

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## THE SHADOW OF THE TYRANT (1960)

Julio Bracho (Mexico)

Drama – Spanish

Location: [https://youtu.be/GrC\\_Yty4DEA?si=BCmHqb12SkraGJTh](https://youtu.be/GrC_Yty4DEA?si=BCmHqb12SkraGJTh)

### OVERVIEW

**Auteur:** At the time of the filming of *The Shadow of the Tyrant*, Julio Bracho had directed a string of mediocre films after his universally acclaimed films of the late 1940s through the mid-1950s. With *The Shadow*, Bracho returned to his dramatic mise-en-scene and collaborations with gifted cinematographers. If he thought that the film would re-establish him as a box office powerhouse with accolades from the government, he could not have been more mistaken. The government censored the film and insisted that he destroy the negatives and all prints. He found very little work immediately after the debacle, and moved to television. Finally, in the mid-1960s, he was able to direct films again, although none of them achieved the recognition of his earlier work.

**THE FILM:** The film, *The Shadow of the Tyrant* (dir. Julio Bracho, 1960), was banned in Mexico, copies confiscated and destroyed. The novel upon which it was based, was written by the revolutionary writer, Martín Luis Guzmán in 1928. It was censored for 30 years, and Guzmán had to live in exile for 30 years. What is it about the novel, and then the film, that made the Mexican government so adamant that no one read the novel or see the film? For context, critiques of corruption, prejudice, cruel mistreatment of indigenous peoples, had been not only tolerated, they received Mexico's highest awards. Films by Emilio Fernández, for example, specifically dealt with the unfulfilled promises of the Mexican Revolution, political corruption, greed, duplicity, and cruelty. With gorgeous cinematography by Gabriel Figueroa, Fernandez's films had deep emotional impact as well. For *Shadow of the Tyrant*, Julio Bracho chose to work with the cinematographer Agustín Jiménez and to employ the writer of the novel himself, Martín Luis Guzmán. The result was an indictment of the Mexican government in the 1920s, immediately after the Revolution. One would think that the passage of 30 years would allow the sting of reproach to recede a bit. However, because the events portrayed in the film and the novel so closely mirror reality, and the political party that is being portrayed metamorphosed into the still-dominant (in 1960) political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the message in the film could be deeply destabilizing to the Mexican government.

**BACKGROUND:** *La Sombra del Caudillo* (*The Shadow of the Tyrant*) was based on a novel of the same name by Martín Luis Guzmán, first written in the early 1930s. It was controversial because it depicted true-to-life events in the power struggles immediately following the Mexican Revolution. The novel was not made into a movie until 1960, despite the fact it was censored, and the government was assured that the originals and copies of it were destroyed. Nevertheless, pirated versions of terrible quality circulated in a clandestine manner for several decades, where it gained a cult following. In 1990, it debuted from a copy Julio Bracho had managed to save. The National Cinema of Mexico restored the film due to its historical, cultural, and artistic importance.

The *Shadow of the Tyrant* (1960, dir. Julio Bracho) was banned for inflammatory political content and potential delegitimization of an entire half-century of Mexican governance. That obscures the fact that *The Shadow of the Tyrant* is probably one of the most profound works of philosophical thought in the Mexican Golden Age of Cinema, an era already bountifully blessed with films that question reality (in film noir and surrealism), identity (noir, gothic), and ethics (abuse of women, the poor, the indigenous). To the casual movie-goer, *The Shadow* may play out as an exposé of what goes on behind the scenes as a strong-arm dictator decides to be the de facto head of state ad infinitum in spite of the “one six-year term only” rule in Mexico. The “caudillo” (strong-arm leader or tyrant) negates the law by remaining in power in a sub rosa manner. Such behavior of chiefs of state is not unusual, and is, in fact, probably the norm in countries where the head of state has managed to control the military. To a person who has studied existentialist philosophy, however, both Martín Luis Guzmán’s novel and the film based on the novel are masterpieces of nihilism, perfectly illustrative of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, who describes what happens when humans choose to eradicate or “kill” God and then insert themselves in that role, attempting to make themselves gods or at least what Nietzsche calls the “Übermensch” or “Superman.” The Übermensch is first described in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) and later in a collection of writings assembled by his sister, Elizabeth, and published after Friedrich’s death in 1900. The Übermensch is perfectly illustrated by the “caudillo” tyrant / strong man, who will use his power to maintain his position in government and society, and to self-fashion and perpetuate a new kind of “beingness” which is problematized if / when he has no power.

