation has built a school in the mexican film industry that makes it parallel to the Hollywood style, because the equipments, the production hierarchies and the organization are roughly the same.

In turn, mexican talent, both cast and crew, tend to look for opportunity in the more resourceful industry of the north. The resulting mexican style of cinema turns to be as much a celebration and a reaction to the Hollywood trends. But what is relevant to this paper has more to do with the interactions across the border between filmmakers and people from each of both countries, and not so much the evolution of trends and styles. It is relevant to understand however, what different people might see in their counterparts, and I will start with a review of the Colonialist case, that is, when an army of foreigners with millions of dollars invade massive portions of Mexico to make their giant movies.

From the outsider perspective, things will not change much. Don Ysidro would have never noticed if the director of the movie that disrupted his life came from London instead of a few miles away from the rich area in the same city. The differences or new dynamics will be found where members of the two film communities will have to deal with each other, specially where lower end foreigner supervisors must control the local workers or hire local services. Directors, producers, cameramen, and audio people from over the world have had similar experiences and move in more or less the same space; there is almost no difference working with a director or a photographer from Mexico, Argentina, Spain, Hollywood, England or Sweden. It is in the realm of production design where tension is more visible. The working practices of a team of carpenters is completely different between USA and Mexico. In Hollywood, when you talk to your team of carpenters, you will find that most of them have MFAs or a similar education, and they are making at least 15 hundred dollars a week. In Mexico, because of its history of caste segregation, the film hierarchy has been split in two by a horizontal line, perfectly dividing working class labour from administration and creative work, even if it is still organized exactly like its Hollywood equivalent, and tasks are distributed according the segregated structure of the mexican society.

Art directors, Construction Coordinators and Decorators from USA find it impossible to understand the complicated master-servant dynamics that serve the mexican labour dynamics, and they often have to hire a set of local Art directors,

Construction Coordinators and Decorators to serve as translators and/or filters. New tension will be created from the fact that these translators are creative people themselves, and will want to input their own vision somehow into the movie.

Most of the productions that fall in this category can't be considered realist. A foreign filmmaker interested in this genre will generally not have the means (or interest) to afford the migration of a whole production to a different environment in a different country. These productions are mostly historic epics, international action thrillers, or science fiction adventures. However, this is not an obstacle for ethnographic research and the consequent distortions, that can take place as the rewriting of historical events or as stereotypical depictions of the local cultures. Here, the Voyeur is the western conquistador, looking down to the inferior culture that will help him build his palace in the form of a movie, where the hero is usually a foreigner that has to deal with the local dangers in order to succeed or survive, proving his superiority in the process.

4. THE MEXICAN IN USA

There are 2 big differences between the ways a film production is conducted in Mexico and the USA. The first and most obvious one is budget; the most expensive mexican movie of recent history barely made it a little above the cost of the average American indie film. The other difference has to do with how contracts and copyright law are conducted. The mexican decorator and the american decorator alike will visit a location for research, and will take for rent any piece of art or furniture they might find appropriate to dress a particular environment. The difference is that, in the case of a painting for example, the mexican decorator will just take the painting and put it on set, whether the american decorator will have to track down the artist and make them sign a copyright release form. If there is no signed copyright release form and the painting is in the movie, the set of frames where it shows will have to be removed from the final cut of the film.

At the same time, USA unions and other institutions closely monitor the working conditions inflicted by the production on the cast and crew. Countless stories of abuse and exploitation populate hollywood's history, leading it towards today's set of policies that seek to protect and give a more fair share to the hollywood film workers.

When working for six months on location in Memphis, Tennessee, I experienced what could be called "reverse" colonization. A mexican director and a handful of his original team (including me) were controlling an american crew of half angelinos and half newyorkers to film a realist melodrama located in a city whose name is never mentioned. Again, to convey the realism we looked into the lives of the people from memphis for inspiration, and some of them actually joined the crew, giving it a multicultural flavor that took things beyond expectations, because the angelinos and the newyorkers were already culture shocked just from being in the

american south. It became then clear that members from different places of the world, like Los Angeles, New York and Mexico City, have more in common with each other than what they might have with people in their own neighborhoods. Even the filmmakers from Mexico felt that dealing with the people of Memphis was like dealing with a primitive culture from a lost pacific island.

Music, food and religion are perhaps the big cultural riches in Memphis, highly influenced by the black population and a certain african aftertaste that was never bleached away after the years of slavery. It also becomes easy to see that the central area of Memphis is half abandoned, and that the neighborhoods surrounding it are dangerous and poor. In a completely different situation than the one in Mexico, a handful of production people found themselves looking for a house that could express that feel of danger, and we turned out to be working in a location where we would have to run away from the crazy locals, in a completely different setting, and a reality that also had to do with crack.

