

Review Essays | Ensayos de Reseña

What is Mexico?

Portraying the War on Drugs in Documentary Film

Film Review Essay by Rosanne Elisabeth Tromp

- *Cartel Land*, directed by Matthew Heineman. United States, 2015.
- *Kingdom of Shadows*, directed by Bernardo Ruiz. Mexico, 2015.
- *Devil's Freedom*, directed by Everardo González. Mexico/United States, 2017.

As I was writing this review, *The Guardian* reported that on the outskirts of Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city, 273 corpses were dumped in a refrigerated trailer after local officials had been unable to keep up with the identification and burial of bodies due to the pace of bloodletting. The report is, unfortunately, illustrative of the ultraviolence and the lawlessness surrounding the Mexican drug war. Moreover, the incident symbolizes a crisis which affords no dignity to its victims. Thirteen years since the Mexican government – aided by the U.S. – launched a war on drug cartels, the violence continues, rule of law is elusive and human rights abuses abound.

Although drug trafficking in Mexico can be traced back several decades, the extreme violence erupted in 2006, when President Felipe Calderón declared a “war on drugs”. Ironically, the move that is seen by many as an attempt to legitimize his position after a 0.5 per cent election victory, initiated the biggest explosion in violence, deaths and lawlessness in Mexico's recent history. The drug war and its principle tactic to go after high profile cartel leaders generated headlines, pleased the U.S., and could be accomplished top-down, with little input from corrupt or weak local law enforcement. However, it has fractured and diversified cartels, leaving factions and rival cartels to fight for turf. Against this background, other violent crimes, such as kidnapping and extortion, which are not dependent on smuggling routes, surged. Moreover, the huge influx of cash

and military support via the U.S. funded Merida Initiative has helped to create an opaque security system open to corruption at every level. Since 2007, around 230,000 people have been murdered, and more than 28,000 are reported as disappeared. Human rights groups point to a vast rise in human rights abuses by security forces. The “we are at war” ideology has profoundly changed Mexican society, and trust in public institutions, such as security forces and democracy, has plummeted.

In the wake of this crisis, a frenzy of U.S. and Mexican series and films portraying the drug trade has sprung up. In them, usually a stereotypical and dualistic picture is painted of Mexican drug culture and society in general. On the one hand, Mexico is reduced to a country that is essentially about violence and corruption; on the other hand, stories idealize the lives of famous drug kingpins. The narrative is almost always the same. The protagonist is a smart guy from humble origins who rises to become a kingpin, battling against the often “evil” government. Above all, in entertainment films and series such as *El Chapo* (2017-present), *Escobar* (2017), *Narcos* (2015-2017), *El Señor de los Cielos* (2013-present), *El Infierno* (2010), *La Reina del Sur* (2011-present) and *American Made* (2017), drug lords lead glamorous lives.

However, the portrayal of the prolonged period of drug-related violence that has cut across Mexican society, is approached radically differently in *Cartel Land* (2015), *Kingdom of Shadows* (2015) and *Devil’s Freedom* (2017), the three documentaries under review here – and largely selected because they are different. *Cartel Land*, directed by Matthew Heineman, explores the drug trade by recounting the parallel stories of two vigilante groups battling cartel violence, one in Mexico and one in the U.S. The documentary was produced in the U.S. by The Documentary Group and Our Time Projects. The second documentary under review, *Kingdom of Shadows* was directed by Bernardo Ruiz and produced by Participant Media and Quiet Pictures. This film equally explores elements of the drug problem, this time by narrating the perspectives of a human rights’ activist in Mexico, a former drug smuggler in the U.S. and an American special agent with homeland security’s narcotic division and intelligence. Lastly, *Devil’s Freedom*, directed by Everardo González and produced by Arregios and Animal de Luz Films, centres around testimonies of victims and perpetrators of drug-related violence in Mexico.

So why are these portrayals of Mexico and the war on drug such timely and essential alternatives? What do they say that popular media, which by and large heroize and essentialize trafficking and drug-related violence, do not tell? And what do these documentaries tell us about what Mexico was, what it has become and what it could be?

Diffuse roles and causes

Cartel Land, *Kingdom of Shadows* and *Devil’s Freedom* each explore elements of the Mexican drug crisis, but with different emphases and slightly different

analyses. Still, up-close, heart-wrenching and chilling testimonies are central to all three of them. The documentaries portray the different groups of actors that are linked to, and affected by, the violence. We hear stories from victims, perpetrators, law enforcement, politicians, and those who organize themselves against it.