## SYNOPSIS

*The Shadow of the Tyrant* explores the downfall of General Ignacio Aguirre, a once-rising star of the Mexican government who is not satisfied with his role as the Minister of War, but dares to aspire to be the Party’s next official candidate for the office of President, despite the fact that it goes against the wishes of the Caudillo, the strongman behind the scenes who is, in essence, the Party Boss and the locus of power of the entire country. In creating a narrative that explores this fatal decision, the author of the novel, Martín Luis Guzmán, exposes the lies, corruption, greed, lasciviousness that characterize all the politicians and their associates. It also exposes the Party that purports to bring about the promises of the Mexican Revolution as no better, and even perhaps worse, than the corrupt dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, which triggered the bloody wars and appropriations of land and property. One of the outcomes of the Mexican Revolution was to separate the church from the State because it was seen as having too much influence over the political process and too much control over resources. However, what is left is a system with no morality or values except those dictated by power. When Aguirre lies in the dirt, his lifeless eyes staring into the sky, we are not seeing the death of a visionary or one with a mission to make the world a better place. We are simply seeing the ultimate meaninglessness of his thirst for power and self-satisfying sensation.

## CHARACTERS

General Ignacio Aguirre	Minister of War in the Mexican Government
General Hilario Jiménez	Head of the military
The Caudillo	The current President and Strongman
Representative Axtaná González	Member of the House of Representatives
Representative Emilio Olivier Fernández	Member of the House of Representatives
Governor Catarino Ibáñez	Governor of the largest state in Mexico
Rosario	One of Ignacio Aguirre’s mistresses

## SCENES

The film opens in Chapultepec Castle, the seat of the government, where the government that emerged after the Mexican Revolution is charged with carrying out the reforms that people fought and died for, and for being a different type of government than the one that was in place before. However, nothing could be further from the those ideals.



General Ignacio Aguirre, the Minister of War, sits at his desk and explains that he will not put his name in to be a candidate for the Presidency because he realizes that he is not the choice of the powerful "caudillo." Hilario Jiménez is the caudillo's choice.



General Aguirre meets with Rosario, the youngest of his mistresses. She is 20 years old, a little bit shy and “common” but she has an alert, smiling quickness. Although uneducated, she has a eager-to-learn spirit.



After their tryst, Aguirre and Rosario run through the rain. Aguirre asks her what she wants from him and in life, but it is just a part of his seduction. Ultimately, he considers her a plaything and part of the spoils of his position.



General Hilario Jiménez expresses his loyalty to the caudillo / tyrant. He also tells his circle of friends that he believes that there is no way that he will lose the candidacy to the Presidency because he is the Caudillo's chosen puppet (although he does not express it in such bald terms), and because the military backs him.



Aguirre has a change of heart about running for President. He misinterprets sycophantism for objective reality, and announces that he thinks he is a sure thing because everyone who has spoken to him says he would be a good candidate.





Senator Emilio Olivier has his own reasons to back the potential presidency of Ignacio Aguirre. Axkana Gonzales, Aguirre's closest friend, discusses the issues.



In a demonstration of the debauchery of the political elites, the closest to the Caudillo spend hours at their favorite brothel, where they get drunk, spend vast sums of money, and buy the services of prostitutes.



Aguirre and the Caudillo leave Chapultepec castle (the seat of Mexican government) together on the way to a dinner. Aguirre assures the Caudillo that he will support the candidacy of Hilario Jiménez, important because the Caudillo holds the reins of power.



Leaving Chapultepec Castle (the government buildings), the Caudillo and government leaders drive to a restaurant in the “Bosque,” the woods in Chapultepec Park. This is the center of power in Mexican politics, and they drive in the most expensive cars and are surrounded by military guards.



Aguirre spends time with his mistress, Rosario. She claims to love him, and he does as well. However, the relationship is one of illusion – she spends time with him because she is ambitious, and he spends time with her because her overt ambition makes him feel powerful and the object of desire. Ultimately, it is empty.



