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Casting Out the Serpent:
Eroticized Violence and the Mexicana Body in Hollywood Cinema

By Alesia García
On a recent visit to DePaul University in Chicago, Academy Award nominated Chicana filmmaker Lourdes Portillo screened her latest documentary film entitled Señorita Extraviada—an investigative look into the horrific and as-yet-unsolved crimes of kidnapping, murder, and mutilation of over 400 young Mexican women in the Texas-Mexican borderlands that have taken place since 1993. What moves the viewer and captures her imagination most in this film are the eyes of the missing women that gaze directly into the camera from grainy snapshots. Photograph after photograph of women from throughout Mexico. As so many before them throughout history, they ventured to el norte in search of the camera from grainy snapshots. As I watched the stories of the missing women unfold, I couldn't help feeling outraged at the failure of the United States media to report such disturbing human rights atrocities. I later recalled a summer issue of Time magazine that promoted the borderlands as a location that is “creating a new world for all of us.” Of course, this is mostly a reference to the cultural exchanges NAFTA is believed to have created rather than to the rich mestizaje that we have known about for centuries. The only mention in this national news magazine of the countless missing women who have been raped, strangled, set afire, decapitated, dismembered and thrown away like trash within miles of the maquiladoras is a couple of buried sentences. A new world indeed. Sadly, it has long been much easier for the “average American” to comprehend the cartoonish images of Mexican women that have been manufactured by Hollywood since the early 1900s. As a professor of Chicana literature, it is my job to teach my students how to read these images and analyze the contexts from which they emerge, which is why a film like Señorita Extraviada is so important and why its realism must be recognized in direct contrast to exploitative images of Mexicanas and Chicanas that continue to emerge from the assembly-lines of Hollywood movie factories. One such film is From Dusk Till Dawn, co-written with Quentin Tarantino and directed by Tejano boy wonder, Robert Rodriguez. This film premiered in January 1996—three years after the mass murders began, which was, coincidentally, also a presidential election year in the United States.

Rodriguez’s “action-adventure” film From Dusk Till Dawn symbolized what would become a barrage of on-screen “alien invasions” of American culture throughout the 1990s (including a rash of Chupacabra attacks). In scenes eerily reminiscent of videotapes of the infamous 1991 Rodney King beating and the 1996 beatings of Mexicans nationals on Southern California freeways, the crucifix-toting, white male protagonist in Rodriguez’s film, beats, stabs, shoots, impales, decapitates, and dismembers a mob of alien female vampires. What is most disturbing about this cinematic violence against Mexicans is that it takes place near the U.S.-Texas-Mexico border—one of the most politically-charged and exploited landscapes in American history.

The film follows two Americans on the run from the FBI and the Texas Rangers. Seth (George Clooney), a professional thief and murder, and his brother Ritchie (Quentin Tarantino), a serial rapist and murderer, flee toward the Mexican borderlands, where they plan to buy their sanctuary deep inside Mexico from the local drug-runners. On the way there, the kidnappers carjack a white preacher (Harvey Keitel) and his two children, and, in a mock reversal of “illegally crossing over,” force the family to hide them in their RV and drive them across the border to the appointed meeting place: a topless bar, brothel, and truckstop, branded the “Tittie Twister.” What awaits the killers is neither the invisibility from American justice that they seek, nor a night of anonymous sex with a border whore. Rather, they find themselves in a physical and spiritual confrontation with what film critic David Maciel refers to as the conventional frontier “lawlessness” of the U.S.-Mexico border—a culturally constructed wasteland where white American film heroes have traversed since the late 19th century (2). Lawlessness in this film would not meet conventional cinematic standards of frontier violence without the requisite onslaught of racist and sexist language, bloody gunfights, knife-play, and half-naked, dancing Mexican women, which the director provides in abundance. This time, however, the “twist” that the hero is up against is none other than an ancient cult of Aztec female vampires who prey upon helpless border travelers.

Long-standing stereotypes of cold-blooded, Mexican “savagery,” together with the wave of anti-Mexican rhetoric that abounded in the U.S. in the 1990s, combined to undeniably shadow the cinematic representations of Mexicana bodies in From Dusk Till Dawn. The blurring of film genres, particularly the action-adventure, horror, and Western, creates a prime narrative space for Rodriguez’s disposable Mexicana bodies: shape-shifting, monster-alien who must be exterminated to protect the American values of capitalism on the border and the purity of white American womanhood.

