

# Hollywood views Mexican immigration

David R. Maciel\*

**M**exican undocumented immigration to the United States is the single most complex and difficult issue currently facing these two countries. The controversy concerning Mexican undocumented workers in the United States includes economic, political, legal, social, cultural and even

moral considerations. Mexican immigration has, in fact, become one of the salient political issues of the 1990s. The immigration question has intensified in the political discourse of both countries<sup>1</sup> and, as such, has received considerable attention from the academic community, policy makers, and the media.

\* Professor in the Department of History at the University of New Mexico.

<sup>1</sup> "Inside Proposition 187," *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1994, p. A-28.



Charles Bronson in *Borderline* (1980).

Associated Film Distribution

Although there is a growing and important body of scholarly studies on the subject, the media have been by far the most influential force in setting the agenda for the political debate and molding public opinion in the United States and Mexico. Printed and visual media coverage and representation of the issues surrounding Mexican immigration have been greatly responsible for the current rise in xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> In Mexico, media portrayals of the immigrant experience have contributed to the move for political action on the subject. Among the visual media, cinema is the one that, because of its consistency and popularity, has been singularly influential in addressing the theme of Mexican immigration.

Mexican immigration to the U.S. has been a dominant cinematic theme on both sides of the border from the early decades of the century up to the present. Just as the process of Mexican immigration to the United States encompasses the entire 20th century, representations and images of Mexican immigrants on the silver screen followed an equally long path.

While the majority of immigration films do not necessarily provide narrative elements that contribute to a more insightful understanding of the complexity of Mexican immigration, films on immigration do reveal national idiosyncracies. As such they are an important measure of national attitudes on Mexican immigration to the U.S.; as a noted scholar has demonstrated, "recurrent screen motifs reflect the needs and fears of the entire nation."<sup>3</sup>

Hollywood immigration films are particularly significant because of their origin, ideological constructs and popularity. The American film industry, the largest and most powerful in the world, produces and distributes more films than any other national cinema.<sup>4</sup> Hollywood features are the most widely viewed motion pictures in almost every country in the world. Because of this mass consumption, American cinema is highly influential. The Hollywood style has set the standard for popular films both thematically and artistically.

The conceptual mode of analysis applied in this discussion of immigration films is the study of "genre," defined as a "category, kind or form of film distinguished by subject matter, theme or techniques."<sup>5</sup> Genre films, then,

are features that are imitations of previous ones. Such films follow a similar discursive pattern or formula. Basic common ingredients found in genre narratives include: setting, plot (conflict and resolution), recurring images and interchangeable cinematic techniques.<sup>6</sup> Foremost is the fact that genre films "are commercial films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations."<sup>7</sup> This also has to do with the relationship between groups of films, as well as with the societies in which they are produced and the cultures in which they are shown. Genre films are almost exclusively popular movies, as compared to art films, which generally serve specific tastes or viewing publics. In the words of a recent critic, genre films are "pure emotional articulation, fictional constructs of the imagination, growing essentially out of group interests and values."<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, recent genre film studies stress the importance of acknowledging and understanding the milieu and background of the work through its relationship with history, popular culture and politics.<sup>9</sup>

On the theme of immigration, Hollywood has followed a distinct path. Unlike other cinematic themes that have reflected creativity and diversity in American cinema, in immigration genre films the Hollywood style has opted for a static and rather conventional format.

On the whole, Hollywood genre films on immigration share certain characteristics: 1) they cover a lengthy historical period of production, from the silent period to the present; 2) they follow one basic discursive formula, a modified version of the Western where the hero struggles valiantly against the gangs involved in trafficking undocumented workers, always defeating them at the end; 3) although these films are supposed to deal with the theme of Mexican immigration, in reality the immigrant experience is always vague, the least developed aspect of the film; 4) Hollywood immigration movies are, without an exception, vehicles for a traditional action story for the principal star, be it Tom Mix or Jack Nicholson; 5) they have a clear policy message—the importance of the control of our southern border and the need to institutionalize a campaign against the smuggling of undocumented workers to the U.S.; 6) the films reveal U.S. preoccupations and concerns with the immigration issue on U.S. soil; 7) the roots and causes of Mexican immigration and the substantial contributions of Mexican immigrants to the U.S. economy are never addressed in much detail; 8) these movies do not offer any alternative solutions to Mexican undocumented immigration;

<sup>2</sup> The excellent article by Juan Gómez-Quiñones, "Una interpretación de las relaciones entre la comunidad chicana y México" in David R. Maciel, ed., *El México olvidado: historia del pueblo chicano* (Ciudad Juárez), forthcoming, covers this theme well.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History* (New York, 1985), p. 160.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Mast's *A Short History of the Movies* (Indianapolis, 1976) discusses the rise and the influence of Hollywood on world cinema in an excellent manner.