Hilario Jiménez, the person the Caudillo wants to be the next President of the Republic of Mexico (because he can be controlled), confronts Ignacio Aguirre. Aguirre purports to be a good friend and supporter, but Hilario openly tells Aguirre that he does not trust him.





Senator Olivier tries to rally support for Aguirre's candidacy behind the scenes and speaks to Caterino Ibáñez, governor of one of the most powerful Mexican states. Olivier believes that there is a possibility of success, and he wants to assure his own political success and to rise further than he has been able to do so with the Caudillo.



The Caudillo (and Hilario) hire a large group of poor tenant farmers and workers (the group that largely fought and died in the Mexican Revolution, which was supposed to give them land and access to education and economic opportunity) to stage a large, public rally and demonstration of support for Hilario Jiménez. It is an empty spectacle; the individuals have no say whatsoever in the political process.



While the people hired to stage the political rally are dished out cheap corn tacos and beans, the political elite dine at a restaurant that serves the finest European cuisine, with butter produced as the card reads, "from the great stables of the Citizen Governor." As governor (and a loyal supporter of the Caudillo), the governor has become very rich.



Senator Olivier sits next to Governor Catarino Ibañez, hoping to persuade him to support the candidacy of Aguirre, and try to challenge the chokehold on power that the Caudillo has on the government.



Making elaborate toasts and flowery speeches, the political elite try to show their allegiances and loyalty. These are empty speeches, and the event demonstrates a nihilistic view of the modern world, where there are no values except those of personal gain and consolidation of wealth. Instead of doing something that has meaning in life, they indulge their appetites. Gluttony and libertinism gratify the senses and create of simulacrum of life and the sensation of being alive, but there is no actual meaning in it.



The Caudillo has become aware that one of the senators is challenging his authority. So, he plots to ruin the reputation of Senator Axkaná González by forcing him to drink to the point of alcohol poisoning, then throwing him into the street where he will be arrested for public intoxication, all the while being photographed for the newspapers, which will bring public opprobrium down on him.



Aguirre learns of the shameful arrest of his friend, the Senator, and he realizes that there are dirty tricks afoot. He still thinks he can win the candidacy, and that he can be named the party's candidate if all the people who claimed they would support him would do so. He does not realize that he is deluding himself.



The Caudillo warns Aguirre not to aspire to the candidacy to run for President of the Republic. The Caudillo looks at Aguirre with the “arrogant eyes of a tiger” and when Aguirre claims people have come to him supporting him as candidate, the Caudillo responds, “Aren’t you deceiving yourself?”



There are consequences to crossing the Caudillo. General Ignacio Aguirre is forced to submit his resignation as Minister of War. The paper also reports on the banquet attended by the political elite which took place in Chapultepec.



In the Mexican Congress, the President of the House of Representatives looks concerned as a speech is being made. He is aware of the faction breaking away from the Caudillo and he knows that anyone that is accused of being a part of that faction will face severe consequences. The legitimacy of the political system is at stake. It cannot be admitted that one strong-arm dictator (the Caudillo) controls everything behind the scenes.





General Hilario Jiménez recognizes that Aguirre represents a tremendous threat to his candidacy. He and his henchmen discuss the gravity of the situation.



In another political spectacle, an angry mob of peasants storm the governmental buildings at Chapultepec. It is rigged. The goal is to show that the people are indignant that there might be any threat to the candidacy of Hilario Jiménez, and that order must be restored by any means necessary.



One of the military generals claims to support Aguirre and will help him.



This scene shows the complexity of the landscape and provides an establishing shot to remind the viewers of the Sierra Madre Occidental of Mexico, the site of many of the battles of the Revolution. It foreshadows what is to come.



Orchestrating a crisis that will require extreme intervention, the headlines read “General Aguirre launches an armed uprising.” It is not true, but will serve as justification for eliminating the threat.



Arrested and in jail after having been betrayed by the member of the military who promised protection, Aguirre and Axkaná read the newspaper headlines. They laugh mirthlessly at the lie and the fact that they are caught in a trap. It is a moment that illustrates the existentialistic philosophy and the philosophical notion of absurdity that underlies the novel and the film.



