

# **The Sound of Silence: The *corrido* as Counterculture in Felipe Cazals' *Canoa***

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As a national film industry emerged at the turn of the twentieth century in Mexico, filmmakers were quick to capitalise on the huge popularity of traditional music.<sup>1</sup> Decades later, the soundtrack to the tumultuous events in Mexico in the late 1960s and 1970s continued to reference traditional music, but it also increasingly looked to global youth culture. Songs by U.S. or local rock musicians became a notable feature of films produced in Mexico at this time, with rock music often functioning as a shorthand that differentiated a hip, younger generation from their conservative elders. This article is concerned with Felipe Cazals' *Canoa* (1975), which centres on the clash between the youth of the 1960s and an older, repressive, generation, yet it uses traditional Mexican music, particularly the ballad known as the *corrido*, rather than a more contemporary rock or pop soundtrack. Cazals' formal experiments in this film have attracted much critical commentary, as will be discussed later, but his use of music to critique a repressive government and call into question an idyllic representation of the nation has received little attention. This article will consider Cazals' unconventional use of music in this and other films to provide a radical alternative to the formulaic use of music in earlier Mexican films and to suggest how music can be much more than an accompaniment to images and dialogue.

## **The *Corrido*, Rock Music and Mexican National Identity**

The diverse ways in which music's contribution to cinema can be understood is reflected in numerous studies, which, although they approach the subject in different ways, unite in asserting the central importance of music to film.

1 See, Sergio de la Mora, *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 31–5.

Ian Inglis makes the bold claim that ‘all film relies, in varying degrees, on musical elements’,<sup>2</sup> while Kevin Donnelly argues that: ‘Film music is invariably more than it seems to be. It is often far from simply aural wallpaper: it is vibrant and affecting, a central pillar of cinema’s power and charm.’<sup>3</sup> Music undoubtedly structures and influences our reading of films, and it has greatly enhanced the appeal of Mexican cinema since its inception. The films from the so-called Golden Age of the 1940s to 1950s, such as Fernando de Fuentes’ hugely successful *comedia ranchera* *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936) or Alberto Gout’s *Aventurera* (1950), take their titles from songs and loosely base their plots on them, while their action is punctuated regularly by musical numbers ranging from *rancheras* to rumbas. Film music during the so-called Golden Age of the 1940s and 1950s was generally diegetic, presented as a natural part of the narrative. Songs could be used to evoke a variety of emotional responses in the audience. The enduringly popular *Nosotros los pobres*, directed in 1948 by Ismael Rodríguez, opens with its protagonist Pepe el Toro, played by Pedro Infante, singing ‘Ni hablar mujer’, joined by virtually the entire cast, whose joyful singing and dancing suggest a united and, quite literally, harmonious community. Pepe’s next number, ‘Amorcito corazón’, is a serenade, while the next number, ‘Las mañanitas’, which is also performed with support from several neighbours, is a birthday song to his niece that again underlines the importance of family and extended family, a central theme of the film. This use of music to reflect the onscreen drama and to add intensity to certain dramatic moments is a standard part of film practice, yet there has also been much discussion of the way in which film music is essentially not heard. As Peter Larsen notes in a far-ranging discussion of theories of viewer response to film music, ‘normally film music is “unheard” in the same way as camera angles, colours, lighting, are normally “unseen”’.<sup>4</sup> It is the dramatic departure from this conventional wisdom that makes Cazals’ use of music in *Canoa* particularly notable, as its presence is both insistently visible and also, equally dramatically, unheard.

