

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **The Perfect Dictatorship / La Dictadura Perfecta (2014)**

Luis Estrada

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The Perfect Dictatorship* (2014) is the third in a trilogy by director Luis Estrada. Drawn from real life, each of the films takes a satirical look at a different aspect of Mexico's political and economic life and explains why corruption, violence, and self-interest are so seemingly intractable. While based in Mexico, *La Dictadura Perfecta* is a universal saga as it follows the story of a naive but ambitious young person and the grand ambition of a corrupt governor who is at the head of a deeply corrupt (and even criminal) system. When the governor finds himself in danger of losing power, he calls in the largest television station in Mexico to produce a media spectacle that will distract the nation. The ensuing drama not only reveals the inner workings of corruption and the desperate acts that accompany it, but also explore the way in which the media (and social media) construct a reality that is more believable than the truth.

### **CHARACTERS**

*Governor Carmelo Vargas:* Governor of the most corrupt state in Mexico. He is involved in drug and human trafficking, kidnapping, murder for hire, and more.

*Producer Carlos Rojo:* Idealistic and ambitious young producer at Television Mexicana

*Congressman Morales:* Political Opposition Leader

*Lucia Garza:* Mother of the twins

*Salvador Garza:* Father of the twins

*Television Mexicana news anchor:* The main new anchor in the Mexico City studio

### **THE STORY / SCENES**

*La Dictadura Perfecta* opens with the President of Mexico and the U.S. ambassador in a meeting. The Mexican President, who resembles former (but contemporary to the film) Mexican president Pena Nieto, is describing a proposal he would like to make to the ambassador, who is an emissary of President Obama. It is worthwhile noting that Pena Nieto was known for his soap opera, teen heart-throb level good looks, and also for being shockingly ignorant, unread, and uninformed.

The Mexican President tells the Ambassador (and President Obama's delegate) that "Mexicans would like to do all the jobs the blacks do not want to do" which is immediately received and disseminated through a fire storm of mocking tweets, memes, and harsh media coverage.

The social media construction of reality: Estrada introduces the notion that social media as well as the news media construct reality. He does not use the term "fake news," but demonstrates that invented and popularly disseminated news (or inventions and memes) are often believed while the truth is either rejected or simply ignored.

Estrada uses a series of quick cuts and point of view shots to flash scenes of people enjoying the absurd memes on Instagram, Twitter and other social media, as they "Like" and "share" with their friends.

At the same time, a perfect opportunity for the President to distract the public, and to make him look tough on crime comes up. Carmelo Vargas, governor of a state notorious for its cartel activity, has been implicated in a number of crimes and corruption, and there is a whistle-blower Congressman who claims to have videos that prove all the allegations.

Quick cut to the Television Mexicana studies, where the newsroom anchor, a national personality, is giving his nightly news coverage. Governor Vargas and his entourage are welcomed into a conference room, where the Director of media, explains that they can intervene and resolve this public relations crisis. They have a number of “packages,” he explains.

In this scene, Estrada gives the audience the view of media discussing the way that the media constructs reality. The scene is both funny and fascinating as it explores the territory of both reality television and news media and explores what happens when they converge. Because Television Mexicana is a well-respected media source, they have a great deal of credibility. The fact that they sell “packages” to help shape public opinion, and then to even go further, to get politicians elected, is not surprising in and of itself. What is most surprising is that it is so shamelessly and brazenly offered, as though it were any other kind of media public relations package, and not one that has to do with the fate of a nation and its inhabitants.

The President no longer has a problem since public attention has been directed to Governor Carmelo Vargas. However, Governor Vargas definitely has a problem. So, he eagerly selects the largest package, and even offers Television Mexicana a cut of tax revenues if they can get him elected to higher offices.

Television Mexicana’s managing editor eagerly accepts the deal and then assigns his brightest, most ambitious journalist, Carlos Rojo, to the project. Carlos Rojo, along with camera crew and staff, pile into the Television Mexicana SUVs and head to the state.