Lamar Sorrento is not Don Ysidro, but he also lived a few blocks away from the new dangerous location house. He also happened to be friends with a local that was working with us as an assistant, and every time she heard of a particular task that need some local help to get done, she would summon a bunch of her friends to try to get them work.

Lamar Sorrento became an sad case of a local that had an unfortunate mingling with the production. He is an folk painter and the guitarist of his own band. After meeting with him, the production designer requested me to hire him to paint a mural of Christ in the wall of a religious center we were building in a warehouse. I was not sure his style would match what we were looking for, because he had a very wild and violent brush stroke, the kind a rock guitarist would have, but the production designer was obsessed with his personality. So he did the job, even though it was evident that he was not the kind of artist that would ever get hired to pint a mural in a church, and our australian art director had to repaint over it. The production then tried to refuse paying him, which is something the production often does. The american unions protect the people working for the production, actors and crew, but not the people making business with them, and in the world of business, you get away with what you can. Lamar got payed, but only after I got in a fight with the producer.

Another important character in this movie was a mathematician with a heart problem that had a few months left to live. This is an example where the Voyeur turns around both ways and becomes a mirror, because the director, knowing that I have a mathematician degree, started his character research almost a year before we moved to Memphis by interrogating me. Then I conducted a series of research in the Math Institute of the Mexico City University that brought back to life my relationship with the mexican mathematician community, awakening again my desire to be close to science. When we took off to Memphis, I already have a big percent of our mathematician character in my suitcase. The next step was to meet the mathematics department at Rhodes College in Memphis, and ask them for full access to their lives and belongings. It was easy enough, because the movie featured

an all star cast, and the director had already been nominated for an Oscar a few years before. I had a good knowledge about the obsessive compulsive chain smoker mathematician character that the director wanted, and it was not hard to make a collage out of the belongings of the seven faculty members of the Mathematics department in Rhodes College to dress the character's apartment.

Distortion of reality might be deliberate most of the times, but it can also happen out of the scope of the creators. In the movies produced by the big hollywood studios in Mexico, the main distortions have already taken place having to study, understand and filter the subject of the distortion. Hollywood has become such a manufactured of entertainment, that most of the mainstream movies produced there already follow very strict formulas of distortion. The personality of the main characters, their motivations, and the way the story is going to be structured come all from the same recipe. It is very unusual to see someone break the norms.

This can be one reason that fuels the Hollywood efforts to import foreigner talent. Most newcomers usually last at least a couple of blockbusters before they are bleached by the Hollywood standards, and some of them actually manage to survive authentic. Meanwhile, they inject new blood, energy and alternative points of view, even if its only in the form of visual pyrotechnics, to the powerful film factory of California.

5. THE BORDER

Several cities are split in half by the Mexico/USA border. Matamoros-Brownsville is in the east corner and Tijuana-San Diego is in the west. There are several others in between, like Juarez-El Paso, but I can only talk about Matamoros-Brownsville and Tijuana-San Diego because they are the only ones where I have worked on movies. They are both very different. Tijuana features the most frequently crossed border station in the world and it is an entry point to the overactive southern californian economy, whether Matamoros meets with a fairly underdeveloped region of Texas. The productions that took place in each city were as different from each other as the cities themselves, but both of them approached the communities that they needed in a similar fashion. Again, it is possible that the way things were conducted from within production were completely different, but none of the outside people would have had a chance to notice. In Tijuana, the production was led by a team half american and half mexican, and both with a long history of experience. There were plenty of resources for dealing with whatever was needed, and things were taken care of the safe way. The production in Matamoros-Brownsville was less experienced and had almost no resources, forcing the producers to cut a lot of deals in the dark, taking advantage of the inherent corruption that ruled in both sides of the border.

In Tijuana, everything was shot in the Mexican side. There was no way to afford the american sequences in the USA, and the US immigration offices in California

wanted control over the content of the finished movie before allowing us to use their installations. It is a good thing that if you travel a little south from Tijuana, just a few tens of miles, you will find yourself in a residential area that looks like Malibu CA, where the language is english and the currency dollars. It seems that the mexican poor migrate north in search of opportunity, and the american moderately rich migrate south in search of property. The mexican political corruption is responsible for not letting them know that it is constitutionally illegal for a foreigner to own mexican land. For the border crossing station there was no other solution than to find the right spot in the desert to build our own border-crossing station.

In Matamoros-Brownsville nothing was a problem to the authorities. Brownsville, perhaps even more of a wasteland than Matamoros, found it so exciting that a movie would be shot in it, that the major founded the Brownsville film commission, and offered the city's infrastructure to aid with whatever the production could need. The mexican side was no different, granting us access to the most extreme film experience I have ever seen.