As the 1960s came to an end, the idea of what constituted Mexican national identity was the subject of much debate and the issue of uniting an extremely diverse country again came to the fore. Young people began to turn away from a traditional, nationalistic identity and instead immersed themselves in a new, more open identity that embraced other cultures and influences. The anti-authoritarian, countercultural movement in Mexico during the 1960s and 1970s is often associated with rock music, as young people sought to

2 Ian Inglis (ed.), *Popular Music and Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), p. 3.

3 K. J. Donnelly (ed.), *Film Music: Critical Approaches* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 1.

4 Peter Larsen, *Film Music* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).

align themselves with a global youth culture and oppose a repressive nationalism embodied by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had been in power since the Mexican Revolution ended in 1920. To young people in Mexico in the 1960s, rock signalled a new political radicalism:

As elsewhere in the world, youth readily identified with the new feeling of rock music. Musicians such as the Doors, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles captured the sentiments of a generation in revolt against tradition [...] The changing sensibilities of Mexican middle-class youth were marked not only by what kind of music they listened to but also by how they wore their hair, what kind of clothes they put on, what language they used, what they read, and in general what their attitude toward authority was.<sup>5</sup>

Mexican films clearly reflected this move towards adopting rock music as a marker of rebellion and a break with a conformist past. This tendency to equate current, and particularly non-Mexican, music with progress was often superficial, however. One such example is Juan de Orduña's 1968 *Despedida de casada*, a comedy about a turbulent marriage that features Bill Haley's 'Rock Around the Clock' as the seemingly free-spirited male protagonist's rebellious theme tune, only to have the couple reconcile at the film's conclusion, thus re-establishing marriage as the only acceptable status quo. In his ribald satire *Mécanica nacional* (1971), Luis Alcoriza roundly parodies this use of supposedly modern music to signify a break with tradition by having the younger cast members dance to U.S. funk while behaving exactly as their parents do; the renowned *ranchera* singer Lucha Villa engages in self-parody by drunkenly and tunelessly singing her hit song 'A medias de la noche'. Noted directors, however, including Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, attempted to use contemporary music to take film in new directions. Hermosillo's feature debut *La verdadera vocación de Magdalena* (1972), for instance, centres on the tumultuous relationship between a conservative young woman and her rock-musician husband. The film not only takes music as a central theme but the soundtrack features music by Mexican rock group La Revolución de Emiliano Zapata.<sup>6</sup> Jorge Fons' *Rojo amanecer* (1989), a key film about events in Mexico in 1968, also reflected the way in which rock music was embraced by young people. In the opening sequence, The Beatles' 'She Loves You' is played fleetingly on the radio as the family has breakfast, prompting an enthusiastic yelp of approval from the youngest son Carlitos, while his grandfather grouchy dismisses the song as 'puros gritos de maricones' [gay squealing].<sup>7</sup> This exchange eloquently

5 Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 112–13.

6 Zolov, 1999, pp. 197–8.

7 My translations throughout.

captures the chasm between a new Mexico enthusiastically embracing the sound of a global youth culture and an older generation holding fast to a traditional view of Mexican identity.

Héctor Castillo Berthier observes that rock music in Mexico has evolved since the 1950s and 1960s by being appropriated by working-class rather than middle-class youths, but he notes that state repression has been a constant throughout this time:

Rock's shift [...] has been accompanied by the undeniable and irremediably authoritarian presence of the Mexican state: the corporatist politics of a one-party system and the rhetoric of a so-called 'revolutionary family' to which all Mexicans belong.<sup>8</sup>

The questioning of the overarching power of this oppressive state apparatus is the central theme of Cazals' *Canoa*. Yet, as we will see, the central role given to the traditional music in the film, especially the *corrido*, seems initially to work against its countercultural message and condemnation of the government's treatment of young people in the late 1960s.

### ***Canoa* as Historical Document and Aural Protest**

The historical backdrop to *Canoa*, the 1968 massacre at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City, when a peaceful protest against government repression was brutally quashed by the army with an estimated death toll of 500, has been documented in numerous studies.<sup>9</sup> At this time, young people in Mexico, like their counterparts elsewhere, were becoming aware of radical political, social and cultural changes such as the Cuban Revolution and the rise of a new counterculture.<sup>10</sup> Despite government censorship, Mexican filmmakers did reflect on the event through films including the documentary *El grito* (Leobardo López Aretche, 1968) which contains footage of the massacre, and Fons' *Rojo amanecer*, which centres on a family living in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas (also known as Tlatelolco) and the devastation they suffer as a result of the army's attack.<sup>11</sup> *Canoa* does not deal directly with the

8 Héctor Castillo Berthier, 'My Generation: Rock and la Banda's Forced Survival Opposite the Mexican State', *Rockin' Las Américas: The Global Politics of Rock in Latin/o America*, Deborah Pacini Hernandez, Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste and Eric Zolov (eds) (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), p. 244.