A central theme running through the three documentaries is that, in the complex chaos of the drug war, the roles in society become diffuse. Established categories do not suffice. The human need to distinguish between good and bad, to point to the guilty ones, to point out causes, has become difficult to satisfy. The *narco* hitmen could easily be pointed to as evil, but when listening to their stories, it is hard not to see them as victims too. Governments are guilty,¹ but even politicians are extorted and controlled by the *narco*. The documentaries clearly show that violence coexists with, and is connected to, formal democratic processes and institutions (Pansters, 2012, 6). A popular North American narrative, the idea that violence is spreading from “evil” Mexico into the “noble” U.S., due to a porous border, is easily debunked by the counter narrative focussing on the U.S. demand for drugs and North American weapons flooding Mexican society (c.f. Rodríguez et al., 2010). Rather than a dualist story of good versus evil (or state versus organized crime), roles and positions are blurred, making it difficult to distinguish between those who commit violent crimes and those who are supposedly combatting it. In this way, many different actors in all layers of society are bound together in an intricate web of cause and effect.

Of course, the documentaries do have differences. Notably, in *Kingdom of Shadows* and *Devil’s Freedom*, the filmmakers suggest a moral ambiguity, while in *Cartel Land* there is some suggestion that the authorities – both the Mexican and U.S. – are ultimately to blame. The latter documentary focusses on the rise of the *auto-defensas* in the Mexican state of Michoacán and a border patrol militia in the U.S. state of Arizona, both organizing against the violence. Several scenes illustrate the narrative of the “guilty government”. A memorable scene is recorded, when the population of a town in Michoacán drives out the military forces intending to disarm the *auto-defensas*, shouting “corrupt government, we don’t want you here!” We also see the *auto-defensas* watching former president Enrique Peña Nieto on TV and calling him a *pendejo* (loosely translated as “idiot”). In addition, director Heineman manages to create a sympathetic portrayal of Tim “Nailer” Foley, the leader of the armed militia group Arizona Border Recon, who argues that the federal government is failing to protect the border states from the drug trade.

Thus, roles (law maker versus law breaker) and categories (good versus evil) in Mexican society have become muddled. Even the idea of national borders is rendered meaningless. Both *Cartel Land* and *Kingdom of Shadows* explicitly argue that the drug problem should be approached as an international problem, with cause-and-effect and supply-and-demand chains cutting across official national borders. As former drug smuggler Don Henry Ford from Belmont, Texas, puts it in *Kingdom of Shadows*: “The drug business can’t be looked at through a

microscope. You need to look at it as a picture of a larger puzzle.” This line of argument is beautifully illustrated by images of Don and his wife cooking similar food as is eaten at the other side of the border.

Although all three documentaries are both subtle and careful in their analysis of causes and steer away from placing the blame solely with one group of actors, it is made very clear who the victims are. This becomes most evident through the gruesome testimonies. *Cartel Land* becomes almost impossible to watch when a woman recounts how “Los Caballeros Templarios”, a cartel based in the state of Michoacán, murdered a total of thirteen members of a family of lime pickers, including a three-month old baby – all killed for the simple reason that their boss owed money to the cartel. Equally gruesome stories feature in the other two films. The documentaries particularly explore the stories of those who are left behind when a loved one is forcefully disappeared. In *Devil’s Freedom*, a mother says: “A disappeared loved one is worse than a dead one because the pain increases.” Consuelo, in *Kingdom of Shadows* adds that “the worst crime is forced disappearance because you are kept in a limbo. You don’t know where they are or what happened to them.” One son so desperately wants to return his disappeared brothers to his devastated mother, that he is prepared to turn himself in to the drug lords in exchange. Although he is tortured and subsequently released, his brothers are never returned to their mother.

In *Devil’s Freedom*, a specific stylistic choice is made: the faces of all the interviewees are covered with skin-tight masks, leaving only the mouth and eyes visible. This not only protects the identity of those interviewed, but it adds to the documentary’s suggestion that, in Mexico today, the chance that you end up in front of the barrel of the gun is similar to ending up behind it. It also underlines the documentary’s message of desperation: the light skin-coloured masks give the faces of the interviewees the appearance of skulls, suggestive perhaps of the constant nearness of death.

The explicit choice of the directors to focus on different groups of actors involved and affected by the drug violence, rather than to heroize one group, is laudable. However, one story that remains underexposed in all three documentaries is the story of journalists. Adding to the situation of lawlessness is that most crimes are not reported in (local) newspapers. Journalists censor themselves to stay alive and drug cartels dictate press coverage. Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for the press. Reporters Without Borders ranked Mexico 147 – one spot ahead of Russia. Twelve reporters were murdered in Mexico in 2017, putting it on par with Syria. Crimes committed against the press are almost always remain in the realm of impunity, which “continues to incentivize the killers,” says Jan-Albert Hootsen, Mexico representative for the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), in *Devil’s Freedom*. The police itself is often implicated in the murders of journalists.

