

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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El Infierno (2010)

Luis Estrada

SYNOPSIS

The second film in Luis Estrada's trilogy on crime, corruption, and ambition in Mexico, *El Infierno* (2010) is a satire that realistically depicts the dynamics of drug cartels, and the greed, fear, and moral weakness of the individuals who become ensnarled in a zero-sum game. The cartels are successful business enterprises, replete with codes of ethics, enforcement, standard business practices, and quality assurance, as in the formal (rather than the informal) economy. Unfortunately, in the part of Mexico depicted, the informal business enterprises had completely subsumed and replaced the formal (legal) businesses, with profound implications on society. The timing of the film is important. Released in 2010, the year of Mexico's Bicentennial, widely celebrated as the 200th anniversary of the "Grito" (the shout) of independence, the film questions the progress of the nation. It also demonstrates how involvement in the cartels is almost inescapable, and how it makes any reform or change very difficult.

THE CHARACTERS

Benny Garcia: Protagonist deported from the U.S.; thinks joining a drug cartel is quick ticket to riches.
Cochiloco (Crazy pig): Local drug cartel boss
Don José Reyes: Drug kingpin of the entire Reyes del Norte cartel
Dona Maria Reyes: Wife of Don José
J.R.: Son of Don Jose and Dona Maria, groomed to take over the empire
Guadalupe Solis: Wife of Benny's murdered brother; mother of "El Diablito"
Benjamin: Lupe's son; Benny's nephew (El Diablito)
Capitan Ramirez: Corrupt local police official
El Tejano: Arms dealer from Texas

THE STORY / SCENES

The American Dream: Benjamin Garcia ("El Benny") leaves for the United States, known colloquially as "El Otro Lado" (The Other Side), as a young man. He says "good-bye" to his mother and his younger brother.

20 Years Later, An Ignominious Return: Benny is deported from the United States. He returns home flat broke (not rich with spoils from his years in the U.S., as all expect). Estrada emphasizes the contrast from the U.S. by framing Mexico in dusty, faded colors, and by emphasizing a cloudless sky and trees with insufficient leaves to provide shade.

A Landscape of Poverty and Violence: With establishing shots that emphasize the desert conditions, poverty, and empty streets, Estrada shows the desolate conditions that dominate his small town. They are a microcosm of what has happened across the country due to the economic crisis and the infamous "War on Drugs."

Casual Death: As he walks down the street, a truck drives up and people with guns shoot the driver and passengers dead. The driver falls out of the truck onto the street. He bleeds to death without a single person coming to the rescue. Finally a policeman arrives to take notes and to call the undertaker unceremoniously haul off the bodies.

Reunion with sad news: Estrada interchanges long shots with medium close-ups and two-shots in interior settings with his mother and godfather. The colors used by Estrada are muted and dark, which gives a somber feeling.

Mysterious violent death of his younger brother: Benny learns that his younger brother was murdered years ago under mysterious circumstances, but most likely in relation to being involved in the drug cartel, "Los Reyes del Norte" (Kings of the North).

Unhealthy attraction: Darkness is falling, which seems to transform the town a bit and give it a sense of intimacy. Benny stops by the house of his brother's widow. The door is opened by Benny's nephew and namesake, Benjamin, known as "El Diablito" (Little Imp). El Diablito is a 14-year-old who is doing everything he can to follow in the doomed footsteps of his father. He smokes, owns a gun. Benny meets his sister-in-law, Guadalupe Solis (Lupe) and immediately feels strong attraction. Fascinated by the fact that Benny was in the U.S. and expecting him to rich, they quickly lose interest in him when they find out his not wealthy.

Establishing ties: Benny and Lupe visit Benny's brother's grave and Benny assures Lupe that he will find out who killed her husband, and he will do everything he can to provide for her and her son. Estrada uses tight 3-shots in order to establish the idea that the three are now a united family, albeit a warped one, with Lupe, who works as a prostitute, Diablito, the young son who is dabbling in organized crime himself, and Benny, who has become infatuated with Lupe and wants to please her.

Burgeoning friendship: Time passes and Benny comes across his childhood friend, Eufemio "El Cochiloco" Mata who has become a drug trafficker who works for the "Reyes del Norte" cartel. Benny asks if there's any good money to be made in working for the Reyes del Norte. Cochiloco warns him that there is, but it's dangerous.