An armed brigade stops the vehicles that are transporting the prisoners. They are passing through the mountains and in the same places where bloody battles took place a few years earlier during the Mexican Revolution, a fact that ironizes this scene and calls into question the accomplishments of the Revolution. This will set the stage for a trumped up “escape” attempt.



This close-up of Aguirre’s bound hands presents a visual metaphor for how the Caudillo has bound up and incapacitated any threat to his totalitarian approach to governance and power; exactly the opposite of the pluralism and democracy that the peasants fought and died for in the Mexican Revolution. The government lies to the people to make them think that the promises of the Revolution were honored.



General Ignacio Aguirre lies in the dirt, shot as a part of a false “escape attempt.” He was not killed by an execution squad but by the enraged general who responds to taunts and ridicule by shooting Aguirre in cold blood.



All of the “escapees” are hunted down by the military and shot, with the exception of Senator Olivier, who flags down a car going back to Mexico City. Ironically, it is the limousine of the English Ambassador, who has played an unwitting part in this consolidation of power by the Caudillo. The shot is a stunning one that illustrates the dire condition of the country, and the dangers of exposing illegitimacy of the nation’s governance.





## THEMES

The themes in *The Shadow of the Tyrant* make the work very dangerous, both as a novel and especially as a film. It is clear why it was suppressed, censored, and copies of the movie destroyed. What is amazing is that it was ever made in the first place. Here are the most dangerous of the themes, which may be expressed in somewhat specific or peculiar terms:

### POLITICS

**Power: “Hidden Hand”** – the idea that a former president could continue to influence the selection of the president, and thus control the presidency, is very dangerous. The Mexican Revolution was fought to rid Mexico of dictatorships and to replace them with democratically elected presidents with non-renewable six year terms. However, the selection of the presidential candidates is where the “hidden hand” of behind-the-scenes power could manifest itself and completely subvert democracy. Where is the true democratic option when the people have only one candidate to choose from? With the “caudillo” (tyrant / strongman) exerting influence to the point of ordering the murder of a potential opposition candidate be murdered along with his followers, it is clear that Mexico lives within a dictatorship. The military supports the strongman. It is the military that carries out the execution-style murder of the opposition.

The President of Mexico (the “Tyrant” / Caudillo) wanted to continue to be in power, but behind the scenes. To do so, he hand-picked a successor, General Hilario Jiménez, and then made sure that the rest of the politicians would support his choice. However, when the Minister of War, General Ignacio Aguirre, decides he has a good chance of winning the nomination and being the next President of Mexico, he goes directly against the wishes of the Caudillo, the Strongman / Tyrant. Behind the scenes, the Caudillo arranges for the Aguirre and his followers to be killed execution-style in an ambush on a desert highway. In that act of murder, the legitimacy of the Presidential candidate was abrogated, as well as the ethics and legitimacy of the strongman calling the shots (the sitting President).

The murder delegitimized the entire government, which was largely run by the Executive branch with the collaboration and cooperation of the governors of the states. In fact, it was one of the governors – the governor of the State of Mexico (the Distrito Federal) that executed the plot that set off a series of actions resulting in the murder of the General Aguirre. With an illegitimate government, none of the sweeping reforms or changes would have been legitimate, and the implications of that would extend through all the subsequent administrations.

To add insult to injury, the Mexican Revolution was fought and one with the help of the landless poor, the peons, the mixed-race mestizos, and the indigenous. However, the government barely recognizes them except to callously use them for putting on loud political demonstrations, for which they are rewarded with a very inexpensive lunch.

**Dissipation:** The Strongman (Caudillo, current president) is a decadent, dissipated reprobate who spends time and money in brothels, in debauchery (drinking, gluttony), gambling in casinos. He hardly steps foot in the house of his wife, but has several mistresses. The Caudillo sets a terrible example – all the high-ranking government officials follow in his footsteps. General Ignacio Aguirre is equally dissolute: he is a hard-drinking womanizer who spends time gambling, over-eating, and bragging about his exploits. He owns expensive real estate, not just for his family but for his mistresses. One of the governors shows himself to be equally dissolute and greedy: he has a huge ranch with cattle and horses that he subsidizes through fat government contracts for providing his farm’s products to government events and entities. Showing this level of dissipation is dangerous because it makes it patently obvious that the revolutionary

government was no different from the pre-revolutionary dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, and in fact, in certain ways, worse.