The act of killing

While all three documentaries explicitly explore the act of killing, the filmmakers steer away from glorifying the act. This is definitely an important strength of the documentaries vis-à-vis popular series and films: rather than heroizing them, drug lords and gunmen are reduced to almost normal people. Much more normal than we would perhaps wish they are. All three filmmakers manage to interview killers, and although their faces are covered, their eyes stare blankly into the camera. In *Devil's Freedom*, one gunman shares: "I didn't feel anything any longer. No compassion. It's not your family, why should you have compassion?"

Although the documentaries argue that an essential element for the killers was to "switch off" their emotions, *Devil's Freedom* adds another element to the ability to kill. It explores the argument that those who kill are not necessarily mentally ill or evil human beings, but that the most horrific crimes are committed when people follow orders. One hitman for example says: "We did the job, killed a whole family. You feel regret, but orders are orders and there is nothing you can do about it." Later on in the documentary a federal police officer states: "We are specialists in receiving orders. When there is an order, you lose humanity." In the same *Devil's Freedom*, it is suggested that a feeling of pride is a part of what drives the hitmen to kill as well. As one young *narco* recounts: "I felt a sense of euphoria, this is where I wanted to be." Another one makes the following comparison: "Pilots are proud of their flying hours, for us, each murder was another 'stripe for the tiger.'" In *Kingdom of Shadows*, another element is offered as to why one would join the drug trade and its related violence. Oscar Hagelsieb, assistant special agent in charge of homeland security, El Paso, running the narcotic division and intelligence, recounts how when he grew up, his whole life was shaped by the *narco*: "It was a way of life, nothing out of the extraordinary." Whereas for many people partaking in the drug trade might be impossible to imagine as it is so far removed from their day-to-day reality, for many Mexicans and North Americans taking the step into such a life is relatively small.

Through the testimonies of gunmen in all three documentaries runs another clue as to why they joined the cartel: poverty. Without a doubt, poverty is key to understanding the drug violence and everything that is related to it. Today, Mexico is one of most unequal countries within the OECD. And while the richest man in the world is from Mexico, 53 per cent of the country lives below the poverty line (Esquivel Hernandez, 2015). In the opening scene to *Cartel Land*, a meth cook justifies their role to the film crew: "We know it hurts people but what can we say? We are poor. If we would be wealthy, we would be like you guys, traveling the world doing good clean jobs." In *Kingdom of Shadows*, Oscar Hagelsieb recounts how, in the town he grew up, "there was always a lot of temptation. A lot of poverty, a lot of struggle (...) Your friends suddenly had a lot of money. If somebody offered you money, why not? He's doing it, so why shouldn't I?" A gunman in *Devils' Freedom* describes how after his first murder, committed when he was only in high school, he was given a car. With every

murder he would gain more money. And with the money he acquired power. In all the documentaries, shots of desolate landscapes or the repetitive movements of factory workers reinforce this narrative of lack of opportunities through conventional (and safer) means.

The dysfunctional state and the rise of self-defense groups

The atrocities depicted in the documentaries take place against the background of dysfunctional public institutions.² In *Devil's Freedom*, a mother turns to the police for help after her two sons and two nephews have disappeared. Time and time again she is told there are no prosecutors available for her case. And as the waiting turns into months, the despair grows. The hopelessness in the face of injustice runs through the testimonies of the victims in all three documentaries. In *Kingdom of Shadows*, Sister Consuelo Morales of the NGO Citizens in Support of Human Rights in Monterrey says: "The two largest monsters are impunity and corruption. As long as we don't have the legal tools to punish those responsible for these terrible acts, the abuses will continue." Human Rights Watch (2018) reports that prosecutors and police routinely fail to take basic investigative steps to identify those responsible for enforced disappearances, often telling the missing people's families to investigate on their own.

A related aspect is the lack of educational opportunities. This does not feature in any of the documentaries under review here, but it is essential in understanding the complexities of the drug trade. Poverty, educational opportunities and violence are all both cause and effect in an intricate web. On the one hand, education is a victim of drug-related violence. Several studies report how both exposure and persistence of criminal violence reduces math test scores, as teachers are absent and students traumatized. My own research has shown how, due to drug-related violence, schools in the mountains of the Mexican state of Durango were unable to operate for over a year. On the other hand, the lack of relevant education plays a role in the persisting influence of cartels. Teachers struggle to keep youngsters interested whose aspirations mainly included joining the local drug business. Government responses, such as mandatory testing for all teachers to improve teaching, seem to be driven by the desire to comply with international standards, rather than motivated by a real concern with the effects of these measures on the ground (Tromp, 2016).

