



‘No Hay Nada Que Celebrar’: Music,
Migration, and Violence
in Luis Estrada’s *El Infierno* (2010)

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TEXT

In his work *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, author and cultural critic Octavio Paz provides a thoughtful examination regarding the Mexican fascination with death. He states: ‘The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love’ (Paz 1985: 57). Paz discusses the celebrations of death in Mexico, describing the colourful and vibrant representations constructed during *Día de muertos* (Day of the Dead) and the indifference that many Mexicans supposedly feels towards it, either as an event or as a condition. According to Paz, ‘the Mexican death is a mirror of Mexican life. And the Mexican shuts himself away

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and ignores both of them' (58). But death takes on a myriad of meanings in Mexico. Aside from these yearly, lively celebrations that have captured the imagination of the world, the visual depiction of death and its realities have been splashed onto the cover pages of Mexico's popular periodicals for several decades, portraying the violent and gruesome activities enacted by the country's numerous drug cartels. These narratives and images have also bled into the film industry, offering the population a ghastly and at times intimate look into the culture. Death and its associated violence are at the heart of Luis Estrada's 2010 film *El Infierno* (*Hell*), which focuses on the protagonist Benny García and his descent into the narcoculture that has absorbed the country and left it in a state of severe political, social, and economic crisis.

Premiering during Mexico's Centennial of the Revolution and Bicentennial of the Independence, both taking place in 2010,¹ and backed by Mexico's major cultural institutions, including IMCINE (Institute of Mexican Cinematography), CONACULTA (National Council for Culture and Arts), and FONCA (National Foundation for Culture and the Arts), *El Infierno* received both accolades from audiences and the popular press, as well as backlash from government officials for its negative and unfavourable depiction of contemporary Mexican politics and culture. Set in Northern Mexico and functioning as a response to then President Felipe Calderón's '*Lucha contra el narcotráfico*' ('Fight Against Narcotraffickers') initiative (2006–2012),² Estrada's film offers a dismal interpretation of the country, highlighting the extremities of Mexican rural poverty and the exploitation of its residents by Mexico's quadrangle of higher powers: the police, the government, the church, and the cartels.

But while also a critical commentary, *El Infierno* relies heavily on dark or macabre humour, a satirical representation of the displacement and the violence that the country was—and currently is—experiencing, where music plays a strategic and vital role. Dark humour and music tend to go hand in hand in Estrada's films, as music typically portrays the development (or downfall) of the protagonist. *El Infierno* marked the end of Estrada's political trilogy, films that openly criticised contemporary Mexican politics and the national political parties, particularly the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI or Institutional Revolutionary Party). The initial organisation of the trilogy included *La ley de Herodes* (*Herod's Law*, 1999) and *Un mundo maravilloso* (*A Wonderful World*, 2006).³ A later cinematic instalment in 2014, entitled *La dictadura perfecta* (*The*

Perfect Dictatorship), broke up the trilogy to scrutinise the *sexenio*, or six-year administration, of then President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018). In all these films, Estrada uses humour to successfully sell his criticism about and condemnation for the Mexican government, and each film also uses specific music, functioning both diegetically and non-diegetically, to convey the director's scathing commentary in intriguing and intricate ways.⁴ *El Infierno*, however, is Estrada's most heavily musical film, featuring a wide variety of music selections that correspond with the characterisation and the activities of *narcotraficantes* (drug traffickers) and the atmosphere of violence, acting satirically and often ironically. With this film, the victims of the sweeping narco-related violence and their deaths become caricatures against a horrific and brutal backdrop, concluding with tragic and unfortunate consequences for Benny and, by extension, for Mexico. Film scholar Jorge Ayala Blanco indicates that the justice that was intended to materialise from *El Infierno* is masked by the inclusion and representation of the absurd, or what he terms '*macroabsurdo*'. He asserts: 'In more than one way, the situation is desperate, but not serious. [The film] is a parable continuing a ridiculous debasement that has been perceived as the only form for current Mexican survival' (Ayala Blanco 2011: 434). In other words, humour obscures the severity of the situation. The consequences of displacement and violence become comical and almost artificial, and the film's strategic uses of music, or musical moments, play essential and colluding roles in this process, offering audiences a caustic take on devastating circumstances.