**Corruption:** The Progressive Party (which eventually was replaced by the party that dominated Mexico from the 1930s to the year 2000), existed to self-perpetuate a system that reserved power and access to the nation's resources for itself. The film suggests that the locus of power is in one person, a shadowy puppet-master, who controls everything behind the scenes. Such access to the nation's resources does not mean they are used responsibly. Instead, the film demonstrates that to hold a position in the government means one can become very wealthy and squander money and time on conspicuous consumption and banal, meaningless indulgences.

Further, the film illustrates the utter profligacy, corruption and dissipation of the government, with pillaging of the national coffers, self-dealing sweetheart government contracts, and inside trading. This "new" revolutionary government was the same or even worse than the governments that inspired the Mexican Revolution in the first place, namely the administration of President Porfirio Diaz.

**Nihilism:** While the government seems to be able to maintain its existence, and the strongman behind the scenes, the film and the novel's vision of the world is essentially nihilistic, because it is not possible to continue to use a country and its resources for personal enrichment ad infinitum without ultimately destroying it. In 1960, what was so dangerous about this message? Why would the government in 1960 feel so threatened that they would attempt to destroy all copies of the film?

One of the core problems in Nietzsche's existentialist philosophy is that it is deeply nihilistic. This is to say that it devolves into nothingness – no values, no ethics, no natural order, no essence, EXCEPT as ordained by humans, and those who possess the most power in order to impose their will. As the embodiment of the Ubermensch, the Superman, the Caudillo enacts the nihilistic substitution of man for God and also demonstrates the "nothingness" in it. The Nietzschean lust for power is also accompanied by a lust for physical satisfaction to the point of wanton gluttony. There are no external restraints, no code of morality to follow since all is in the hands of godless men. And, as such, the consequences play out in post-revolutionary Mexico of the late 1920s.

Existentialist philosophy as espoused by Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980) holds that there is existence first and "essence" second, in direct opposition to the Ancient Greek philosophers who held it was essence (an essential beingness) that manifested itself first in the world, and then the existence of differentiated material things. By positing that existence comes first, the scary fact emerges that people have freedom to posit what they are, who they are, and why. Instead of God and a divine plan ordering the universe, it is now propounded that man, or even a single man, can do it. Which man would that be? Why and when? Existentialist philosophy, flowing from Nietzsche and further elaborated by Camus and Sartre, suggests that whoever can manage to have power – by hook or by crook – is in point of fact a self-styled god, but there is no divinity. Because there is no divinity, and this self-styled god will, by definition, only serve itself in order to assure the continuance and persistence of itself. In this way, the self-styled god (or ubermensch) is Anti-God. This Ubermensch anti-god is a parasite because it feasts on the energy, blood, and ambition of others who are caught in a terrible maelstrom of endless "becoming" as the ubermensch forms and reforms himself. There is nothing firm in this world, no room for faith, justice, or transcendental goodness in this godless world. There is only the spectacle of a caudillo strong man trying to leverage his ability to harness the greed and gullibility of others. What can others do in such a system? They must buy into the the same epistemology and embrace the same manner of thinking, and play out their own dramatic spectacles of loyalty and

sycophantic fawning (with always an underlying assumption of at least some level of duplicity). They gamble with their lives as they put their chips on the pony they think will win. Sometimes they are wrong.

The impossibility of successfully navigating such a constantly shifting world where appearances always deceive and there is no stable divine scaffolding or foundation sets the stage for Absurdism, the philosophical theory that the universe is irrational and meaningless. The Mexican government attempted to suppress the novel, and went as far as to destroy copies of the film, their fear being that of the Supreme Court finding that the rigging of the election (through the assassination of an opposing candidate and the strong arm dictator naming the successful presidential candidate, thereby ruling from behind the scenes) made the entire government illegitimate, and thus all the political, legal, and financial dealings of that administration, and administrations of the political party that followed it, could be impugned, challenged, and potentially reversed.