In the face of all the violence and distrust of government institutions, both Mexico and the U.S. have seen a sharp rise of self-defence movements (García González 2016). The documentaries under review all refuse to portray the victims of violence and injustice as merely that, and choose instead to highlight the relentless ability of Mexicans to organize and selflessly fight for justice. In *Kingdom of Shadows*, Sister Consuelo organizes the family members of the disappeared, ceaselessly pushing prosecutors to do their jobs and find the forcefully disappeared. In *Devil's Freedom*, a Mexican federal police man explains how, in the face of the impunity within the police force, some policemen started to

bring in and question people on their own: “If you know that the person in charge of justice is not doing his job, someone has to maintain balance. This is how we worked, imparting justice with our own hands.” That the story of social organization is not an unproblematic story to tell, also becomes clear. One problematic outcome of this initiative within the federal policy was that, eventually, this group started to question people without orders, torture to obtain confessions, and kill without due process. *Cartel Land* centres around the rise of what are argued to be two self-defence groups; the *auto-defensas* in Michoacán and a U.S. border patrol group. The first group originated in an attempt to protect citizens from the violence committed by cartels operating in Michoacán. However, as former cartel members started to join, another cartel was eventually formed from within their ranks. Heineman even goes so far as to position the U.S. border patrol in this category of self-defence group, which is a controversial statement, as others have characterized them as hate groups. In *Cartel Land* we indeed see an interview with one of the group’s white nationalists, but the suggestion is made that also these people believe they are organizing themselves for a better tomorrow.

Social organization is by no means without risk in Mexico. In a context where the distinction between government, law enforcement and organized crime is blurred, it is never really clear who the enemy is. In addition, the strategies adopted by the Mexican state to confront organized crime, such as the militarization of parts of the country, have included repressing social movements (Pansters 2012, 5). This constant danger in which social organizations operate in Mexico is depicted in both *Cartel Land* and *Kingdom of Shadows*.

What will Mexico be?

In sum, contrary to the frenzy of popular *narco* hero series and films, portraying stories as dualistic (good versus evil) and often glorifying the lives of kingpins, the documentaries *Cartel Land*, *Kingdom of Shadows* and *Devil’s Freedom* show the drug-related violence in Mexico as a complex, international, multi-factor and multi-layered problem, in which categories and roles are diffuse. Poverty, inequality and dysfunctional public institutions are pointed to as essential elements in understanding the problem, but all three documentaries rightfully steer away from placing the ultimate blame on one cause or group of people. Yet, in all three documentaries it is made crystal clear who the victims are amidst this chaos. At the same time, the relentless ability of society to organize itself against violence is highlighted. These complex portrayals of the drug problem are not only more realistic illustrations of its effects, but they are also necessary – and uncomfortable – alternatives to the many popular entertaining cartel hero-stories that erroneously portray the drug business as glamorous, which may possibly lead to the perpetuation of the celebration and aspiration to join the drug trade.

The new Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-) has proposed a dialogue with drug cartels in order to establish some stability, as an

alternative to the “war against drugs” strategy which has only increased violence. However, this sparks controversy and it also seems difficult to realize as there is not one cartel boss strong enough to negotiate with and maintain order. At the other side of the border, proposals to construct a wall and to renegotiate trade agreements are bound to have their repercussions on the drug trade. All of this leads to essential questions: What can Mexico be? Will the pawns in the web be caught in an everlasting cycle? If fundamental issues in the realms of education, health, security, inequality, demand, and supply are not addressed regionally, then the suggestion of the three documentaries under review – which is succinctly illustrated by the prediction of one gunman in *Kingdom of Shadows* – might very well be true: “You can kill a *narco* but there will always be someone else waiting in line.” Without offering an answer to these questions, by carefully portraying the people and processes involved in the drug war, the three documentaries uncover some of the often-invisible realities and complexities of this crisis.

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Notes

1. Mexican organized crime annually invests, on average, forty million US dollars to bribe the judges and as such achieve adequate protection for their operations. To achieve this protection in the implementation of their strategies, organized crime requires the protection of high levels of the Mexican State (for example, members of Congress or senior officials of the Federal and State Executive Power) (Buscaglia, González-Ruiz and Prieto Palma, 2006).
2. Interestingly, Pansters (2012, 7) argues that the current criminal and political violence, the militarization of public security and repression of social movements is in fact a fundamental element of modern Mexican state building, and could thus, in a way, be called “functional”. Solís González (2013) equally argues the existence of the “Narco-State”,

whose external manifestation is that of a technocratic neoliberal political regime, but nevertheless with a strong presence of organized crime's representatives in its various governments as well as in the economy and in finance. According to this author, this phenomenon should be seen as part of the current crisis of global capitalism, taking the form, in the case of Mexican society, of a major organic crisis consisting of *a deficit of rationality* (three decades without economic growth) and a *deficit of institutional legitimacy* (italics in original).

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