MUSICAL MOMENTS, MEXICAN CINEMA'S NARCOSCAPE, AND *EL INFIERNO*

Since the 1930s and the beginnings of early recorded, synchronised sound cinema, music has played a crucial and fundamental role in Mexican film productions. Several of the industry's established national film genres, such as the prostitute melodrama, the *comedia ranchera* (ranch comedy), and the *cine de añoranza porfiriana* (films of Porfirian longing), have included crucial diegetic musical sequences or performances that provide the audience with important messages regarding the location, the action, the emotive atmosphere, and/or the character development.⁵ In her work on the function of music and dance in Mexican cinema, film scholar Ana M. López argues that the melodramatic narratives of Mexican

cinema, particularly during the Golden Era (roughly 1936–1952), were predominantly dictated and driven by diegetic song. She states:

In these and other films the narrative stoppage usually generated by performances was reinvested with emotion, so that melodramatic pathos emerged in the moment of performance itself (through gesture, sentiment, interactions with the audience within the film or simply musical choice) [...] Music and song rather than dramatic action propel the narrative. (López 1993: 145)

These specific moments in the film foreground the music and drive the plot to behave in what Amy Herzog has labelled ‘the musical moment’: the moment ‘when music, typically a popular song, inverts the image–sound hierarchy to occupy a dominant position in a filmic work. The movements of the image, and hence the structuring of space and time, are dictated by song’ (Herzog 2010: 7). In Mexican cinema, songs that were played in their entirety generally functioned as one of the primary signifiers for the formation of the character’s sense of self, and these musical moments offered the audience, both on and off screen, insight into the construction of their identities.⁶

Mexico’s long-standing tradition of incorporating music in compelling and calculated ways has helped increase production values, tying in many of the nation’s most popular performers to the film industry and enticing audiences to flock to theatres to see and hear their favourite artists.⁷ The prominent role of music in Mexican film productions has continued well into the twenty-first century, although the musical moments do not necessarily involve on-screen performances (although they often do); musical moments in contemporary Mexican cinema tend to feature popular songs functioning on a non-diegetic level, in which the performed lyrics and sound take over and shape the narrative. Films that focus on the activities and the culture of Mexico’s drug cartels are no exception in this regard.

Music is an essential feature of ‘narcoculture’, which Miguel Cabañas refers to as the various representations about drug traffickers and the world of growing, processing, distributing, and consuming illegal drugs. He adds: ‘It also includes the effects of these activities on individuals and communities, the formation of protective networks and money laundering, their association with power structures, and their contribution to political corruption’ (2014: 6). Mass media has become a provocative conduit for the construction and representation of narcoculture in

what has been termed the 'narcoscape', the landscape in which representations of drug trafficking become more consumable in and for popular culture. Narcoscapes shaped by the popular cultural forms of literature, music, television, and films are relatively fictional, consisting of several complex and at times contradictory components that provide audiences with varying representations of the political-economic power relations at work.⁸

In cinema, drug trafficking has been a significant part of Mexican film culture since the 1970s, appearing predominantly as low-budget, direct-to-video cinema produced by Mexican and Mexican American studios (Rashotte 2015: 1–2). These films, labelled simply as 'narcocinema', specialised in elevating the *narcotraficante* to a privileged status, featuring the popular vernacular from the border, graphic violence and nudity, heavily emphasised melodramatic plot lines, and music, often functioning as interludes, that in a sense exploit the actions of the narcos. This particular selection of music focuses on specific genres and performers that are connected to the actual narcoculture, serving as an indexical sign for the national audience. *El Infierno*, however, is not strictly considered narcocinema; it falls under a current that Ryan Rashotte labels *nuevo cine de narcos* (new narco cinema), a more stylised, polished, and heavily financed film that borrows from the current of narcocinema, but constructs the narcoscape differently, both visually and aurally.⁹ Rashotte explains that *El Infierno* both criticises and spoofs narcocinema, making use of many of its standard elements listed above, including the use of music that is socially and culturally linked to (or relates to) narcos and narcoculture (2015: 159).