9 See, for example, *Reflections on Mexico '68*, Keith Brewster (ed.) (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

10 Moises Viñas, *Historia del cine mexicano* (Mexico City: Coordinación de Difusión Cultural/ Dirección de Actividades Cinematográficas, 1987), p. 196.

11 For further discussion of Mexican cinema and the events of 1968, see Emilio García Riera, *Historia documental del cine mexicano, 1968–1969* (Jalisco, Universidad de Guadalajara,

massacre but rather with a related conflict that similarly captured the polarization of Mexican society between would-be revolutionaries and repressive traditionalists.

Cazals' film recounts the true story of a vicious attack on employees of the Universidad de Puebla during their visit to the nearby village of San Miguel Canoa. It is part of a trio of films directed by Cazals from 1975 to 1976 – the others being *Las Poquianchis* and *El apando* – which are generally considered to be his most outstanding works. Notably, the structure of *Las Poquianchis* revisits that of *Canoa*, as the establishing scenes show members of the press reporting on the events at the heart of the story, which are then presented through a series of flashbacks that are interwoven with contemporary scenes that follow the media's presentation of the events. The repetition of this structure is significant in that it highlights the central role the press played in the shaping and recording of the events of the 1960s and early 1970s, as Cazals notes in an interview:

En ese tiempo, en los setentas, la prensa y los medios, en particular el periódico *El Sol*, decían todos los días en todas las regiones del país, que los comunistas vendrían a robarnos nuestras casas y matarnos. Decían también que los estudiantes eran comunistas.

[At that time, during the 1970s, the press and the media, especially the newspaper *El Sol*, said every day in every part of the county that Communists were going to come to steal our homes and kill us. They also said that students were Communists.]<sup>12</sup>

A further notable element of Cazals' filmmaking is his inclusion of scenes where music is discussed rather than simply featured as a backdrop or soundtrack. This device is evident in *El apando*, a film that is directly relevant to 1968 because, as the opening credits note, its author José Revueltas wrote the novel on which it is based while incarcerated on the charge of masterminding the student protests that took place in that year. Early in *El apando*, a corrupt prison guard returns home where his two children and wife await him. He sits at the kitchen table in silence while his harried wife serves him a beer, then turns on the television as she returns to her ironing. The programme they watch features an interview with a famous musician, clad in Mariachi garb, who expounds on the virtues of traditional Mexican musical forms:

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1994), David William Foster, *Mexico City in Contemporary Mexican Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) and Niamh Thornton, *Revolution and Rebellion in Mexican Film* (New York, Bloomsbury, 2013).

12 'Entrevista con Felipe Cazals: Es un peligro para los cienastas estar cerca del poder,' Canal100.com, [http://www.canal100.com.mx/telemundo/entrevistas/?id\\_notas=6750](http://www.canal100.com.mx/telemundo/entrevistas/?id_notas=6750). Accessed 10 January 2014.

La sensibilidad del bolero me emociona. ¿Usted me entiende, no? Todos los mexicanos entendemos eso ... La canción ranchera es otra cosa. Es como menos íntima. Como que hay cosas que no pueden cantarse de parte de los mariachis, ¿no? ...Y es lo que quiero poner en mis canciones. La poesía que llevo en el alma. ¿Por qué he triunfado? Quizás por eso. Porque yo soy mexicano y soy sentimental y sufro mucho cuando me enamoro.

[The sensitivity of the bolero moves me. You know what I mean, don't you? Every Mexican understands it ... The Canción Ranchera is completely different. You could say that it's less intimate. Well, there are things that can't be sung by Mariachis, you know? ... And I want to put the poetry that's in my heart into my songs. Why have I been so successful? Maybe that's why. Because I'm Mexican and I'm sentimental and I suffer a lot when I fall in love.]

