

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Herod's Law** (1999)

Luis Estrada

### **SYNOPSIS**

Director Luis Estrada gives a view from the inside of just how and why corruption started to take hold and spread in Mexico, no matter where the town is located, how large it is, or who is in charge. His approach is bold and satirical as it follows the story of a naive janitor suddenly catapulted into the mayor's office in a remote, dusty Mexican town, and how the dominating political party, the PRI, brought him into their fold. As he rises in the party, he descends rapidly into a moral abyss. This is the first of a trilogy of films by Estrada that critique Mexico's government and explore the way that the all-enveloping web of corruption seems to be almost inescapable, no matter which side of the political divide you might be on.

### **CHARACTERS:**

*Juan Vargas:* New mayor of San Pedro de los Saguaros, a tiny, backwards town where most of the populace speaks an indigenous language rather than Spanish

*Lopez:* A PRI party official (secretary to the governor), corrupt and ambitious who plots to kill the governor

*Doña Lupe:* Brothel owner

*Robert Smith:* Lupe's lover and an American who claims to be an expert in rural electrification

*Filemón:* Town drunk

### **THE STORY / SCENES**

Another one bites the dust. The year is 1949 and the mayor of San Pedro de los Saguaros (fictional), a dusty, desert town in Mexico, is lynched by angry townspeople because he tried to abscond with the village's money.

The political party in power, the PRI, appoints Juan Vargas, who runs a small junkyard. Vargas, who is ambitious and dreams of power, is thrilled.

The scene of the drive into town is a play on expectations. Shot in sepia tones that suggest this took place in the past, and also which give a sense of historical relevance and authenticity, the film itself feels like a glimpse into the past, almost like watching old newsreels.

A utopian vision. Vargas is shocked at how small, dusty, and poverty-stricken the village is. He is also taken aback at the low level of education. This is not what he signed up for (!) However he has a vision of what can be done. He would like to transform San Pedro de los Saguaros a modern town and to be the very best mayor.

A slight impediment: the town is broke! Vargas visits Licenciada Lopez in order to obtain funds for community development. In a scene that uses over-the-shoulder shots to give a sense of having an intimate look at what is happening behind the scenes, the audience watches Lic. Lopez give Vargas advice in the form of two "tools": The Mexican Constitution (to use the law to his advantage) and a gun (for self-protection).

Step 1: The Brothel. After studying the Constitution all night, Vargas decides that a good place to start in cleaning up the town would be to shut down the local brothel. The owner of the brothel, Dona Lupe, is outraged and threatens Lic. Vargas with a machete. In self-defense, Vargas shoots Dona Lupe in the leg.

**Step 2: The First Source of Income.** Vargas has no budget and the problems of the town are getting worse. So, when Dona Lupe responds with a bribe, Vargas accepts. Vargas has just taken his first step into corruption, and he starts making huge promises to provide electricity. He dramatically raises taxes.

**The Resistance and a Pig:** Dona Lupe does not like the high taxes, the bribes, and the fact that there is still no electricity. She lures Vargas to her brothel, promising bribe money and prostitutes. He takes the bait. But, instead of pleasure, Vargas is beaten up by Dona Lupe's bodyguard. Then Vargas is forced to act like a pig.

**Herod's Law:** Vargas is tired of Herod's Law (roughly translated and cleaned up as "either or screwed one way, or your screwed another"), and he decides to exact revenge. He returns to the brothel, where he shoots Pancho and also Dona Lupe. As the violence ends, the camera zooms in and focuses on a PRI party lapel button. This evidence at the scene is discovered by Filemon.

**Execution:** The scene in which Vargas shoots Filemon to keep him from telling anyone about the murders uses medium long shots and point of view shots to focus on the gun in Vargas's hand and the fact that Filemon is killed execution-style.

**Depravity:** After the murders, Vargas descends into increasing violence; violence seems to be his only tool for maintaining order, exacting revenge, and expressing his offended honor. He beats his wife for cheating on him with an American "consultant."

**Tyrant:** Vargas continues to abuse his power. He raises taxes and jails the people who can't pay. There are more murders, more uprisings, and the town hall is burned. The townspeople are outraged and ready to lynch him like they lynched the last mayor when a PRI Party official arrives. Ramirez, the PRI party official finds Vargas on the electric pole (the only thing that Vargas actually accomplished).

**Political absurdity:** There is no doubt that at this point, Vargas is a deranged psychopathic murderer. However, the fact that Vargas murdered Lic. Lopez just as Lopez's nefarious plot to murder the governor was uncovered, Vargas is turned into a hero. After all, by killing Lic. Lopez, he saved Governor Terrazas's life (according to the narrative).

**Political Shining Star:** Vargas is appointed as a Special Secretary in the Mexican National Congress, and he revels in the fact that he now receives respect.

**Full Circle:** Back at San Pedro de los Saguaros, a new mayor makes the dusty, hot drive into town, and history seems to repeat.