The Mexican state where Carmelo Vargas is governor is a dry, arid place which reminds one of the town, San Pedro de los Saguaros in El Infierno, which took place in 1949, 55 years earlier. As they approach the town gates, they see a welcoming party. There is also another welcoming spectacle: Six semi-dismembered bodies are hanging, dead – a warning to those who might do something to annoy the local cartel. A badly spelled, hand-lettered sign warns that anyone who tries to grab this turf will get the same treatment.

Welcoming party: The arriving journalists are taken to the Governor’s office. There are a number of over-the-shoulder shots which give the impression that one has special privy to intimate conversations. Governor apologizes for the inconvenience and emphasizes that he is happy to see the crew.

Unpacking at the hotel: In this scene, Estrada juxtaposes the Television Mexicana group with the governor’s aides, plus the hotel staff, all of whom are terrified to upset the governor. The crew would like to use a different hotel, but are met with “Sorry it’s not the best, but it’s the one the governor wants you to use.”

Enter the Whistle-Blower: In contrast with the journalists and the Governor, who are dressed in sharp contrasting colors, with crisp collars and professional clothing, the Diputado enters. He is rather disheveled, and wears a rumpled, brown suit. Instantly, he gives the impression of being a disgruntled trouble-maker. And, that he is. He threatens to expose the Governor, and wants to do so during a televised address at the State Assembly. “I have recordings!” he says.

Quick cut to welcome party: The Governor’s security detail whisks the Television Mexicana crew to a welcome party which is all narco excess, with loud music, and scantily clad women dancing around stripper poles. The Governor wants to talk about their job – to correct his image. He seems surprised when the Television Mexicana crew is not interested in dancing or getting involved in debauchery.

Crisis: The next morning the Congressman stands at the podium during the National Assembly. He does not have a chance to tell about the videos he has, or about corruption. Using a number of point of view shots, combined with medium long shots, we see almost a telejournalistic unfolding of a shooting – appearing to be on “live” television. In this case, the cameras are rolling, and the gunman shoots the political enemy. The low-angle shots are perfect because they are then fed to live television.

Now we really have a problem!: The Television Mexicana crew meets with Governor Vargas, who is more motivated than ever to try to change the focus of this event and to supplant it with something that will distract viewers and voters.

It's urgent: How do we distract the public from the political scandals? Estrada uses a series of long shots as establishing shots to frame the issue and put all the people in the same frame, providing sense of unified purpose. Together, through an energetic brainstorming session, Carlos Rojo and the others alight on the idea of rescuing cute children.

Coincidentally, the next day, the saga of the kidnapped twins emerges through a series of long shots / quick cuts

Twins, snatched from the swingset in their back yard: Long-shots of the swingset, the back yard, the desert panorama gives a sense of the emptiness. Two identical twin toddlers have been kidnapped from them.

It's Television Gold: Television Mexicana's strategy works perfectly. Carlos Rojo is the report on the scene, and he interviews everyone about the adorable twin girls and the viewers are glued to their sets. Estrada shows the shaping of reality through news, and also social media as they go through quick cuts from the interviews on site, to the news room where the established anchor is giving his opinion, and then to quick cuts to social media as viewers and users share tweets, instagram posts, and more.

Each night, the spectacle gains in intensity. Television Mexicana turns it not only into the kind of spectacle that they create and broadcast, but in a socially inclusive social media circus by including interactive surveys, live discussions, and more. An example of one night's polls: Who do you think kidnapped them? The dad? The mother? the babysitter? Estrada captures this with completely deadpan verisimilitude with what would happen in a real-world example, which makes the contrived spectacle all the more satirical. He uses establishing shots of television set, which is constructing a kind of reality, and then back and forth to the tweets, where the public are cheerfully participating in the spectacle. Estrada makes it clear the primary motive for being interested is a human interest story that evokes profound emotions, and rewards sentimental displays of emotion. The fact that it is completely contrived, with the only question being who actually is behind the kidnapping, is something the audience sees, and it is precisely what contributes to the sense of irony and satire. One is witnessing the construction of reality, and sees just how easily the public is duped.