The deep contrast between this sentimental monologue, in which music, emotion and *mexicanidad* are presented as virtually synonymous, and the action it accompanies is striking. As the interview plays, the camera follows a further silent exchange between the prison guard and his wife. After giving her a fistful of notes that he has obtained as bribes from the prisoners, he roughly embraces her. She pushes him away and wearily returns to her domestic chores. This loveless and even hostile interaction between the pair utterly contradicts the romanticism embodied by the musician, who becomes a symbol of an idealized Mexico that is far removed from contemporary reality. In this and other scenes in Cazals' films, he refers to traditional Mexican musical forms in an unexpected way that signals the disparity between the folkloric fantasy represented by traditional cinematic Mexican music and the disturbingly violent and corrupt world he portrays.

Rather than using rock music to underline his theme of the gulf between Mexican youths and the repressive political system upheld by their elders, in *Canoa*, Cazals employs the *corrido* as a social protest.<sup>13</sup> This traditional musical form has been strongly associated with Mexican nationalism, particularly the era of the Mexican Revolution. It was marked by antipathy towards foreign culture and a celebration of a distinct Mexican identity often referred to as *mexicanidad*.<sup>14</sup> In his groundbreaking study of the *corrido*, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*, Américo Paredes has noted that many of the figures celebrated in these ballads resemble Hobsbawm's idea of the noble bandit.<sup>15</sup> María Herrera-Sobek's much-cited work on the *corrido* provides a

13 See John H. McDowell, 'The Mexican Corrido: Formula and Theme in a Ballad Tradition,' *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 85, No. 337 (Jul-Sept., 1972), pp. 205-220, p. 209.

14 Américo Paredes, 'The Ancestry of Mexico's Corridos: A Matter of Definitions,' *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 76, No. 301 (Jul.-Sept. 1963), pp. 231-5, p. 233.

15 Américo Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero* (Texas: University of Austin Press, 1973).

valuable framework for the understanding of its strong connection with national cinema. She notes that 'this ballad genre has been a staple of Mexican movies since the 1920s and has, in fact, been the source and inspiration for developing narrative films from original corrido plots or corrido heroes.'<sup>16</sup> Herrera-Sobek makes the link between nationalism and the *corrido* even more explicit, asserting that the *corrido* served as the foundational text for an emerging sense of national unity in post-Revolutionary Mexico:

If for Europe the novel served as a primary energizing and stabilizing force in the construction of nations, for Mexico it was the Mexican ballad, or corrido, that enveloped a newly born nation at the dawn of the nineteenth century in a discourse that sought to unify a heterogeneous population.<sup>17</sup>

Cazals uses the *corrido* in an attempt to redefine the nature of *mexicanidad* during the turbulent era of 1968. The opening titles of *Canoa* confirm the fact that the film is based on actual events through the epigraph 'Esto sí sucedió' [This really happened], followed by the date on which the events unfolded, 15 September 1968. The establishing scene takes place in a newspaper office, as a voice in off dictates a news report to a journalist, telling him that over 2,000 people from the village of San Miguel Canoa took part in the lynching of five university employees the previous night. The group had intended to climb the La Malinche mountain but were forced to stay in the village overnight because of bad weather. Not only were they mistaken for students, who were automatically assumed to be subversives at this time, as Cazals has observed in the interview cited previously, but a rumour had spread that they were communists who planned to place a red and black flag on the local church. The reporter goes on to name four dead and one survivor, though in fact it emerges later in the film that two of the group were killed and three survived, as in the actual event.

What is notable about the film from the point of view of its soundtrack is the centrality of music as a form of both rebellion and oppression. An ominous exchange occurs between the villagers and the young mountain climbers even before they reach the village. In high spirits, Roberto Rojano (Jaime Garza), the most outgoing of the five, sings on the bus as they approach the village. When he launches into a joyful rendition of 'Canción Mixteca', he is abruptly told to shut up by a furious old man. Although the lyrics he sings, 'Que lejos estoy de la tierra donde he nacido/ Inmensa nostalgia invade

16 María Herrera-Sobek, 'The Corrido as Hypertext: Undocumented Mexican Immigrant Films and the Mexican/Chicano Ballad', *Culture Across Borders: Mexican Immigration and Popular Culture*, ed. by David R. Maciel and María Herrera-Sobek (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1998), pp. 227–59, p. 227.