<sup>5</sup> Harry M. Geduld and Ronald Gottesman, *An Illustrated Glossary of Film Terms* (New York, 1973), p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre Reader* (Austin, 1986), p. XI.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, *Film History* addresses this theme in an exceptional manner.

<sup>9</sup> See the recent study by David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors* (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 39-69.

9) almost without exception, women are totally secondary as characters —there is, then, a serious lack of important or interesting gender representation; 10) for the most part, they can be classified as “B” category movies (that is, low-budget and of secondary billing); 11) Hollywood films are the least developed in narration or character development of the three cinematic perspectives on immigration.

The Hollywood style on immigration provides an important glance at the blend of art, politics and commercialism prevailing in the United States. Certain immigration films have proved moderately successful at the box office. More critically, they have reinforced widely held beliefs, reflecting the political and ideological ambiance at the time of production in America. What follows is a chronological assessment of Hollywood immigration genre films from their origins to the present.

*Her Last Resort* (1912) is perhaps the first American film on the theme of Mexican immigration. This unusually sympathetic portrayal of the plight of Mexican workers has the protagonist crossing the Rio Grande in search of employment, after exhausting all possibilities in Mexico. Yet, after he enters the U.S., all he encounters is discrimination and exploitation.

The film’s narrative develops as follows. On his way back to Mexico, after reaching the breaking point with constant oppression, the protagonist heroically saves the life of a rancher who has suffered a serious accident. The rancher, ironically, had earlier denied him employment and run him off his land. Asking for no compensation for his noble deed, the protagonist continues his trip home. Upon his arrival, he discovers that his wife had stolen a cow from an American rancher to get milk for their infant son. A posse arrives and, in spite of the wife’s confession, is about to hang the Mexican man. In the nick of time, the rancher he rescued arrives and saves the day. To fully repay his debt, the rancher provides stock as gifts and a permanent job to the protagonist. The film, thus, closes on a happy note.<sup>10</sup>

*The Mexican* (1914) is the single other silent immigration film. Legendary Western star Tom Mix acts in and directs this melodrama that traces the story of a Mexican worker who crosses the border seeking employment to feed his starving family. While working under oppressive conditions, he is badly abused and even physically harmed. The Mexican seeks revenge upon his aggressors by burning their fields and ranch houses. In the middle of doing this, he comes upon the daughter of one of the ranch owners who had done him harm earlier. The young woman had been bitten by a rattlesnake and was gravely ill. The Mexican, putting aside his vendetta, acts quickly and is able to save the victim’s life. In appreciation

for his daughter’s life, the rancher rewards the Mexican worker by permanently providing for him and his family in Mexico. Another happy ending with redemption and justice emerging in the conclusion.<sup>11</sup>

By this time, Mexican-origin characters had become another type of institution in early American cinema —the convenient villain.<sup>12</sup> From the earliest productions on, Mexican archetype characters appeared consistently in films, always portrayed as villains, cowards and buffoons.<sup>13</sup>

Contrary to this tradition, these two initial U.S. immigration genre films represent Mexican immigrant characters in a positive light. Nonetheless, they do so in a condescending way, leaving little doubt as to the implied superiority of the Anglo who has to “save” the Mexican from his fate.

In addition, *Her Last Resort* and *The Mexican* reflect the immigration issues of the times transposed with the silent cinematic discourse of the period. By those years, Mexican immigration to the Southwest had increased by the thousands.<sup>14</sup> These immigrants had become an essential part of the economic and social life of the U.S. border states and of cities such as Los Angeles, San Antonio, San Diego, Tucson and Chicago.<sup>15</sup> Although Mexican immigrants were instrumental in helping build the U.S. Southwest into an economic bonanza, their numbers and origin caused concerns about the possible social and cultural impact this most recent and extensive immigrant group would have on American institutions. In this environment, scholars, educators and social workers were sent to study “the Mexican problem” in the Southwest.<sup>16</sup>

Years later, U.S. filmmakers would once again merge a political and social concern with artistic creation, producing a number of films whose main themes derived from aspects related to the Bracero Program (1942-1964).