However serious any political claims might have been made by the novel and film, it is many times worse to let the air out of the entire conceit that there is any lasting meaning of philosophical foundation to any human society whatsoever. The ultimate fate of any human attempts at organization or governance will be chaos because it's held together by the frayed or rusting baling wire of individual "will to power" of a soi-disant god or ubermensch. Such ubermensch should be dethroned because they are incapable of working for the common good.

If one political strategist and power broker cannot, who can". This is where *The Shadow of the Tyrant* leaves us with pure ambiguity. We know that the majority of the people who sacrificed both lives and votes were of the poor disenfranchised races and classes. In a perfect world, they would have a vote, a voice, and a way to assure themselves and their families of human dignity. For that to happen, however, there would need to be a realignment of property and a good faith follow-up of what happened after the Mexican Revolution. In other words, the promises that animated the original Mexican Revolution would need to be fulfilled. Such attempts to right the world leads to a radical sense of indeterminacy, no matter what the political rhetoric or campaign promises. So we see the film and its echoes in real life illustrate the apotheosis of Absurdism.

To recap, Absurdism holds that the universe is irrational and meaningless. The concept of God has been "killed" and the vacuum that is left is filled by outrageously ambitious and delusional individuals. People invent their own mode d'emploi instruction manuals for living, which slip into a din of cacophonous voices as people vie with each other for access to power and property. In such a world of thievery, duplicity, and dissipation, women, children, and the poor suffer first.

**Love:** In a world where any ethical or moral codes have collapsed into self-interest and power, duplicity and manipulation substitute for sacrificial love. *The Shadow of the Tyrant* does not have any demonstrable family values or self-sacrificing love for one's fellow human being. Nor is there authentic love between men and women. Instead, there are professions of love and "words of honor" that are not honored. For example, Aguirre has professed his love to his young mistress, Rosario, and has promised to divorce his wife and become engaged to her. He does not do so, and in fact, laughs at her for wanting anything more than their "friendship." She is upset and reminds him that he "gave his word of honor." In that moment, Aguirre's behavior reinforces that he has no honor.

Another mockery of love occurs in the brothel, where, convinced that he will be named the party's candidate for president, Aguirre reserves the brothel, orders drinks and entertainment, and directs the madame to put it all on his account. He is buying affection and sycophantic fawning – a shallow simulacrum of love that only serves to bring to mind the authentic love that it is NOT.

**Women:** In the hyper-macho world of post-Revolutionary politics in Mexico, masculine power is revered, and femininity is considered weak and irrational. Aguirre and others refer to “feminine reason” as something superficial, petty, and irrational. The women themselves have internalized patriarchal values to the point they value the qualities they associate with hypermasculinity because its proximity to power and resources. When Aguirre asks Rosario why she prefers looking at the black mountain in the landscape rather than the snow-covered twin volcanoes, she says she only has eyes for Ajusco, the massive mountain because it is powerful and “manly.” The volcanoes have the “soul of a woman” which implies that they erupt but then go dormant. In *The Shadow of the Tyrant*, women exist to build up men’s

## **CHARACTER ANALYSIS:**

One of the things that makes *The Shadow of the Tyrant* hard to watch is the fact that the characters are pretty much unlikeable. They are profoundly unsympathetic. Not only do they possess unattractive character traits, their very existence echoing the “hollow men” of T. S. Eliot.

### **GENERAL IGNACIO AGUIRRE**

The Minister of War and a close friend of Axkana González and, previously, of General Hilario Jiménez. He holds his position because the Caudillo appointed him, just as he appointed (or influenced the appointment) of all the others. Aguirre, like all the other government officials, has no life without his position, and he lives only for the position and the financial and social rewards. He has no internal vision or a service-driven mission.

*Ambitious:* Although he often decries and denies his ambition, he is mesmerized by the prospect of becoming the official Party candidate for President, despite the fact he would be flouting the wishes of the Caudillo. He believes the flattery of his acquaintances; for example, Representative Olivier bolsters his confidences with compliments and exaggerations.

*Womanizing:* Aguirre is a womanizer. He has a wife (although he barely steps foot in the home they have together) and a few mistresses. He uses his mistresses as mood enhancers and to bolster his self-image. They make him feel important with their flattery and coquetry. He also considers having a mistress like having a collection of fine cigars. They are expensive and thus imbue him with prestige in the eyes of his colleagues.