17 Herrera-Sobek, 1998, p. 240.

mi pensamiento' ['How far I am from the land where I was born/A great nostalgia overcomes my thoughts'] would seem to be ironic, since he is in fact only 12 km from Puebla, they prove to be prophetic. San Miguel Canoa is another world that is far removed from the relative progress and prosperity of Puebla. Its traditional society and superstitious populace are the perfect fodder for the local priest (Enrique Lucero) who styles himself as *cacique* of the town and stirs up fear and resentment against any outsiders.

One of the priest's principal tools for controlling the villagers is a sound system, which is seen in the background during the first sequence set in the village and appears prominently thereafter. At first, the constant playing of music over loudspeakers seems innocuous, as we are introduced to a young man dedicating a song to his girlfriend, although the romantic nature of this gesture is somewhat diminished as his record is not played until he pays the brutish character in charge of playing the records. As the film unfolds, however, the use of music in *Canoa* proves to be not just mercenary but decidedly sinister. Even the choice of love song dedicated to the young man's girlfriend in this scene, 'El pecador' is ominous, as it proves unexpectedly sombre and moralistic:

Reconozco, Señor, que soy culpable  
Sé que he sido pecador imperdonable  
Hoy te pido Señor que me vuelvas bueno,  
Porque tengo un amor digno y sereno.  
[I realize Lord that I have been guilty,  
I know I've been an unpardonable sinner.  
Today I ask you Lord to make me good  
For I have found a worthy and serene love.]

What should be a romantic gesture becomes an admission of guilt that suggests the all-pervasive influence of the church. The sinister use to which the sound system is put is also seen when a song is dedicated to another villager in an attempt to shame him into paying tithes to the priest. This song, in turn, is interrupted by an announcement that Nicolás Sánchez has fallen down drunk and that his wife should come and get him. The disembodied voices that form a soundtrack to village life seem omniscient, all-seeing and omnipotent, following Michel Chion's theory of the *acousmètre*.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the examples cited by Chion, where a single voice in off is heard to create increasing tension before the person behind it is revealed, here the voices attest to the priest's power by their sheer number, as they all belong to his host of followers. We are left in no doubt that it is he who controls the sound system, however, as

18 Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 129–31.



the first sound heard from the speakers, the tolling of church bells, automatically evokes his authority, and the ringing of the bells punctuates the film.

As the action unfolds, the young men soon learn that the power behind these mysterious, threatening voices will have a devastating impact on them. Forced to abandon their mountain trek, the group is denied shelter by the suspicious and hostile villagers and the priest himself. They then encounter Lucas García (Ernesto Gómez Cruz), an independent and open-minded local man who refuses to bow to the priest's authority and allows the men to stay at his house overnight. García is one of very few villagers to question the priest's authority – the other most notable example is a cynical narrator who acts as a commentator reminding the viewers of the priest's abuses. García confirms to the group that the sound system has been hijacked by the priest's supporters to vilify locals who stand up to his authoritarian rule and to intimidate others who are deemed to have behaved in unacceptable ways:

De bien ya hace mal al pueblo ese aparato de sonido ... Dedicán canciones de burla. Sí. A mí hace ocho días en la sección primera. No me nombraron, no me nombraron, pero me di cuenta. ... Hay un chingo por todas partes. ... Una muchacha que ya tiene su niño y no casó le tocan la denuncia, le tocan esa que tiene un niño que llora y que llora el niño de a veras por la trompeta.

[That sound system is really doing damage to the village. They dedicate songs to mock people. Really. It happened to me eight days ago in the first district. They didn't name me, they didn't name me, but I knew it was for me. There's a shitload of them around the place. A girl who had a child outside marriage was denounced; they played her a song where a baby cries – the sound of the trumpet really sounds like a child crying.]