*Border Patrol* (1943) builds on the immigration genre in this period. The ever-popular Western genre and one of its great early stars, “Hopalong Cassidy” William Boyd, combine this narrative format with the theme of illegal Mexican immigration. The narrative of this film has the Texas Rangers —Hopalong Cassidy being one— in a struggle to the death against a vicious gang which is importing illegal Mexican aliens to the U.S. and farming them out to the highest bidder.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> Blaine B. Lamb, “The Convenient Villain: The Early Cinema Views the Mexican-American,” *Journal of the West* XIV:4 (October 1975), pp. 75-81.

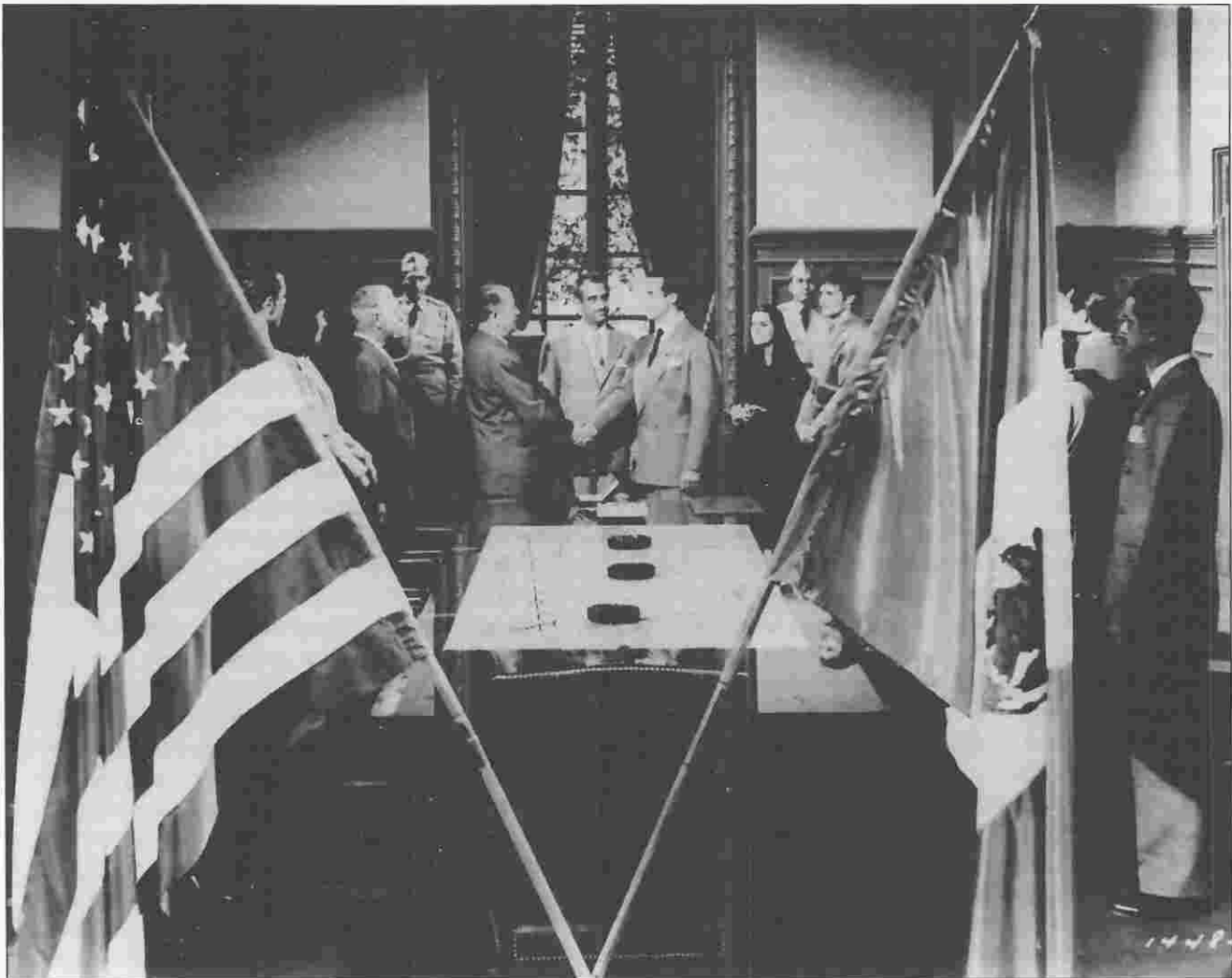
<sup>13</sup> Arthur G. Pettit, *Images of the Mexican-American in Fiction and Film* (College Station, 1980), pp. 111-131.