## **THEMES**

**Ambition:** Politicians seem ambitious, but behind their ambition is a need to survive. In a nation that does not have clear pathways to social mobility or political advancement, ambition must be coupled with creativity, or at least the creative use of force.

**Madness:** The pursuit of total control over a situation leads to madness. As Juan Vargas embarks on his quest to transform his pueblo, he slips into corruption which takes him down a path of violence. Finally, the pace of violent encounters and the desperation to cover his tracks or secure total control lead to a rapid descent into madness.

**Tyranny:** Herod's Law explores different levels and types of tyranny and poses the question to the audience: Is tyranny ever desirable? Is tyranny necessary in a country where there are no stable governmental structures, and no enforceable tax?

**Politics:** In Herod's Law, the main type of politics is that of the politics of personality, and also the politics of power. Both go hand in glove with corruption. In many ways, Herod's Law is a history of the PRI party in Mexico, and an inside view of the pressures it exerts on politicians to become corrupt and also to resort to almost any level of skullduggery and stealthy behaviors to assure the continuance of power.

Violence: In *Herod's Law*, when Vargas is given a copy of the Mexican Constitution and a gun, it is clear that his only way ahead is to use violence, either legal or physical. Brute force is the way of the jungle when there is not rule of law, and where the only law is ultimately a self-defeating state of nihilistic chaos.

### **JUAN VARGAS:**

*Ambitious:* When Juan Vargas is elevated from the job of a junk yard manager to that of the mayor of a town, he is elated. After all, in Mexico, to be a mayor means you can pretty much write your own ticket, and that it comes with a great deal of respect and the potential for wealth. He is disappointed when he finds that San Pedro de los Saguaros is so poor and desolate. He is ambitious and would like to be an important figure in the world.

*Psychopathic:* At one point in the film, when Vargas begins to beat his wife, and as he murders person after person, Vargas seems to have become utterly insane with murderous rage. The film suggests mental imbalance with a series of quick cuts and point of view shots which give a sense of the state of his disordered mind.

*Violent:* Vargas's solution to problems of all kinds is to use violence. He uses gun violence to eliminate people who might present an impediment to him and the achievement of his dreams. He uses the Mexican Constitution to find loopholes that allow him to tax and imprison people at will.

*Visionary:* Vargas is a contradictory character, and although he does seem quite unhinged later in the film, at the beginning, when he first arrives in San Pedro, he is filled with visions of how the town could be modernized.

*Corrupt:* Vargas does not begin his life as mayor as a corrupt official. However, the pressures of budget and the need to modernize the town start to make him desperate. His desperation causes him to start to consider unwholesome methods.

**LIC. LOPEZ:** Something of a caricature, but yet useful in that he functions as a paradigmatic example of political operators within the PRI political party.

*Ambitious:* Lopez is a seasoned operator within the party and he knows how things work. He wants to ascend in the ranks and would like to become governor. When he gives advice to Vargas, he is sharing tips and secrets gained from his own experience.

*Ruthless:* Lopez will stop at nothing to achieve his goals, even if it means having to kill his political rivals.

*Machiavellian:* Lopez is very deliberate in his actions, and he considers that most expedient plan in order to achieve his goals. His primary objective is personal survival and success, and so he simply considers all who are around him as a tool or a means to an end.

*Usurper:* Lopez is revealed as having planned to have the governor murdered.

### **Questions:**

1. The "Herod's Law" concept is a "lose-lose" proposition and suggests that governance is essentially a nihilistic endeavor. What is Estrada saying about a governmental system that relies on charismatic leaders, and those who concentrate power completely within their own office? What are the likely consequences for those they govern?
2. The quest for power and total control seems to typify the politicians of the PRI Party. They seem to lust for power because that is apparently the only way to assure survival. Without it, one finds oneself in Vargas's situation as a mayor of San Pedro de los Saguaros: absolutely without recourse to any sort of budget. Describe how the movie suggests that the current system of placing a person in a position without any budget or hope of revenue may encourage corruption.
3. Estrada leads the viewer into what seems at some point a mind-numbing level of violence, much of it senseless because the people who were killed (such as Filemon, the town drunk whom no one would

possibly find credible), were actually no threat at all. Please explore possible reasons for such a level of violence. How is Estrada commenting on the fact that repeated violence can result in desensitization, which can inhibit positive change? Or, how is Estrada demonstrating how repeated violence is dehumanizing and ultimately results in a class of people who are systemically excluded from economic participation (as in the case of the villagers in Herod's Law)?



Juan Vargas with the enormous book containing the Mexican Constitution.



Juan Vargas, surrounded by items that remind him of his experiences as a mayor of San Pedro de los Sagueros.



Vargas trembles and attempts to calm his nerves in the brothel.



The PRI party button that Vargas leaves behind and which could implicate him in the murder of Guadalupe, the owner of the brothel.



Juan Vargas, successful at last. He is giving a speech to the Mexican Congress after having been credited for stopping a conspiracy to murder the governor.