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'Narco Cultura' explores the meaning of the war on drugs

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Dec. 11, 2013 NCR Today

"Narco Cultura" [1]
102 minutes, in English and Spanish with English subtitles

Just when some think border fences between the U.S. and Mexico are stemming the tide of undocumented people coming north, their status as problem-solvers appears to be that of a managed image to mask the real threat to the U.S: illegal trafficking in guns and drugs that is facilitating a tragic conflict in Mexico.

What U.S. citizens are not seeing is how the Mexican war on drugs is fueled by arms from the U.S. and Mexican government corruption and how the Mexican drug cartels have murdered thousands of their own people each year since President Felipe Calderon announced the "war on drugs" in 2006. The *Los Angeles Times* called Calderon's time as president the bloodiest [2] since Mexico's civil war a century ago.

Seeing Juarez again as a city of death reminded me of the unsolved deaths of almost 400 women in that city that has been documented in film, such as Gregory Nava's 2006 film "Bordertown," and in the news since 1993.

Meanwhile, since 2006, a subculture of music is on the rise in the U.S. and Mexico: "*narcocorridos*," or *narco* folksongs, which glorify cartel leaders and their criminal and Robin Hood activities for their local towns and villages. In fact, the CDs are sold in family-friendly Wal-Mart and Target stores and on iTunes.

In this new documentary, "Narco Cultura," director Shaul Schwarz explores the pop culture influence of the drug cartels and gangs north and south of the border. He also exposes a chilling paradox: the political and government corruption in Mexico and its state-of-the-art CSI lab in the city of Juarez against the thousands of killings by the cartels, including of hundreds of women, that go unchecked and unsolved. Add to this the rise of the *narcocorridos* music genre that celebrates the "death and destruction," and it leaves you feeling outraged and helpless, wondering what the U.S.'s war on drugs means, if anything at all. In fact, these urban drug wars in Mexico have already cost the U.S. taxpayers more than a billion dollars, Schwarz told me.

Schwarz deftly juxtaposes the pieces of the paradox by following two men in his somber film. One is a crime scene investigator in Juarez who goes about his job conscientiously and carefully, aware that at any time, he and his family can be gunned down like some of his colleagues. All through the film I kept asking myself: Why do the CSIs even bother? No one, except heartbroken mothers of the dead, seems to care. Schwarz told me in an interview, "What options does he have? To cry? He can't speak out."

The other man is Los Angeles native Edgar Quintero, a singer-songwriter whose music celebrates the *narcos* as heroic outlaws.

I asked Schwarz about the effectiveness of the fences along the border.

"People want to believe that they can throw some law enforcement, a fence, and billions of dollars to the Mexican police and send them more guns, but this is not working," he said.

"Look at the price of cocaine: It's getting cheaper and cheaper. What has been achieved since the fence went up and Mexico's war on drugs began? 60,000 people dead in five years in Juarez. We halted illegal immigration to the U.S. but not the drug activity to the U.S."

I asked Quintero if he thought he was contributing to the drug cartel conflict.

"No. I am telling a story but at the same time it's really happening," he said. "If I don't do it, someone else will. If we don't ignore [drug cartels], maybe something can get done about it."

Young people who like the Mexican drug ballads pay Quintero to write songs. He described his audience as young people who want to live the life of the *narco* for a night. "They come up to me as fans, as someone that they like. Who am I to deny my services? If someone wants a song, I will write it. But there are certain rules: no pointing fingers, no disrespecting people, and no blaming anyone."

Quintero says in the film that he likes to smoke good pot, and he has a wife, children and good parents who guided him. "It comes down to choices. We all make choices. If I am singing these songs, it is my choice, and it is a choice not to get involved. That's the boundary: Just don't get involved, you don't name names. A lot of *narcocorridos* singers have been killed."

So, I asked Quintero, are you giving the *narcos* a pass, and how are these men like Robin Hood?

"Going to a club and hearing this music is more of a way for Mexican-American kids who come from good homes to find a way to identify themselves, to go to a night club and feel what it means to be a *narco* for a night," he said. "Guys become *narcos* to get out of poverty, and the [Mexican] government doesn't help the situation. The *narcos* build schools and roads, they help their towns where they are from. They feel they have to help locally."

I asked Schwarz why no one is speaking out against the power of the cartels in his film, not even the church in this predominantly Catholic country. We see in his film that people are not even buried from the churches.

"Even for the church, people are scared," he said. "Only a mother screams in grief [in the film], which is a no-no in Juarez. Intimidation and fear of the cartels is huge -- and for the right reasons. The church is not different from this. At the end of the day, the church fails like everyone else."

"Narco Cultura" premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January and is now playing in select cities. I had never heard of *narcocorridos*, so I checked the Wal-Mart and iTunes websites, and sure enough, there they are. Schwarz told me these stores carry the music because they are commercial while I found it ironic that Wal-Mart, the same chain that wants to carry films that are faith- and family-friendly in English, willingly carries music in Spanish that celebrates so much tragedy.

What is the influence of these songs in the United States? Are they, as songwriter Quintero attests, subversive and ultimately harmless, "like they used to think rap music was"?

I was more concerned at how ineffective and costly in human lives and treasure these wars on drugs are. What's really going on? Who pains and who gains? Can we make a difference?

When I asked Schwarz what he hopes the film will achieve, he said, "Two things: a discussion and action. It's more than gangsters killing gangsters. People on both sides of the border are at fault. Most Americans will do drug activity at some point in our lives ... These musicians are singing about these guys as Robin Hoods, but our U.S. policies are creating the problems. Reality creates the culture. Spending billions on a fence or more guns on the ground are not going to change it. I hope that the larger community sees this film and does not blame the

Mexicans only. We are in this together."

"Narco Cultura" is about a "disturbingly glorified conflict" that no one is paying attention to and how pop culture functions in society and in commerce. For people who care, it is a film not to be missed.

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