<sup>14</sup> Gutiérrez, *op.cit.*, pp. 39-69.

<sup>15</sup> Ricardo Romo and Raymond Paredes, eds., *New Directions in Chicano Scholarship* (San Diego, 1977), pp. 183-201.

<sup>16</sup> Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles* (Austin, 1983), pp. 89-112.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Charles Richard, *The Hispanic Image on the Silver Screen* (New York, 1992), pp. 67-68.



A scene from *Border Incident* (1949).

As in a typical Western narration, in *Border Patrol* the heroes face grave adversity. They are initially captured by the villains, tried in a “kangaroo court” and sentenced to death. As expected, just before the executions, the pendulum shifts. They manage to escape, turn the tide against the villains, and eliminate the gang in a climatic and predictable shoot-out, thus saving the poor *indocumentados*. Once again, in this movie the “valiant” Texas Rangers defeat the evil perpetrators.<sup>17</sup> What an irony is presented here! The Texas Rangers coming to the aid of Mexicans flies in the face of documented historical reality. For the Mexican-origin population of Texas, the Texas Rangers were always “*los diablos texanos*” (the Texan devils).

*Border Incident* (1949) is chronologically the next production on the theme of immigration. This social-problem movie is important for various reasons: it was

produced by a paramount Hollywood studio, MGM, and directed by the respected Arthur Mann; the film was generally devoid of the negative stereotyping of Mexicans evident in the Hollywood cinema of previous decades; the plot showed a certain knowledge and sensitivity toward Mexican immigration to the U.S.; and, for once, Mexican-origin actors were cast in feature roles.

The story centers on the plight of Mexican migrant workers who, unable to secure work permits under the Bracero Program, cross the border illegally to toil in the agricultural fields of California’s Imperial Valley. The laborers are constantly exploited by a brutal gang. The workers are frequently robbed, and some are even murdered by this gang on their return trip home. United States and Mexican immigration officers, played effectively by George Murphy and Ricardo Montalbán, are assigned to uncover and apprehend all those involved in the murders on both sides of the border. Montalbán is able successfully to

<sup>17</sup> William K. Everson, *The Hollywood Western*, (New York, 1969), pp. 166-67.

infiltrate the gang, disguised as a would-be worker, while Murphy poses as a fugitive carrying stolen bracero permits. As the story unfolds, the sufferings of undocumented workers are vividly detailed in hard-hitting scenes.

When the workings of the ring are uncovered, an intricate capture is planned. But before the plan can be put into effect, Murphy's true identity is discovered by the villains. He is then tortured and brutally murdered. The same fate awaits Montalbán and his coworkers, but they put up a courageous struggle until the authorities arrive and capture all of the gang members.

The film is effective, well-made and one of the best Hollywood immigration films ever. Ricardo Montalbán and George Murphy deliver solid performances. They are supported by an equally good secondary cast. The filming was done at an actual border location in the San Joaquin Valley. The director, Arthur Mann, develops the narrative convincingly in a semi-documentary format. Suspense and interest are maintained until the final scene. Clearly, *Border Incident*, because of its political message and attention to developing its theme and characters, can be classified as one of the very best of the social-problem films of the decade and probably the single most accomplished Hollywood immigration feature.<sup>18</sup>

In *Illegal Entry* (1949), once again, the narrative revolves around a well-organized band of smugglers who are illegally transporting Mexican undocumented workers to various areas of the U.S. A crack government agent, played by Howard Duff, is given the task of bringing to justice these criminals involved in the trafficking of human contraband.