Like all spectacles, the more random and seemingly unrelated "dirt" that is dished up, the better for the ratings. We see Carlos Rojo, the crew, and most particularly, the newsroom anchor, doing all they can to inspire a chorus of outside voices. The engagement of the people is the first goal, and if the people can start to spin conspiracy theories of their own, all the better. They will go from being engaged to obsessed.

In the meantime, no one in the public is the least bit interested in the revelations of the Diputado / Congressman. Governor Vargas, however, still considers the Diputado's threats to be a worrisome issue, and so he gets rid of the problem. He shoots him in the head.

Seeing the lengths to which the Governor will go to eliminate problems, cub producer Carlos Rojo steps back and takes a long, hard look. He wonders if he should try to get out of this project. But, Governor Vargas is truly Faustian. He proposes a deal with the paper – make me popular, propel me into the presidency and I'll make you a Vice President of Communications.

Suddenly, there is a jump cut. The twins have been found. It turns out they had been kidnapped by someone who was paid off by the newspaper to suggest it to one of the Governor's staff. This is a fact that is never released to the public. The camera rolls as we see the children reunited with their parents, and a series of medium close-ups connecting the reunion with the Governor.

As the twins are returned, and interview after interview occurs on the television, the Governor secures his popularity and Television Mexicana works on reframing him as a champion of the family. The Governor shocks the Television Mexicana staff for his eloquence on camera. There is no resemblance whatsoever to Governor Vargas's true nature and behavior. In reality, Vargas can't seem to say a sentence without using profanity. On camera, he suddenly becomes amazingly eloquent.

During the triumph and rejoicing, we see long shots alternating with over the shoulder shots. The parents, who were threatening divorce, stay together. They are an integral part of the Governor's image. He uses

the twins as a symbol of his commitment to the family and society, and the parents are incorporated into his campaign.

We see the campaign spots for Governor Vargas. He has shaved off his mustache and he walks hand-in-hand with his wife. In the same frame, you see the Garza twins and their parents. There is no hint of Vargas's true nature: a ruthless, profanity-spewing, violent and ambitious megalomaniac.

Later, we see Vargas elected President of the Republic for the six-year term. Carlos Rojo has been elevated to Minister of Communication.

## **THEMES:**

**Reality vs. Fiction:** *The Perfect Dictatorship* takes the postmodernist idea that reality is a construct to an entirely new level. In previous films such as *Wag the Dog*, the media and the government work hand in glove to create a distraction from an uncomfortable or politically destabilizing reality, such as an affair, or an accusation of corruption. However, in *The Perfect Dictatorship*, the media is so inured to the necessity that they have created a number of packages and they are sold just like public relations packages would be sold. The entire goal is to promote a fiction as a reality so that the populace believes in the fiction more than they would ever believe in the truth.

**Fake News:** The cynical construction of "fake news" takes the entire notion of disinformation to a new level as well. The "fake news" is more than simply distorting or expunging from court records information that one wants to keep hidden. In the construction of "fake news," the potential audience is studied very closely to find out what it is that moves them, and which emotional arguments are most compelling. So, in constructing items of "fake news," they are structured in a way that triggers emotional responses and in doing so, makes it less likely that the readers or viewers will be able to think rationally with their pre-frontal cortex. *The Perfect Dictatorship* incorporates many of the ideas of Daniel Kahneman, whose work, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* explores just how it is that emotional thinking often leads to cognitive bias, thus obfuscating the facts.

**Naive Youth:** Carlos Rojo is a young media producer who is a genius at gauging audiences and developing emotional appeals that spur individuals into action in their social media accounts with "likes," "shares," "comments" and responses. His enthusiasm for what he does and his abilities make him very powerful as a behind-the-scenes influencer. However, he does not stop to think of the long-term consequences of what he is doing. He is extremely enthusiastic and talented, which results in his quick rise in the organization. Given what happens when a publicity campaign goes badly, his job is much riskier than it may seem to Carlos as he is still in his "rising star" stage of his career.