García also explains a curious scene towards the beginning of the film where the camera pans over lyric sheets containing two *corridos*, wherein the villagers list the abuses the priest has condoned, as well as his constant demands for money. These sheets contain the lyrics of *corridos* that, as García explains, chronicle the priest's meddling in politics to the point where he was implicated in the murder of the son of a political opponent. This incident is related in the first of the *corridos*, entitled 'Historia de un cura impio' [The Story of an Impious Priest], which describes an attack on an opposition party candidate by the priest and his followers. This event culminates in the death of a young boy, as the priest and his housekeeper Ofelia, despite having successfully attacked his opponents, want bloodshed:

El Cura y Ofelia no quedaron conformes  
Dijeron: 'a lapidar la casa y tienda  
Matar a los dueños como es costumbre  
Y saquear y quemar toda esa vivienda...'

Un niño estando en su cuna,  
La arrojaron una piedra que pereció sin culpa alguna,  
Y todo ésto queda en historia negra.  
[The priest and Ophelia were still not satisfied  
They said, 'Let's attack the house and shop with stones  
Kill the owners as is customary  
And loot and burn the entire dwelling...'  
A child who was in his cot  
Was hit by a stone despite being totally innocent  
And this became part of the dark story.]

The *corridos* in *Canoa* act as a vehicle for dissent and a call for justice by exposing the ignominious exploits of a villainous priest who rules over the village of San Miguel Canoa with an iron hand. Cazals' use of the ballad form transposes its tradition of communicating anti-establishment messages to the Mexico of the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>19</sup> He both questions and redefines nationalism by using this musical expression of Mexican identity to counter the oppressive political power represented by a tyrannical priest. Indeed, Hazel Marsh's appraisal of the *corridos* produced by Judith Reyes about 1968, which were largely overshadowed by rock music at the time, could well apply to the *corridos* in the film: 'Reyes created songs that functioned as oral 'eye-witness' accounts of grassroots mobilisation and as critiques of political repression about which official sources and media outlets frequently remained silent.'<sup>20</sup> To return to Herrera-Sobek's theory of the *corrido*, she asserts that as well as being commemorative or protest ballads, they can also function as hyper-texts, as they:

[...] provide the story line with additional information, thus expanding the parameters of the scene and the message it is conveying. In this manner, corridos and popular songs aid the plot action in moving forward and backward, and simultaneously expand a particular scene by musically and verbally adding to the visual effects and the dramatic import.<sup>21</sup>

This *corrido*, which amplifies the scope of the narrative by recounting events in another village, provides a disturbing context for the situation of the villagers and a menacing portent of how the events depicted will unfold. The priest and his housekeeper have already managed to control and subdue the community, with the exception of a few marginalized rebels like García. The fact that their previous battle also saw them in a position of dominance

19 Ed Morales, *Ritmo Latino: La música latina desde la bossa nova hasta la salsa* (Barcelona: Ediciones Robinbook, 2006), p. 241.

20 Hazel Marsh, "'Writing Our History in Songs": Judith Reyes, Popular Music and the Student Movement of 1968', in Brewster (ed.), 2010, pp. 144–159, p. 144.

21 Herrera-Sobek, 1998, pp. 228–9.

but they nonetheless insisted on eliminating their enemies foreshadows the violence to come. The second *corrido*, 'Nefasta división y odios' [Disastrous Divisions and Hatred] outlines the priest's political manoeuvres and greed:

Voy a contarles un negro corrido,  
De cinco años de negras estafas,  
Que el pueblo de Canoa ha sufrido,  
Por un puñado de chaclaes y cafes.  
[I'm going to recite a dark *corrido*,  
Of five years of terrible fraud,  
That the village of Canoa has endured,  
Because of a group of jackals and morons.]