El Infierno is a film about displacement and violence in the narco-sphere. Twenty years after immigrating to the United States, Benjamín 'El Benny' García (Damián Alcázar) is deported back to Mexico, returning to his hometown of San Miguel Arcángel to find it governed by a drug cartel family known as Los Reyes del Norte, headed by its notorious and apathetic drug lord, Don José Reyes (Ernesto Gómez Cruz). The infiltration and the takeover of San Miguel Arcángel by the cartel significantly, and humorously, changed the town's name to San Miguel Narcángel for the residents. Benny returns with good intentions and high expectations: his dream is to build a school for English instruction for the town's children. This dream, however, is short lived when Benny takes on the financial burdens of his family after finding out his brother, Pedro 'El Diablo' or 'Devil' García (Tenoch Huerta), was killed, leaving behind his

teenaged son (Kristian Ferrer) and his wife Guadalupe Solís (Elizabeth Cervantes). Benny, in desperate need of money to help his struggling nephew, is quickly absorbed into the cartel's business by his best friend Eufemio 'El Cochiloco' Mata (Joaquín Cosío, whose performance steals the show) and gradually becomes one of the cartel's leading *sicarios* (assassins). For this, he is paid both handsomely and tragically. Although he successfully acclimates into the narcoculture of his town, Benny realises that the corruption runs deep: the Reyes cartel has power over everyone and exercises their control in horrific and deadly ways. After attempting to make a deal with authorities (who turned out to be working for the cartel) and discovering the decapitated head of his girlfriend, Benny sacrifices his life by killing the cartel leaders at the town's Centennial and Bicentennial celebration in hopes that the violence would end and the narcoculture would disappear. After Benny's death, however, his young nephew takes up the reins and begins a new current of cartel power.

As previously mentioned, *El Infierno* is not considered wholly narcocinema, but tangentially references many of the genre's signifiers, including the selection, placement, and role of music. The song list in narcocinema proper includes *narcocorridos*—typically strophic songs in a major key that narrate stories of drug trafficking, some successful, some tragic, and the drug lords—and, depending on the location of the narrative, either heavily brass-infused banda music or polka-driven *música norteña*, or both.¹⁰ Because the film is set in the northern region of Mexico, the soundscape—the general acoustical environment of a society—features musics predominantly heard and performed around the Texas-Mexico border.¹¹ The Mexico City-based periodical *Reforma* has noted that *El Infierno* can be interpreted as a musical tribute or homage to Tex-Mex *conjuntos* (small musical ensembles that feature the button accordion) and *narcocorridos*, emphasising its connections with the border, Northern Mexican culture, and narcocinema (Cabrera 2010: 9). The film features an extensive compiled list of songs from artists and groups that perform *música norteña*, *corridos* (strophic narrative ballads), and the *canción ranchera*. These include El Flaco Jiménez, Los Alegres de Terán, José Alfredo Jiménez, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, and Los Lobos, among others. Much of the film's music reinforces the narcoscape's 'assumed sound' or 'assumed atmosphere' in relation to the developing narrative, functioning in the background and taking a subservient role to the action on-screen. Music is so present in the film, however, that Ayala Blanco declares that its interjections are 'irritatingly frequent' and distract

from the film's 'visual lyricism' (Ayala Blanco 2011: 430). But there are two essential musical moments where music dictates Benny's dual identities in the film: first as an undocumented immigrant forced to return to Mexico, articulated by Los Lobos' version of 'México-Americano', and second, as one of the Reyes cartel's *sicarios*, characterised by Chalino Sánchez's *narcocorrido* 'El Crimén de Culiacán' ('The Crime of Culiacán'). A closer reading of these two musical moments reveals functions more compelling than just providing an 'assumed aural atmosphere' or as 'interjecting' in the narrative. Both scenes are montages edited to fit the entirety of the songs and both are crucial for Benny's development: these musical selections affirm his transformation from a recently deported working man to *sicario*, and exalt the pessimism and death that follows him in unapologetic yet satirical ways.

'DON'T COME BACK': 'MÉXICO-AMERICANO' AND BENNY'S DEPORTATION

At the beginning of the film, a cowboy-hat-wearing Benny García sets off to the United States in the early 1990s. He, like so many before and after him, is full of optimism, promising his mother and brother he will send money to alleviate their financial burdens. After a brief fade out, the next scene takes place twenty years later in 2010. Benny, now sporting a baseball cap, handcuffed, and looking dejected, crosses the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border after a white male border agent wearing aviator sunglasses tells him: 'Grab your bags, keep on walking. Welcome back to Mexico. Don't come back'. Benny then boards a bus that heads to his hometown. As the bus drives away from the port of entry, the hybrid *norteña*-rock version of 'México-Americano' performed here in Spanish by the rock band Los Lobos begins to play. 'México-Americano' was initially written as a *corrido* in Spanish by Rumel Fuentes (1943–1986), a schoolteacher and songwriter from El Paso, Texas, whose music contributed to the soundscape of the Chicano movement during the early 1970s.¹² Fuentes's music, which consisted of originally composed *corridos* and works for *conjunto*, provided a positive conduit and tool for the unification of Mexican Americans struggling to find their place and their identity on U.S. soil. 'México-Americano' was considered one of the anthems of the movement, detailing the dual identities felt or undertaken by the singer, who proudly declares that he is both from the United States and Mexico, but his origins are from the 'noble race... *la raza de oro*' (the

golden race), which functions as the song's refrain: 'I am from the golden race / I am Mexican American'.¹³