Los Reyes del Norte: Cochiloco tells Benny that his brother was working with the same cartel and was known as Pedro "El Diablo" García but that he was assassinated by a rival cartel "Los Panchos".

Succumbing to temptation: Benny, who is now in a relationship with his ex-sister-in-law, is in trouble. His nephew (El Diablito) is arrested for theft and will only be released in exchange for a bribe of 50,000 pesos. So, Benny asks Cochiloco to help get him into the cartel. It's the only way he can think of to raise the money

Meeting the Kingpin: Benny gets his wish and meets with Don José Reyes and his son Jesús (J.R.). In contrast with the dry, dusty, poverty-stricken town, Reyes lives in a posh, luxurious mansion. Don José admits him to the ranks of Los Reyes del Norte, but only after explaining that he will be instantly killed if he fails to adhere to the core rule: Honesty, loyalty and total silence. Don Jose intones this with the most serious tone possible, as though murdering, drug-dealing, kidnapping, extortion and other nefarious acts, were completely legitimate and honorable activities.

Initiation: Benny has gotten his wish to join Los Reyes del Norte, he has to witness the torture and death of an informant. The camera angles allow one to see the matter-of-fact way in which the torturer takes out a chainsaw and starts to lop off the extremities of "La Cucaracha." Unused to such demonstrations of violence, Benny falls to the ground in a dead faint. This is one of many of the gallows humor moments.

Turf war: The Reyes del Norte have problems. Their rivals are gaining ground, so the Reyes decide to hire ex-military personnel (deserter soldiers from an elite unit of the Mexican Army) which will be led by J.R.

Disaster Cochiloco calls Benny with an emergency. J.R. has been killed by the rival cartel, but worse than that, he was killed while having a sexual encounter. J.R. has been hiding his homosexuality from his father, and now Cochiloco tries to hide both the fact of J.R.'s homosexuality and the reason for the murder. J.R.'s father (Don Jose) is suspicious.

The Funeral: Don Jose blames Cochiloco for the death of his son, so orders the murder of Cochiloco's oldest son in a "tit-for-tat" revenge killing.

All-Out-Revenge: The killings trigger more killings, and the town is turned into a slaughterhouse as they kill rivals and try to find out who has been the informant.

Who killed “El Diablo” (Benny’s brother): In an emotional scene, little Benjamin (El Diablito) confesses that he has been the informant, and he did so because he discovered the Reyes del Norte killed his father.

A quest for the truth: Benny is tormented by suspicion about who might have killed his brother. He finds out that it was, in fact, Don José who murdered him and in fact castrated him for sleeping with his wife.

No Escape: When Benny finds out the truth, he decides to flee Mexico with his young nephew, El Diablito. But, Lupe calls and informs him that the Reyes del Norte already know and are looking for him.

Corruption: Benny goes to the federal police to give his testimony against Don José in exchange for protection, but later realizes that they, too, are colluding with Los Reyes. After being tortured, he tries to save himself from being handed over to Don José by bribing two officers to let him escape, but they rob him and shoot him, leaving him for dead.

Left for Dead: The next morning, a very injured Benny gets up and returns to the house only to find that Lupe has been murdered. Benny then leaves town to hide and slowly recover.

End of the Game: Months later, Don José becomes the town’s mayor, which enrages Benny. Benny devises a plan to take down Los Reyes del Norte while they shout “The Grito” at the bicentennial party for Mexico's Independence. He comes out blazing with an automatic weapon and eliminates them all, ending the cartel.

In an extended scene available only in the DVD and Blu-ray edition, El Benny is shown before the graves of Guadalupe and his brother, says goodbye to them.

THEMES

Corruption: Corruption occurs at all levels and is absolutely inescapable. It’s first and foremost related to the illegal activities of the cartel, but it’s also even in the town’s non-cartel stores and services. Since most of the revenue of the town comes from drugs, prostitution, murder-for-hire, and extortion, none of the money that circulates in the town will be untouched. In fact, Benny is seduced into the life of working for the cartel because he needs to find a way to pay a bribe to get his nephew out of jail.