Here, the *corrido* hypertext underlines the extent of the priest's control over the villagers through his financial machinations. García circulates the *corridos* amongst the increasingly worried youths. They begin to understand the extent of the corruption and perversion of power in the village that will ultimately lead to their lynching and the death of García. It is not incidental that we never hear these *corridos*. They are first introduced through the lyric sheets that the camera pans over quickly, almost furtively, and they are next presented by García when he shows them to the youths in his home. This is, of course, a reflection of the fact that although they represent an element of protest in the community and indeed a reaction to the overwhelming presence of the loudspeakers, they cannot overcome the religious and political power represented by the priest. This unconventional use of a traditional musical form plays a key role in Cazals' experimental reenactment of the tragedy.

### ***Canoa* and Mexican Cinema**

Despite the director's insistence that the film is based on events that happened, he does not present them in a linear manner. The story is told in flashback, while the device of the documentary's omnipresent narrator is used to inform the audience about the extraordinary power that the priest holds over the village. Thus, Cazals does not take the usual step of parodying a conventional style but in fact subverts it from within, by having the omniscient documentary narrator provide the usual facts and figures about the community and then launch into a subjective and disapproving account of the priest's activities:

Como en todos los pueblos hay una iglesia. También aquí el parroco ocupa un lugar importante en la organización social. Y su influencia es determinante en la vida del pueblo. Pero quizás sea difícil encontrar a un parroco

tan particular. Llegó con su cocinera o ama de llaves a San Miguel de Canoa hace ocho años procedente de Aguatenpan en Puebla, de donde salió, dicen sus enemigos, ante las protestas de los habitantes por lo que llamaron sus abusos.

[As in every village there is a church. Here too the parish priest has an important place in local society. And his influence is decisive in the life of the village. But it would probably be difficult to find such a strange priest. He arrived in San Miguel de Canoa with his cook or housekeeper eight years ago from Aguatenpan in Puebla, which he left, according to his enemies, because of the protests of the inhabitants about what they term his abuses.]

Cazals intertwines this seemingly objective documentary with commentaries from the village narrator we have previously mentioned, who repeatedly says that the priest 'es muy cabrón' [he's a real bastard]. Black-and-white footage of the army removing bodies after the lynching and a later interview with the priest also contribute to the documentary feel of the film.

Thanks at least in part to this innovative style, *Canoa* remains a seminal film in Mexican cinema history, which, although it has also been criticized, has been praised for its testimonial value and its formal experimentation.<sup>22</sup> David R. Maciel notes approvingly that the film is an example of state-funded productions that emerged from the shadow of the Tlatelolco massacre and that dealt with 'contemporary as well as historical critical issues.'<sup>23</sup> Carl J. Mora is unstinting in his praise for the film, seeing it as evidence that the new government under Luis Echeverría Álvarez was determined to confront a difficult past: 'Of all the "new" Mexican cinema, *Canoa* is perhaps the finest example of the government's commitment – for whatever political agenda – to greater freedom for artists and intellectuals.'<sup>24</sup> Carlos M. Vilas, meanwhile, notes that without the film, the events of San Miguel Canoa would have been ignored and overshadowed by the massacre in Tlatelolco.<sup>25</sup>

To return to the reasons for the prominent inclusion of the *corrido* in *Canoa*, when a rock music soundtrack would perhaps have been a more obvious choice for a film about a vicious attack on Mexico's youth, which is

22 For a discussion of what some critics see as a problematic celebration of the army in the film, see, for example, Jorge Ayala Blanco, *La eficacia del cine mexicano: Entre lo viejo y lo nuevo* (Mexico: Editorial Grijalbo, 1994), p. 18 and *La condición del cine mexicano* (Mexico: Editorial Posada, 1986), p. 303, as well as Charles Ramírez Berg, *Cinema of Solitude: A Critical Study of Mexican Film, 1967–1983* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), pp. 188–9.

23 David R. Maciel, in Hershfield and Maciel (eds), *Mexico's Cinema: A Century of Films and Filmmakers* (Oxford: SR Books, 2005), p. 203.

24 Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896–2004* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2005), p. 130.