In the late 1990s, Hollywood released a number of alien-attack movies, namely The Arrival, Independence Day, Men in Black, and Falling Down, but From Dusk Till Dawn, is perhaps the most unsettling and violent interpretation of an “alien invasion” because the film justifies the devaluation and disposal of Mexicana bodies in the popular imagination. Moreover, the violence committed against Mexicanas in this film is highly eroticized—comic stereotypes of the Mexican border prostitute bleed into one-dimensional images of devil-worshipping primitives, harkening back the days of Hernan Cortes’s bloody massacres at Cholula and Tenochtitlan.

Mexican women in the bar appear naked except for loincloths and feathered headbands. They are eroticized and eroticized for the viewing pleasure of the mostly American male truck drivers who inhabit the bar. But the central symbol of sexual evil is inscribed upon the body of featured dancer, Santanico Pandemonium (Selma Hayek), a nearly naked, dark-skinned woman, who wears a copilli, or Aztec sacred regalia, as she seduces a python in a parody of a snake dance. The visual conflation of sexual and racial stereotypes of Mexicanas reinforces the white American heroism of Seth, for, in the minds of the audience, the Mexican-ness of these female alien-vampires already inscribes them as more dangerous and evil than either Seth or his brother, Ritchie.

Further complicating audience reception of these stereotypes is the way film critics tend to validate the authenticity of these border representations, as Anthony Nerricio points out in a recent essay where he refers to a noted film critic’s description of the border “essence” that is “authentically” captured in films like Orson Welles’
Touch of Evil. This 1958 film, which is characterized by “strip joints and prostitution, a few ragged Mexican poor, and a couple of men trundling fantastic pushcarts . . . the [border] town . . . exists by selling vice to the Yankees, functioning as a kind of subconscious for northerners just outside their own boundaries where they can enjoy themselves while they imagine the Mexicans are less civilized” (qtd. in Nerricio 49). The effectiveness of Rodriguez’s film depends upon the audience’s acceptance of these distorted ideas about the Mexican borderlands. Perhaps its success can, in part, be measured by the fact that to this date, two sequels and an interactive videogame have been released.

The images of Mexicana bodies in From Dusk Till Dawn are doubly inscribed as impure and expendable because Santanico is played by Mexican actress Selma Hayek, a woman who, in true Hollywood style, has had her sexuality exaggerated in the roles of Mexican spitfire and hot-blooded Latin, much like other famous Latina actresses such as Lupe Vélez, Rita Moreno, and more recently, Jennifer Lopez. Commenting on classic Hollywood stereotypes of Mexicans, film critic Linda Williams points to the obvious: “that women’s bodies reduced to the status of sex objects for the delight of male subjects are no less stereotyped than the ‘lazy Mexicans’ who serve as foils in countless Westerns to flatter the intelligence and energy of the Anglo cowboy” (59).

The strewn decapitated and disem­boweled bodies of Mexicanas in this film visually demonstrate what feminist film critic Laura Mulvey refers to as “the fragmented body,” a female body that is hacked into eroticized, objectified pieces in order to transform her into manageable objects of desire (7). Others find direct links between film genre and political ideology. Gina Marchetti, for one, notes that action-adventure films, in particular, “embody and work through those social contradictions the culture needs to come to grips with and may not be able to deal with except in the realm of fantasy” (211). All feminist and cultural theory aside, it is still quite unsettling that From Dusk Till Dawn has received far more media attention than the real life murders of young Mexican women on the border.

By the end of From Dusk Till Dawn, we see how anti-Mexican immigration rhetoric merges with popular stereotypes of Mexican “savagery.” With the vampires successfully disposed of, the final shot of the film reveals a justification for the bloody massacre. As the camera zooms out to a long-shot, the focal point on the screen is the image of the vampire lair resting upon the ruins of an Aztec sacrificial temple—an architectural reminder of the fall of ancient Mexico and a relic of the European conquest of a “primitive” culture. Victorious, Seth emerges into the sunlight not as the thief and murderer that he arrived as at the start of the film, but, as the “hero” Cortés reborn, reconquering Mexico and securing the U.S.-Mexico border against an invasion of man-eating Mexicanas. Unbelievable. Perhaps one day Hollywood will get the message?

WORKS CITED