*Self-Deluding:* When the Caudillo speaks very directly to Aguirre to stop pursuing the candidacy and that his desire for that prize is causing him to delude himself. It is not so much that Aguirre is being gullible when he believes the sycophantic flattery of his friends or those who wish to curry favor, but that he is blind to the real power that the Caudillo has. The fatal flaw is that Aguirre fails to recognize the ruthlessness of the Caudillo. Ultimately, the Caudillo’s “will to power” eclipses that of the others; they are, without realizing it, cogs in his own machine of self-creation.

*Dissipated:* The heroes of the Mexican Revolution were idealistic, spartan, disciplined, and well-organized as they rallied the poor, disenfranchised, and the landless to join forces and strip the landed elite of their resources. The vision was that of a new, fair, and equitable Mexico. What they got, however, was a government run by a dangerous tyrant, surrounded by weak, duplicitous sycophants, whom he fully expected to betray him because their greed would ultimately be the only thing they believed in, since God and all eternal verities had been dismissed. Aguirre is shown drinking, over-eating, womanizing, neglecting his family, and focusing on appetite and appearances rather than values and substance.

## EL CAUDILLO

Nature abhors a vacuum, and once the Mexican Revolution toppled the former dictator (Porfirio Diaz) and the landed elites, the land was perfectly plowed and prepared for a ruthless tyrant who recognized that the way to lasting influence was to be the hand in the glove of the military. With the military in his pocket, he could eliminate competition, not only through arrests and executions, but also by manipulating the media.

*Driven:* The Caudillo is the ultimate Nietzschean “ubermensch” who arises in the vacuum left when humans decide that they can eliminate God and substitute themselves. The Ubermensch, which translates to “Superman,” is a self-actualizing manifestation of the Will to Power. There are few scenes which include the Caudillo himself, but he is, in essence, in each and every frame. He does not have to physically appear. What is manifest is the fact that you are either “for” him or “against” him. Woe to you if you are “against.”

*Ambitious and Power-seeking:* The Caudillo has managed to ascend to the top of the Mexican Government and he does not want that to change. Not satisfied with being President for the single six-year term allowed by the Mexican Constitution, he does everything he can to control the presidency from afar, and be the “hidden hand” that manipulates the government. In order to do so, he must surround himself with subjects who do his bidding, and he must put them to the test to assure their loyalty. He is often successful, as illustrated by the way that Aguirre and his supporters were tricked into going to a restaurant for a celebration, but were instead placed under arrest.

*Ruthless:* When Aguirre fails to heed the Caudillo’s warning (which was actually a threat), the Caudillo believes he must eliminate them and do it in such a way that the public believes that an insurrection was thwarted and those close to him see it as a clear message of what will happen to them if they dare break ranks. Thus, he manipulates the press and paints Aguirre and his supporters as treasonous, and he has them arrested, then when transporting them across winding, mountainous roads, has it appear that they are trying to escape in order to construct a pretext for their murder.

### QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW:

1. Who is the Caudillo, and what is his primary goal with respect to the upcoming selection of the Party’s candidate for President of Mexico?
2. Select three scenes or situations in the film that illustrate corruption of values and morals among the politicians in the government.
3. What is the attitude of the wealthy elite toward the working class and the poor? Please find a scene in the film and describe it.
4. Describe how Existentialism and the concepts of nihilism and absurdism are illustrated by *The Shadow of the Tyrant*. How do they then work together to provide a commentary on the state of the world, human beings, and their institutions?
5. In Shakespearian tragedies, the hero has a fatal flaw which makes him relatable, and the audience can sympathize with him. The same can be said for Greek tragedy, where the downfall leads to a



catharsis for the audience members. Does Aguirre have a fatal flaw? What is it? What is it about him that makes it difficult to feel sympathy or relate to him?

6. Trace how the Caudillo's ordering of the murder of people who opposed him, and his ultimate ability to be the de facto power behind the scenes could be viewed as delegitimizing the entire government as well as all the laws, policies, and disposition of resources effected during that term, and as long as the same Party controlled the government?