The arrangement performed in the film by Los Lobos accentuates the hybrid and transnational nature of the music and the identity and cultural politics of the border region. Los Lobos, hailed from East Los Angeles, are known for their genre and stylistic synthesis that includes rock, R&B, Tex-Mex, country, blues, Mexican *son*, *cumbia*, and *música nortteña*, just to name a few.¹⁴ In 'México-Americano', the song's lyrics suggest a straddling of two cultures on the border, and the musical arrangement reveals a fusion of musical elements. Featuring a bouncy rhythm in 2/4 that is reminiscent of a fast polka (typical in *música nortteña*), this arrangement emphasises a diversity of sound that bridges *nortteña* and rock. An electronic guitar plays the off beats while the melodic line is given to the accordion and tenor saxophone, which is not part of the standard instrumentation in *música nortteña*. The portrayal of this border soundscape emphasises the collision of cultures in effect creating an updated *nortteña* sound for the twenty-first century. The song is strophic, featuring verses sung in thirds that elevate the proud dual identity conveyed in the lyrics. The association of this song with Benny at this early introductory moment suggests that during those twenty years, Benny adapted to his life in the United States, although the audience does not know what that consisted of or what he did. He embodied these national and cultural identities successfully until he was deported. As Benny travels through the countryside by bus, we are given a visual moving display of life in Mexico along *Ruta 2010* (Route 2010), the Mexican highway signs marking the celebrations erected for the Centennial and Bicentennial Celebrations.

The rhythm and flow of the song structures the visual montage that encapsulates his 24-hour bus ride, which we experience through both Benny's point of view from his window seat and through medium and long shots around the bus. As Los Lobos belt out the beginning lines of the song's first verse, 'From my mother I am Mexican / By destiny I am American', we see through a cinematographic yellow filter an arid and bleak desert, abandoned houses and car lots, and a chapel to *La Santísima Muerte* (also referred to as '*la niña blanca*' or 'the white girl'), a demanding patroness that upholds Death as the ultimate sovereign, particularly for narcos (Lomnitz 2003: 493). We witness the decay, the dismantling, and the death of the countryside through quick, successive shots while Los Lobos continue to sing lyrics of pride and honour, amplified by the bright accordion and saxophone riffs call and response to the

vocals, which cut through the dry and depressed landscape. The music's quick and lively tempo and the boastful, repetitive lyrics about transnational migration severely contrast to the on-screen movement: 'Two countries are my land / I defend them with honour'. The song actively works to shape a satirical sense of energetic levity and comradeship through the linking of states and cities in both countries that is disassociated with the dire imagery and vast countryside outside the bus window.

The most damning parts (or perhaps the funniest) occur between Benny and his fellow countrymen: Benny is robbed twice, first at night by an armed man with a mullet and a moustache on the decrepit bus, corresponding comically in the song to the signature male *grito* (yell or cry) heard typically in mariachi performances, then by the armed military in the daytime, who take him off the bus and strip him down, 'discovering' his wad of U.S. American dollars hidden in the lining of his loosely-fitted white underwear. In each instance, Benny, newly arrived on Mexican soil, looks on, confused and helpless as he is being robbed and fearing for his life at gunpoint by both petty criminals and government-run entities. The song's lyrics disregard or overlook these events, focusing more on the uniqueness and the multicultural attributes of two national identities.

Despite 'México-Americano's' optimistic declaration and commentary, Benny experiences a rather severe and negative initiation to starting his new life in present-day Mexico, which contrasts with the music's original message. As the song repeats the refrain 'I am Mexican American' and reaches its final cadence, a dishevelled and hungry Benny departs from the bus with what is left of his belongings and walks towards his childhood home, situated in the desert.