**Corruption:** Corruption permeates the fabric of the Mexican society depicted in *The Perfect Dictatorship*. Part of the reason for corruption is that many institutions and public services are underfunded and so they have to find ways to pay the workers and for buildings and services in creative, entrepreneurial ways. The fact that most of the ways that are most lucrative are also criminal enterprises is an irony not lost on Luis Estrada. Nor is the ironic fact that the criminal enterprises are often much better organized, more efficient, more profitable, and less burdened with bureaucracy than the formal (or legal) private and governmental enterprises. So, it is an open secret that informal payments must be made to government officials to allow the informal enterprises to continue to operate. Further, no one is surprised that the criminals' justice system (as opposed to the legal Criminal Justice system) is swift, ruthless, and unregulated (allowing creative "messages" to be sent via body parts and spectacles of dismemberment). However, no one seems to see the irony in the fact that the Mexican justice system does not allow the death penalty, although in the "criminals' justice system" in the informal economy, death sentences are one of the key ways to improve efficiency and to win trade wars.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **CARMELO VARGAS: THE GOVERNOR**

*Ambitious:* The Governor not only wants to preserve his own position, he also aspires to the highest position in the land. We see, through close-ups, point of view shot, and two-shots that he would like to always be associated with power, prestige, respect, and riches. .

*Ruthless:* The scene in which Vargas takes out his gun and shoots the whistleblower Congressman in the head perfectly illustrates his cold, Machiavellian nature. Unlike many leaders in his situation, Vargas is fortunate in that he never believes the fantasy world that is being created. He always has two feet squarely planted in reality, and he knows that he has true enemies that need to be eliminated, and he knows how he must appear to his supporters.

*Dishonest (duplicitous):* To say that Vargas is dishonest is to just touch the tip of the iceberg. He is dishonest at an existential level in that he creates a complete and total false world and persona so that no one really knows what he is like, or has any idea of the true activities that he is involved in. Some might use the word hypocritical, but it goes much deeper than that, to a more active manipulator of reality.

*Sentimental:* Perhaps one of the reasons why Governor Vargas is so persuasive and eloquent when he speaks to the people is because he himself is sentimental. He loves telenovelas, and weeps when he watches his favorite episodes of "Los pobres tambien aman" (The Poor Also Love). His sentimentality is also a key ingredient in the social media construction of reality. He understands how he himself responds when he sees a photo of a person or people, and so he manages impressions to elicit the desired effect.

### **CARLOS ROJO: THE JOURNALIST / NEWS PRODUCER**

*Ambitious:* When the story of the Garza twins seems to be unravelling and the whistleblower Congressman is threatening to go public, the Governor suggests that Carlos could be the vice president of the television syndicate. This is a primary motivating factor for Carlos.

*Naive:* When Carlos arrives at the entrance of the state and he sees six bodies hanging from a bridge, he starts to realize that perhaps his view of the world has been rather naive, and that there could be some true danger in this assignment.

*Talented:* Carlos is talented and he learns quickly from his boss, the Director. In a key scene in the office in Mexico City, Carlos's boss goes over how the media can manipulate the public. The first is distraction. The second is to create problems, and then solve them. Another is to trigger emotions rather than to encourage reflection.

*Corruptible (easily corrupted):* Point of view shots. Carlos is not viewed as an intrinsically bad person, nor is he morally warped. He's simply a rather naive and ambitious young person who is extremely talented, and simply takes the opportunity where it can potentially go. When Governor Vargas offers him a post in the government for achieving results, there is no outrage or dismay. It is simply normal and the way things work in the world.

*Creative:* Estrada uses a number of long shots to show how Carlos develops the narrative and coaches the actors to make sure that the scene has the desired impact. For example, in the scene where the public is introduced to the Garzas, he coaches them and asks them to look emotional. Specifically, he asks Mrs. Garza to not dry her tears but to let them flow down her face.