The prison of Matamoros, like many other in mexico, is called CERESO (Centro de rehabilitacion social). It is populated with a combination of lower scale thugs and big shot drug dealers. A couple of years before, the police force of Matamoros became the center of the world press attention when they managed to capture one of the bigger druglords in the area. He was a friend of the director's father and granted the production the final authorization to shoot inside the prison after the authorities agreed on it. The inmates were helping the production. Both cast and crew were augmented with inmates, and they behaved really well. One of them, Aguamala, led the construction of a stage inside the prison with the prison's resources (they had very nice carpenter shops), and became extremely close to the production designer, to the point that when he escaped prison a few months later he found his way to Mexico city and her phone number, calling her just to say hi and have a coffee one day.

Most of the times the film production is very careful to separate itself from the rest of the world, locating all the cast and crew in expensive hotels and setting up impressive displays of security around all the production activities, but sometimes it just blends in, mostly because of circumstances. The more resources filmmakers will have, the more of them will be spent in scaling the gap, increasing the separation. Most people that have worked in film know that the power of a director lies precisely on that, the special ability to look at the world top down that enables them to play with reality an fiction as if they were chess pieces to conduct the making of a film, equally concerned about the internal happenings of the production and the strategic negotiations that must happen outside to grant them what they need. If all this acrobatics are not carefully performed under a distance built by the Voyeur, and something is allowed to be more important to the director than the film, this whole chain of trust and worship crumbles down, maybe only inside the director's head, and the power to separate what is good for the movie from what will not work is lost.

The director will ask a team of people to do things; build environments, light them, and then carefully populate them with perfectly orchestrated choreographies of character and action, but his/her role will be to curate rather than to make. The director is placed as the ultimate eye that chooses what will be.

When choosing the small town in Tijuana where a wedding was going to take place, the director was showing a family videotape he borrowed from his maid in Mexico City depicting the wedding of her daughter in a small town in Oaxaca, an important south east state of Mexico. Cultural difference between the south and the north of Mexico is huge, and the more dry cultures of the north can be a little boring when it comes to depicting them as action in a movie. The wedding needed to be distorted, or augmented. It made sense to take the new influence from Oaxaca, where most illegal immigrants that reside in southern California come from, because of its colorful and musical culture. The Oaxaca style Tijuana wedding was born.

The actors performing in the wedding were, all but four of them, unprofessional actors taken from the nearby towns that had never experienced any contact with the entertainment industry before. They were served real booze and a famous Norteña music band (Los Tucanes de Tijuana) played for the bride and groom in between the cuts. By the end of the night, some of the extras could not tell they were not in a real wedding.

The Mexico-USA border is a space of tension and contrast. Language, religion, class and nationality collide and melt everyday in a problematic dynamic that is hard to grasp and understand. With a history of 150 years of conflict, it needs to be reviewed in ways that allow for dialog and justice, and a good first step might be to incorporate into the international film vocabulary. Popular movies are distributed and influence most urban [and rural] communities worldwide, and it is alarming to see how few of them get the chance to be represented, let alone in a truthful way. As an example, I will mention the border between Mexico and Guatemala, in the southern side of Mexico, where there are as many problematic dynamics as in the northern border, but the Mexican media is obsessed with Mexico's relation to the US, and the USA media is obsessed with itself, and there is no way anyone will find the alarming stories of the Mara Salvatruchas gangs interesting until they make it up to Mexico City or Nevada.

6. CONCLUSION

After having identified several aspects of the international film community that locate it beyond the regular borders of culture, I have described several ways of how the film community uses its mobility and power of seduction to enter people's lives, using them as input to make movies, distorting reality into a representation that looks to suit the needs of an international audience. The impact of the film activity on the communities it invades might seem strong, but it is a minor thing

that doesn't leave everlasting marks in the communities. However, it might touch specific individuals in ways that might change their lives.

When comparing film productions in Mexico and USA, a lot of parallels were drawn, most of them coming from the fact that the two countries are very close to each other and the mediatic and economic influence of the US over Mexico is overwhelming. For the mexican filmmaker, this influence is the cause contradictory feelings, that take place as a celebration of the american genres and a reaction against the american perspective.

The most important differences of how filmmakers conduct their activity in Mexico and USA are the budget size and the level of commitment to law. Americans have hundreds of times more resources, and control the distribution industry in almost a global scale, but the natural mobility and flexibility of the film production is enhanced by the more flexible, unsupervised, outlaw nature of the mexican reality.

Representation of violence seems to play a key role integrating local identities in the international scene. Even when violence is actually present in the places it represents, it is usually distorted into a violence that fits the formats of action cinema, thus failing to depict a truthful interpretation of the communities it gets an inspiration from. Realism as a genre of entertainment is not anymore about reality, but about an idea of reality that the network of entertainment values has already constructed. Real is usually not good enough because it can't follow the hyper kinetic pace of action in entertainment.