The placement and selection of the music indicates that Benny is considered (both by the film and by himself) as part of both countries: he trades the cowboy hat for the baseball cap and throughout the film, continues to sprinkle in English words and phrases, à la 1950s Mexican *pachuco* comedian Germán Valdés 'Tin Tan'.¹⁵ Benny, as a repatriated migrant, becomes a symbol of the immigration experience on the United States-Mexico border and a representative of the Mexican American struggle. Despite the idealism conveyed in the music through the representation of dual identities, dancing rhythms, and colourful instrumentation, the movement across and around the border and Benny's encounters with thieves indicates more of a dangerous and pessimistic reality. The music functions as a sarcastic and ironic rebuke of Benny's immigrant experience and deportation rather than a rhapsodic narration

of praise and privilege. According to anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz, the border is charged with life and death symbolism: ‘Border crossings are represented both as baptisms and as dangerous passages that require divine intercession and protection’ (Lomnitz 2003: 476). Benny’s movement across borders signifies this baptism and death as he involuntarily reterritorialises back into what he considered his home country. This musical moment of ‘México-Americano’ introduces Benny as the protagonist who boasts dual identities despite his forced removal from the United States and an end to his own American dream. The parting words ‘don’t come back’ emphasise the stark and precarious realities of many forced to return during a socio-economic crisis. Immigration, transnationalism, and homecoming are sarcastically met with dejection and disdain.

‘EL CRIMEN DE CULIACÁN’ AND BENNY, CARTEL ASSASSIN

It does not take long for Benny to get sucked into the employment of Don José Reyes, the head of the Reyes cartel. He is recruited by Don José’s leading strong arm, El Cochiloco, who exemplifies a Northern Mexican cowboy stereotype affiliated with the cartels (cowboy hat, leather jackets with elaborate embroidery, boots, brightly coloured silk button-up shirt, and dyed black hair, as an extra touch). Initially not a violent person and reluctant to cause any harm, Benny eventually embraces the work with the cartel, changing his appearance to fit the model of a Northern Mexican narco. He also picks up on the narco activities: he begins killing and disposing of bodies with El Cochiloco without much remorse and with some humour. His transition is captured in another important identity-building musical moment featuring ‘El Crimen de Culiacán’, a *narcocorrido* written by Nacho Hernández and performed by Chalino Sánchez that details the brutal murder of two individuals at the hands of a cartel in Culiacán, Sinaloa.¹⁶

The use of Sánchez’s performance here, especially ‘El Crimen de Culiacán’, is quite telling, as it is a historically significant *narcocorrido*. Sánchez was a famous songwriter and performer who had immigrated to the United States in the 1970s. His popularity grew in southern California and eventually in Mexico; he became the dominant source in the creation and performance of *narcocorridos*. Tragically, in 1992, Sánchez was murdered in Sinaloa, and soon after his *narcocorridos*, both the lyrics

and the sound, became rallying cries for *narcotraficantes*, their followers, and the general public. Although his music was not exclusively used in narcocinema, his songs became sonic staples in the narcoscape, censored from the radio, which only amplified his popularity. One of his early hits, 'El Crimen de Culiacán' follows the formula of a *narcocorrido* from the north: it is strophic, in triple metre, and accordion-driven, featuring lyrics that narrate the activities of a cartel. The use of 'El Crimen de Culiacán' in this montage, which, unlike 'México-Americano' encompasses several days rather than just 24 hours, solidifies, or provides credibility to Benny's transition from a deported immigrant to *sicario*, while also harkening back to an older generation of narcoculture voiced by Sánchez, one that the Mexican audience would recognise.

In the film, Benny begins to enjoy his new wealth and power, elevated, in a sense, to the heroes of the *narcocorridos* of the past, emphasised with his snorting of cocaine on the chest of a sex worker, the ridiculous baptism of his gun by the town's priest, and his purchase of golden boot tips that are held in a wooden box adorned with the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe, Mexico's Patron Saint. Initially, the sound of the *narcocorrido*, heavily enforced by the accordion call and response with the strains of Sánchez's voice verify Benny's role in the cartel and his gradual ascent up the hierarchy. But much like 'México-Americano', the placement of 'El Crimen de Culiacán' has a sarcastic rather than boastful function; the song intentionally does not glorify narcos, but, rather, warns against them, describing the gruesome double murder of two men from Sinaloa, Francisco López and Francisco Beltrán, at the hands of the local cartel. The *narcocorrido* begins with the following introductory verse: 'I will sing you a *corrido* about men that were killed / Without receiving compassion, they were cruelly tortured'. In the song, Sánchez details how both men were walking around the Palmito neighbourhood, unaware that they were about to be killed. López had killed a man who 'stole his beloved' (perhaps a member of the cartel), but Beltrán was an innocent bystander. Although the manner in which they were killed is not specifically stated, the lyrics indicate that the two men were tortured and in their death, 'their mothers were left in mourning'. In typical fashion for a *corrido*, Sánchez ends with a final stanza that serves as a moral to the tragic story, urging listeners not to forget what happened to these men.