Naivete: Benny believes he will be able to work in the cartel without any serious consequences. Even though Cochiloco warns him that once he’s in, he’ll have a hard time getting out, Benny does not believe him. Later, he finds that Cochiloco was right.

Temptation: In a revealing scene, Don Jose Reyes warns Benny not to dabble in any of the “merchandise” (porquerias) that the cartel deals in. But, Benny falls for all of it, and soon is taking drugs with Cochiloco, going to the local brothel, and indulging himself by buying a flashy truck and gaudy outfits.

Betrayal: Benny feels betrayed when he finds out that he is working for the man who killed his brother. The betrayal extends to an even deeper level when Benny finds out that his brother, “El Diablo” had betrayed Don Jose by having sex with his wife.

Ambition: Don Jose is ambitious and would like to become an important political figure. It is hard to tell if he is intrinsically ambitious or simply acting out the ambition of his wife, who is ambitious, but since she can’t be the actual cartel chief, she must use her son, J. R., or her husband.

Greed: Greed exists at all levels and in every institution of the small town. The cartel kingpin, Don Jose, lives in a grotesquely ornate hacienda, which through its excess, illustrates the greed and the cultural illiteracy of the brutal members of the organization. Even the local priest is caught up with greed and accepts money for perverse aberrations of Christian rites (for example, “baptizing” Benny into his “Reyes del Norte” name).

BENNY GARCIA: Benny is an essentially a good man, but he falls into all the traps when he returns to Mexico. Illustrative scenes:

Financial Failure: When Benny first arrives at home, his mother greets him with mixed emotions. First, she is disgusted that he spent 20 years in America and never sent money home in all that time. Second, she is disappointed that he has come back more or less penniless. The expectation is that all who go to “El Otro Lado” (the other side) are financially successful.

Honorable: Benny likes to think of himself as upholding a strict code of honor. When he finds out his brother was killed, he wants to avenge his death.

Fatherly: In a scene early in the movie, Benny takes his 14-year-old nephew, Diablito, under his wing and gives him fatherly advice, while they wait for Lupe to come home from work at the brothel. What he does not know is that Diablito is many years beyond that, and already in the cartel business to avenge his father’s death.

Sensitive: Cochiloco was right. The cartel life is a bit harsh for Benny. In one scene, Benny must bear witness to the death by torture of an informant. When the torturer fires up the chainsaw, Benny, who has been watching, transfixed, falls over in a dead faint. The scene is comical, not for the topic itself, but in the absurd way in which protocols are adhered to, and the exaggerated performance that verges in kitsch.

Theatrical: With their gaudy outfits and trucks, their obsession with sending messages by means of body parts and spectacles, the sheer ignorance and excess, the perversion of the pillars of society (government and the church), the cartels are an abomination, and yet also an extension of capitalism. Benny is equally theatrical in choosing the Bicentennial “Grito” celebrations as the time to completely wipe out the leaders of the cartel.

DON JOSE: As the leader of the cartel, Los Reyes del Norte, Don Jose considers himself to be the leader of a business where all of his employees are family members. While he is ambitious, the true steel magnolia in the business is his wife, Dona Maria, who is smart, ruthless, and ambitious.

Patriarchal: In the scene where Cochiloco introduces Benny to the head of the cartel, Don Jose explains that he considers everyone who works for him to be family. However, if any one touches a hair on the head of his son, they will immediately have a bullet in their brain.

Principled: Don Jose has developed a code of honor for his employees. He requires that his employees be honest, follow a gentleman’s code, and above all, honor absolute silence. In this sense, Don Jose resembles the president of a corporation who is onboarding his new employees. There is a great irony, however, when one considers that their business is not honorable at all, but involves drug trafficking, prostitution, extortion, killing for hire.

Ambitious: Don Jose has political ambitions that are only exceeded by those of his wife, Dona Maria, who would love Don Jose to become the mayor, and then president of the municipality. She pushes him and is, in essence, his political strategist.

Philosophical: Don Jose likes to discuss the similarities and differences between the U.S. and Mexico. In a memorable scene, he discusses how Mexico is improving upon the U.S. capitalistic system, and in doing so, righting old wrongs because the U.S. is controlling what should truly be Mexican territory.