### **Questions:**

1. *The Perfect Dictatorship* exists in a world that relies on social media for communication. Part of the communication is to constantly explore the boundaries of what we know to be reality, and to push those further. One way that they are pushed further is through the production of memes or cartoons which are shared. Another way is to participate in polls and chats in which one can share one's conspiracy theories or home-spun analysis. Please find two examples of where social media was used and describe how and where it was used.

2. Within the realm of the personal, inner sanctum, Governor Carmelo Vargas is a scatological, profane person whose every other word is an obscenity. However, when he speaks on camera or in political situations, he is eloquent, subtle, and emotionally engaging. Describe how the contrast between his behind-the-scenes self and his public self advance the messages and political insights of the film.

3. Describe the roles of the news anchor, the producer, and the director of Television Mexicana. How does each one contribute to the construction of a reality meant to be believed by the public? Explain how the television news can be a powerful tool in either destroying and undermining a public figure, or in building him/her up.

### **ILLUSRATIVE SCENES**



Luis Estrada's establishing shot for this scene which occurs at the beginning of the film is a medium long shot, which gives the sense that it records reality, and gives the impression of television news coverage. The President of Mexico (who strongly resembles President Pena Nieto) is shaking hands with the U.S. Ambassador, just as he reveals his plan to send workers from Mexico to the U.S. to do all the dirty jobs. He expresses extremely racist opinions, completely oblivious, it seems, to the fact that the sitting U.S. President is Barack Obama, who is mixed descent and identifies as black.



In this scene, makeup artists are perfecting the “look” of the governor so that he looks convincing on camera. Director Luis Estrada introduces another level of irony when he subverts the expectations of the audience. Far from the inarticulate, foul-mouthed thug he appears to be to his cronies, on camera and in front of a crowd, he turns into the consummate actor who moves his audience with his passion, eloquence, and compassion. In reality, he’s a ruthless and conniving sociopath.



Director Luis Estrada demonstrates power dynamics with this two-shot where the Governor stands and looks down toward reporter Carlos Rojo, who listens to the Governor's proposition. The Governor is ambitious, but he cannot achieve his goals without the complicity of the press, which has the ability to create reality and to choreograph the actions and reactions. In this manner, the press and the corrupt politician, working together, concoct a fictive reality — ideally a sentimental and sensationalistic one — that propels the media-generated candidate into the highest realms.





The cartels like to eliminate their enemies, and while they do so, send a compelling message. When the film crew from the national television station arrive, they are greeted by a welcoming committee who are proud to have just delivered a message to a rival cartel to cease and desist efforts to penetrate their territory. In this, Director Estrada recreates a scene that occurred in 2011 in Veracruz when rival gangs dismembered and hung bodies from bridges as a message to rivals. Taking perverse pride in the day's hunting, the cartel members pose for their photo, taken by reporter Carlos Rojo, who has just arrived with the crew.



Life is not completely perfect for the Governor. There is an obsessed Congressman (Diputado) who has dug up scandalous facts about the Governor's extensive corrupt dealings, and who is eager to expose him. In this point-of-view shot, the camera angle emphasizes the energy and also the deranged and ultimately futile nature of his quest. Even though he speaks the truth, the media portrays his accusations as suspect and spewed from the mouths of a madman.



This frame perfectly illustrates Director Luis Estrada's ability to capture the social construction of reality as it is happening, and to expose the techniques and exploitation involved. Estrada foregrounds Carlos Rojo, the telejournalist, who has been hired by the Governor to improve his image. In doing so, he must choreograph the emotional trajectory of the terrified parents (the Garzas) who fear for the safety of their kidnapped twin daughters. He must also position himself in the frame so that he appears to be the stalwart and trustworthy source of truth. The viewers do not know to what extent the circumstances have been rigged in order to elicit sympathy (and attention).