In the film, the *narcocorrido* flows in counterpoint to Benny's situation and his actions, working to expose Benny's broken moral compass as he becomes more comfortable with his role as murderer and cartel thug.

During the montage, Estrada taps into several practices of narcoculture and the aural and visual construction of the *narcotraficante*, including intimidation, misogyny, drug use, overt displays of religious symbolism, brutal violence, and arms smuggling. Sánchez's sung verses that detail the gruesome murders and disembowelling of López and Beltrán correspond with the more violent images (the killing and disposing of bodies) while the responding accordion riffs highlight Benny's other activities, including collecting money with El Cochiloco and his purchase of narco-attire accessories. The more intense images involve the beating, murder, and disposal of his victims. In one part of the sequence, we see Benny adding acid to a metal container while another narco (Jorge Zárate, known in the film as *El Huasteco*),¹⁷ holding a wooden oar, submerges and stirs a body with one leg sticking out. Known popularly as *El pozolero* (*pozole* maker), a reference to *pozole*, the traditional pork and hominy-based soup or stew popularly served during the holidays and important family functions, this individual is a cleaner who disposes of bodies in lye or acid for cartels. According to several periodicals, this individual did exist, but was not necessarily known at the time of the film's production. This particular killing and body disposal practice, however, was recognised among the cartels and the public. The tension of this horrific scene is broken as Benny gags while the film's El pozolero lets out a boisterous and smug laugh. Musically speaking, this section corresponds with the third stanza of and a key change in the *narcocorrido*, when Sánchez sings about how the two men became victims of the cartel's violence. The most disturbing moment occurs when Sánchez reaches the stanza's final line, indicating that Francisco Beltrán was not guilty of anything. In the montage, we see Benny and his comrade writing a sign that claims Los Reyes (spelled 'Relles') del Norte were responsible for the merciless killing, then stabbing it into the coarsely wrapped and discoloured remains of the body with a wooden stake. The synthesis of this line in the lyrics with the imagery of Benny and El pozolero disposing of the body suggests that perhaps this tortured victim was, like Beltrán, an innocent bystander as well.

Several images of the corpses during this montage are reconstructions ripped from the headlines of Mexican periodicals that feature graphic photographs of the victims of cartel violence, their bodies symbolically desecrated and bearing handwritten warnings. A notable mention is the reproduction of a beaten and bloodied corpse fitted with the Viva México sombrero, which received considerable attention in print media because

of its ironic and horrific use of an important national and cultural signifier during the Bicentennial and Centennial year. In the film, the *narcocorrido* details the most graphic and violent description of the men's deaths that showcases the brutality of the cartels, which is also referenced on-screen: 'They had their guts ripped out and a dog ate them'. While the music has been foregrounded for nearly the entirety of the montage, the *narcocorrido* fades slightly to the background when the scene transitions to a hotel room. Benny and El Cochiloco talk with an Anglo-American gun dealer, negotiating costs for an array of illegal assault rifles, bazookas, and grenades that are spread out on the bed. Sánchez sings the last stanza, pleading his listeners not to forget the victims of violence and to be careful with bad company, while on-screen, Benny, El Cochiloco, and the gun dealer ensure that with the purchase of more arms, the violence will not only continue but will escalate. Rather than exalting Benny's new role, this musical moment functions as a grim and dismal warning not just to Benny's conflicted transition to *sicario*, but also to his loss of morality to the narcoculture, concentrating on the intimidation and the death of so many at the hands of Benny and the cartel.

CONCLUSION

'*Nada que celebrar*' ('Nothing to celebrate'): this is the tagline that is printed on *El Infierno*'s official marketing posters, blatantly disapproving of the government-sponsored celebrations taking place during 2010 while the country continued to experience brutal violence, fear, and horrific death. Both IMCINE and Luis Estrada received considerable criticism from the government after the film's premiere; even then President Calderón criticised Estrada for making a film that placed the country and its people in such a negative and violent light, although at the time he had not actually seen it, but was rather relying on the commentaries of his advisors. The movie-going Mexican public, however, felt differently. For many, Estrada painted a caricature of the perverse relationship between transnational political powers and organised crime that reflected contemporary currents, including violent imagery ripped from the headlines. In that respect, it was seen as a homage to narcocinema and narcoculture, and a cautionary tale about what happens to displaced individuals when forced to cross borders for economic and familial survival. This led many to believe the film was not a fictional comedic-drama, but rather a pseudo-documentary that exposed and sarcastically criticised the

corruption and the brutality the country was currently facing. And music played a significant and influential role in this interpretation.