25 Carlos M. Vilas, 'Injusticia por mano propia: Linchamiento en el México contemporáneo,' *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, Vol. 63, No.1 (Jan.–Mar. 2001), pp. 131–60, p. 152.

undeniably, and necessarily, sympathetic to the youthful victims, a key point would seem to be the ballad form's relation to the juxtaposition between modernity and underdevelopment in the film. Modernity, represented by the city and the university, clashes violently with the forces of a rigid, repressive tradition. The events in the film are doubtlessly intended to be a microcosm of the PRI's oppressive government of Mexico, as Cazals signals:

Es que retrata precisamente el estado medieval de este país, sobre todo en el '68, dominado por la presencia de un presidente de la república torvo, aterrado, y al mismo tiempo colérico y peligroso.

[It portrays precisely the medieval conditions in this country, especially in '68, because the republic was ruled by a president who was severe, terrified and at the same time tempestuous and dangerous.]<sup>26</sup>

Cazals seeks to capture this collision between different worlds coexisting within Mexico in the 1960s and 1970s. He uses a traditional form to comment on contemporary issues but also highlights the collision between competing ideas about national identity. His use of the *corrido* recalls George Lucas's decision to use a very traditional orchestral soundtrack in *Star Wars*, a futuristic film that employed cutting-edge special effects, as Peter Larsen comments:

One would perhaps have expected Lucas to use similar experimental, advanced music for *Star Wars*, but instead he chose to turn back the musical clock. Which in a way makes sense, when one sees the film [...] [i]t is both future and past at one and the same time.<sup>27</sup>

In a similar vein, Cazals links the *corrido* to the University urbanites in his film in order to critique the inability of the fossilised, oppressive nationalism embodied by the PRI to tolerate difference and dissent. Paradoxically, given that the musical accompaniment to the *corridos* is never heard, the *corrido* also functions as a silent leitmotif. Its repeated inclusion reminds the viewer that *Canoa* is a film that is as much about the silence enforced by political repression as it is about the lynchings in the town, a silence that extends to the attempted control and censorship of music. The voices of dissent in the film cannot be eliminated, however, and if the music is not heard, the lyrics remain as a testament of resistance to tyranny.

The use of the *corrido* also re-imagines this expression of nationalistic fervour as a new form of nationalism that allows for dissent and protest. This plasticity of the *corrido* and its enduring power as a social protest is reflected in the contemporary evolution of the *narcocorrido*, ballads about drug culture

26 Leonardo García Tsao, *Felipe Cazals habla de su cine* (Jalisco: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1994), p. 138.

27 Peter Larsen, *Film Music* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).

that the government has attempted to ban.<sup>28</sup> The extremely successful band Los Tigres del Norte has defended their production of *narcocorridos*, and lead singer Jorge Hernández has asserted the group's role as social commentators thus: 'Mientras no sigan dando la información a la sociedad, nosotros tendremos el derecho de cantarle a la gente usando el lenguaje correcto y respetando las leyes que debemos respetar' [As long as they continue to refuse to give information to the people, we will have the right to sing to them using the correct language and respecting the laws that we should respect].<sup>29</sup> He suggests that the government's attempt to ban *narcocorridos* is a form of censorship that seeks to silence people who reveal uncomfortable truths about Mexico's drug culture, just as *Canoa* exposes the reality behind events that a repressive government attempted to erase from official history. By deftly integrating the traditional form of the *corrido* into his aural protest, Cazals wrests the power of national culture from the grip of a totalitarian government and redefines Mexican national identity. His experimental use of music also pushes traditional boundaries in Mexican film, making music much more than a reassuring soundtrack so that it works on a number of levels and signals new possibilities for the soundtrack in a nascent auteurist Mexican cinema.

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28 Mark Cameron Edberg, *El Traficante: Narcocorridos and The Construction of a Cultural Persona on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), p. 104.

29 'Los Tigres Del Norte Desafían Prohibición De Corridos Del Narco En Sinaloa' [http://www.noroeste.com.mx/publicaciones.php?id=688871&id\\_seccion=83&fecha=2011-05-20](http://www.noroeste.com.mx/publicaciones.php?id=688871&id_seccion=83&fecha=2011-05-20), accessed 7 June 2011.

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