Questions:

1. El Infierno is set on the eve of the Bicentennial celebrations. And yet, the posters say that there is “nothing to celebrate.” Please identify three aspects of Mexican society in 2010 that one might not wish to celebrate.

2. Luis Estrada’s use of camera angles and framing gives the impression that what he is filming is non-fiction and documentary. Please discuss two scenes that seem that reality television or a documentary, and explain how they give the impression that one has a special glimpse into real life.

3. El Infierno is considered a satire, and many of the scenes are comical due to their exaggerated nature and the attention to detail. Select two scenes and describe the specific details and elements that are exaggerations or caricatures of reality, and explain why it makes them have a comic or satirical effect.



The local priest “baptizes” Benny into the cartel, Los Reyes del Norte, and gives him the “cartel name” “De La Gringa” which can be roughly translated “Yankee Son” which both refers to the fact he spent so much time in the U.S., and which rhymes with an unfortunate curse word. This scene is satirical because of the profane appropriation of Catholic sacred rites for nefarious ends, and somewhat comical because it is an exaggeration, and yet with the documentary-style medium long shot, it seems to portray the truth.



Benny and Cochiloco meet with an arms dealer from Texas who describes the assortment of guns. The dim lighting and the medium long shot continue Estrada's method of giving the audience the sense that they are voyeuristically participating in the event itself, or that they are watching a documentary. The event depicted is real, only slightly exaggerated by the enthusiastic naivete of Benny and Cochiloco's eagerness.

LOS QUE TRABAJAN CONMIGO SON COMO PARTE DE MI FAMILIA



PERO EN ESTE NEGOCIO HAY REGLAS Y PRINCIPIOS QUE SE DEBEN RESPETAR Y CUMPLIR

1.- HONESTIDAD

2.-HONRADES CAVAL

3.-SILENCIO, SILENCIO ABSOLUTO

Those who work with me are like a part of my family. But in this business, there are rules and principles that must be respected and complied with: 1– Honesty, 2—Gentlemen’s Honor, and 3— silence, absolute silence. One would think that the head of Los Reyes del Norte could be describing a legitimate business enterprise. Instead, he’s talking about a business built on drug trafficking, kidnapping, prostitution, killing for hire, and more, including bribing officials and making elected officials their puppets. The implication is that on the eve of Mexico’s bicentennial, some of the most powerful enterprises in the country are criminal.

QUE YA NO SOY EL "GORDO MATA" MI BENY



**"AHORA TODA LA RAZA ME CONOCE COMO
EL COCHILOCO"**

"I'm not "Fat Matt" any more, Benny. Now everyone knows me as "El Cochiloco" (crazy pig)." Before Benny left for the U.S., he and Cochiloco were best friends. Cochiloco does not know that Benny has come back because he was deported and that he is dead broke. In this scene, Estrada positions the actor so that Cochiloco is standing and Benny is seated, which automatically communicates power. Of course, there is something absurd about greeting one's best friend by pointing a gun at their head, and even more absurdly, that Benny accepts it as somewhat normal. It is yet another example of the perversion (or inversion) of values in Mexico on the eve of its bicentennial celebrations.



In this scene of the corrupt drug kingpin now elected mayor, and his wife at his side, Estrada reveals the true power dynamics. In drug cartels, the mother / wife is not the defender of the family's morals or righteousness. Instead, she is greedy, ruthless, and power-hungry, and she uses her sons and husband as her proxies. In this scene, Estrada shows her husband waving the flag as she holds her flowers and looks around her in satisfaction. This is a point-of-view shot, which is from the point of view of Benny, who has returned with a small arsenal ready to destroy the Reyes del Norte for having killed his brother and ruined his family. Ironically, it is an honor killing that would be in line with the code of honor required by the Reyes del Norte. The fact that it takes place during the "Grito" of the Bicentennial celebrations is also a fitting irony.



This is a poster from the film which shows Benny in all his “narco” glory, having materially changed his position in life after returning to Mexico more or less destitute. However, Benny’s prosperity is hollow; he participates in drug running, killings, prostitution, and regularly imbibes the drugs he sells. The juxtaposition of flashy Benny with his 2010 Bicentennial sign and its scribbled message, “nothing to celebrate” with smoke, piles of corpses encapsulates the film’s powerful message.