The film's musical selections work actively and strategically to reinforce the atmosphere of narcoculture while the musical moments specifically shape Benny's identity. As previously mentioned, *El Infierno* is Estrada's most musically-oriented film, featuring several examples of *música nortteña*, *rancheras*, and *narcocorridos*, both recycled and originally composed for the film.¹⁸ Small ensembles perform in the streets, in bars, and at funerals, while snippets of varying musics blast from car radios and nightclub sound systems, providing an aural sense of space and place. The focused attention on 'México-Americano' and 'El Crimen de Culiacán'—both songs are played in their entirety with visual montages edited to the song's rhythm and they are both connected to the protagonist Benny—indicates how significantly these musical moments shape our sense of Benny's changing and fractured identity. With 'México-Americano', Benny transforms into a deported immigrant, returning to Mexico after a twenty-year stay in the United States. While the upbeat and fast-paced example of *nortteña*-rock proclaims the pride of having two identities—one from Mexico and one from the United States—Benny's situation is much more dire, as he is thrown out of one country and returns to another that robs him and places him in a powerless and unprotected condition, regardless of his dual identities. This musical moment comments on the plight and current situation of many undocumented immigrants in the twenty-first century, forced to return to Mexico from the United States with the line 'don't come back'. In 'El Crimen de Culiacán', Benny realises he cannot make a life for himself and his family without joining the local cartel, which maintains economic control over the town and its residents. He quickly adapts to his new role as *sicario* despite Chalino Sánchez's grisly warnings about men who were tortured and killed without compassion in his *narcocorrido*. Much like in 'México-Americano', the music moves in counterpoint to the actions and images on screen, providing scathing and sarcastic commentary on Benny's new (albeit forced) identity and foreshadowing his inevitable demise for his association with the cartel. In both these musical moments, music is the major conduit for Estrada's harsh criticism, unforgiving of Benny's actions and circumstance.

NOTES

1. The Bicentennial marks Mexico's Independence from the Spanish Crown, which was an insurrection that took place in 1810–1821. The Centennial signifies the Civil War of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), which began as an uprising against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. His reign of power lasted roughly thirty-five years from 1884 to 1911. Both historical events are considered crucial to Mexico's national identity and have been used by many cultural institutions to promote a unified history and common identity through the population.
2. This initiative, initially labeled as '*Operativo conjunto Michoacán*' ('Joint Operation Michoacán'), began on December 10, 2006, just nine days after then President Calderón took office. The intention was to combat organised crime, in particular the Cartel de la Familia Michoacana. After this, Mexico initiated the War on Drugs. For more information, see Jones (2016).
3. *La ley de Herodes* or *Herod's Law* was one of Estrada's most controversial cinematic endeavours during the end of the 1990s. Set during the period of the Miguel Alemán's *sexenio* (1946–1952), the film follows the problematic ascent to power of Juan Vargas (Damián Alcázar), a janitor turned mayor of a small Mexican town who quickly becomes absorbed in political corruption and greed. The film was a blatant commentary on the workings of the PRI that maintained control of the Mexican government for the majority of the twentieth century. Estrada's film was so critical and inflammatory to the history of the party (and is the first film to openly criticise the political party by name), which at the time was still in power, that the Mexican government had the film censored. This action only led to its popularity with the public.
4. In *La ley de Herodes*, Estrada utilises mambos by bandleader Dámaso Pérez Prado in order to highlight the popular soundscape of the 1940s; in *Un mundo maravilloso*, Estrada utilises contemporary Mexican pop music to shape the urban landscape; and *La dictadura perfecta* features a compilation of musical tracks from the nineteenth century western art tradition including Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony no. 9, Gioachino Rossini's *William Tell Overture*, and Edvard Grieg's *Peer Gynt Suite*.
5. For more information about the important role music maintains in these genres, see Avila (2019).
6. For example, in the prostitute melodrama, the female prostitute protagonist is intimately tied to Latin American dance musics, such as the rumba and the danzón, performed in spaces of sexual commerce such as cabarets and nightclubs. Because of the location and function, these musics in the film became culturally tied to sexuality and sensuality, aurally painting the female prostitute as a figure (or object) of desire.

In the *comedia ranchera*, the singing *charro* (Mexican cowboy) protagonist typically performs *canciones rancheras* (ranch or country songs) that demonstrate his virility, his *machismo*, and his ties to the countryside. See Avila (2019).

7. This has also transitioned into television entertainment with the *telenovelas*, Spanish-language soap operas that are broadcast on television. Those produced and funded in Mexico featured many popular contemporary performers who specialise in a variety of musical genres and styles. The narratives intertwine with their music, the lyrics, and their own performances to create an artistic hybrid that audiences find appealing.
8. The depiction and fictionalisation of narcoculture has been especially prominent in *telenovelas* and dramatic serials on streaming media platforms such as Netflix. Two of the more popular shows to gain notoriety in the last decade have been the Televisa produced *La reina de sur* (*Queen of the South*, 2011 and 2019) and Netflix's *Narcos* (2015–2017).
9. In his study entitled *Narco Cinema: Sex, Drugs, and Banda Music in Mexico's B-Filmography*, Ryan Rashotte borrows the phrase *nuevo cine de narco* from film critic Sergio Ramos. Ramos defines this genre as 'the old videohome aesthetic imbued with art-house chic'. Rashotte lists a few films that fall in this category with *El Infierno*, including *Miss Bala* (2011), *Salvando al Soldado Pérez* (*Saving Private Pérez*, 2011), and *Heli* (2013). See Rashotte (2015: 159).
10. The origins of *banda* music are military bands, featuring a variety of brass and woodwind instruments and percussion. The repertoire consists mainly of waltzes, polkas, and marches but is fairly flexible in regards to genre. *Música norteña* (or simply *norteña*) is from the north part of Mexico and Southwest Texas, a juxtaposition of musical styles from German, Czech, and Polish settlers. *Norteña* music features the accordion. For information on both *banda* and *norteña* music, see Madrid (2013) and Ragland (2009).
11. For a discussion on the concept of soundscape, see Murray Schafer (1993).
12. His music is also featured in the iconic Tex-Mex documentary *Chulas Fronteras* (1976) that focuses on migrant farm workers and on how music is used as a form of social protest. See also his short entry entitled 'Corridos of the Chicano Movement: Rumel Fuentes' on the Smithsonian Folkways website: <https://folkways.si.edu/rumel-fuentes/corridos-of-the-chicano-movement/latin-world/music/album/smithsonian>.
13. Translation of lyrics are by the author.
14. For more information on Los Lobos, see the band's official website: <http://www.loslobos.org/site/>.
15. Germán Valdés or Tin Tan was a popular Mexican comedian during the 1950s through 1970s Mexican cinema. His popularity was particularly

startling as the *pachuco* character. *Pachuco* were typically Mexican American males who sported a zoot suit and spoke a vernacular that included Spanish, English, and Caló. He was also known for his ability to sing and dance in a wide variety of genres and for his ability to perform slapstick. For more information about Tin Tan in Mexican cinema, see Avila (2018). For more information about the *pachuco*, see Paz (1985) and de la Mora (2006).

16. Sinaloa is a state on the western coast of Mexico near Baja California. It is considered one of the most violent states in the country, the majority of which is affiliated with cartel traffic and violence. Sinaloa, especially the city of Culiacán, has served as a popular backdrop in *narcocorridos* from the 1970s through the 1990s. For more information, see Wald (2001).
17. *Huasteco* refers to the population living in the northeastern states of Mexico, the region around the Gulf of Mexico.
18. There is one *corrido* that was especially written for the film. 'Corrido de J.R.' was composed by Santiago Ortega with lyrics by Luis Estrada and Rodrigo Santos. It functions diegetically in the film, performed at the funeral of Jesús Reyes 'J.R.' (Mauricio Issac), the son of Don José Reyes, by the *conjunto* 'Terquedad Norteña'.

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Heli, 2013, Amat Escalante, Mexico.
El infierno, 2010, Luis Estrada, Mexico.
La ley de Herodes, 1999, Luis Estrada, Mexico.
Miss Bala, 2011, Gerardo Naranjo, Mexico.
Un mundo maravilloso, 2006, Luis Estrada, Mexico.
Salvando al Soldado Pérez, 2011, Beto Gómez, Mexico.

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LIST OF SONGS

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- ‘El Crimen de Culiacán.’ 1992. Chalino Sanchez (pf). Nacho Hernandez (comp.). © Musart.

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