While the theme of Mexican immigration is supposed to be central to the film, as has so often been the case in this genre's features, the Mexican workers are the least represented or visible characters in the film. Their plight is only marginally alluded to and they remain invisible topics of the narrative. After the usual escapades and twists in fortune, the movie closes with the expected conclusion: the hero, with the help of the central female character, is able to defeat and capture the entire smuggling gang. Justice prevails once again and one more illicit cartel is eliminated.<sup>19</sup>

*Borderline* (1980) was the first major contemporary Hollywood genre film on the theme of Mexican immigration. It stars the international action-film favorite Charles Bronson as the hero. He plays a compassionate and honest cop, chief of a Border Patrol office near the San Diego-Tijuana border. The protagonist does his job well, although he does not particularly like what he sees or has to do—that is, by

his own account, capture and deport hard-working individuals who just seek a decent job.

The plot is an update of the typical "hero of the West in search of the killer of a colleague and close friend" story. When a truck loaded with undocumented workers is routinely stopped by a veteran Border Patrol officer, instead of surrendering the head of the smuggling gang shoots the officer and a young Mexican witness in cold blood. The narrative revolves around a cat-and-mouse game between Bronson and the killer. Before the final scene and duel on the border, in which the outcome is as predictable as in any Western, other characters are introduced in caricature form: the smuggling ring (the real villains), the defenseless victims (the undocumented workers), the good guys (the Border Patrol), and the leader of the gang—a deranged killer and Vietnam veteran who uses all his military training for profit and evil.

The intentions of *Borderline* are essentially good; the film shows a genuine sympathy for the exploitation of Mexican undocumented workers. Yet the lukewarm social message is entirely lost. The dilemma of Mexican immigration is never really addressed in any fashion. The ambiguity is reflected throughout by the dialogue. "How can you bust people for trying to better themselves?", Bronson asks one of his men. However, at the close of the film, statistics appear stating that over a million undocumented Mexican workers have been apprehended and deported, and that more than that number escaped detection and apprehension and are currently residing and working in the U.S.

*Borderline*, as could be expected, was filmed with the full cooperation of the U.S. Border Patrol. Many agents participated as extras and technical advisors. Its implicit message is that the Immigration and Naturalization Service needs more resources and stricter immigration legislation to carry out its mission of controlling our borders, particularly the border with Mexico.<sup>20</sup>

The characters in the movie are all secondary to the hero and the villain. The undocumented workers, the supposed subject matter of the story, are—as in all these films—the least developed aspect of the film. They have no faces, no names, no personal histories, motivations or feelings. The reasons for their ordeal or circumstances are never revealed or addressed. There are countless stories that *Borderline* could have told or developed, but unfortunately the filmmakers were content to use a contemporary issue to exploit the star quality of Charles Bronson, hoping the combination could pay off commercially. To a certain degree it did.

Similar to *Borderline* in certain aspects, and quite different in others, is *The Border* (1982), directed by Tony Richardson and starring Jack Nicholson. This movie is Hollywood's most recent contribution to the immigration

<sup>18</sup> David R. Maciel, "Braceros, Mojados, and Alambristas: Mexican Immigration to the U.S. in the Contemporary Cinema," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* VIII: 4, 1986, pp. 374-375.

<sup>19</sup> *Variety*, March 12, 1949, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> *The San Diego Union*, October 22, 1980, B-7.

genre. Like other films, *The Border* is nothing more than a vehicle for the acting talent and star power of Jack Nicholson. The narrative and the supporting actors are all secondary to a typical Nicholson characterization of contemporary man—at odds with the values and corruption of the system—who has to make a choice between good and evil, accommodation or resistance, complacency or turmoil.

The narrative develops around Nicholson, a Border Patrol agent, who is assigned to El Paso where he joins a former best friend, also a Border Patrol officer. After several raids and apprehensions, Nicholson learns that many border agents, including his friend and the chief, are in business with the contractors and “coyotes” to smuggle certain *indocumentados* into the United States. Nicholson ultimately rebels against his corrupt colleagues when killing is involved. Symbolically, he states that this is the line (the border) he will not cross.

In the course of the story, he meets Maria (Elpidia Carrillo) and her brother, both undocumented Mexicans who face constant ill-treatment and oppression. When Maria’s baby is abducted and her brother is shot by the coyotes and dies, Nicholson lashes out in revenge. In disbelief of her newly acquired champion, Maria asks him why he helped her. The Nicholson character just answers: “I guess I got to feel good about something I do.” The predictable climatic gunfight at the border ensues and the equally expected triumph by the hero occurs. The film closes with Nicholson crossing to Mexico with the rescued baby to join the virtuous Maria and live in bliss.

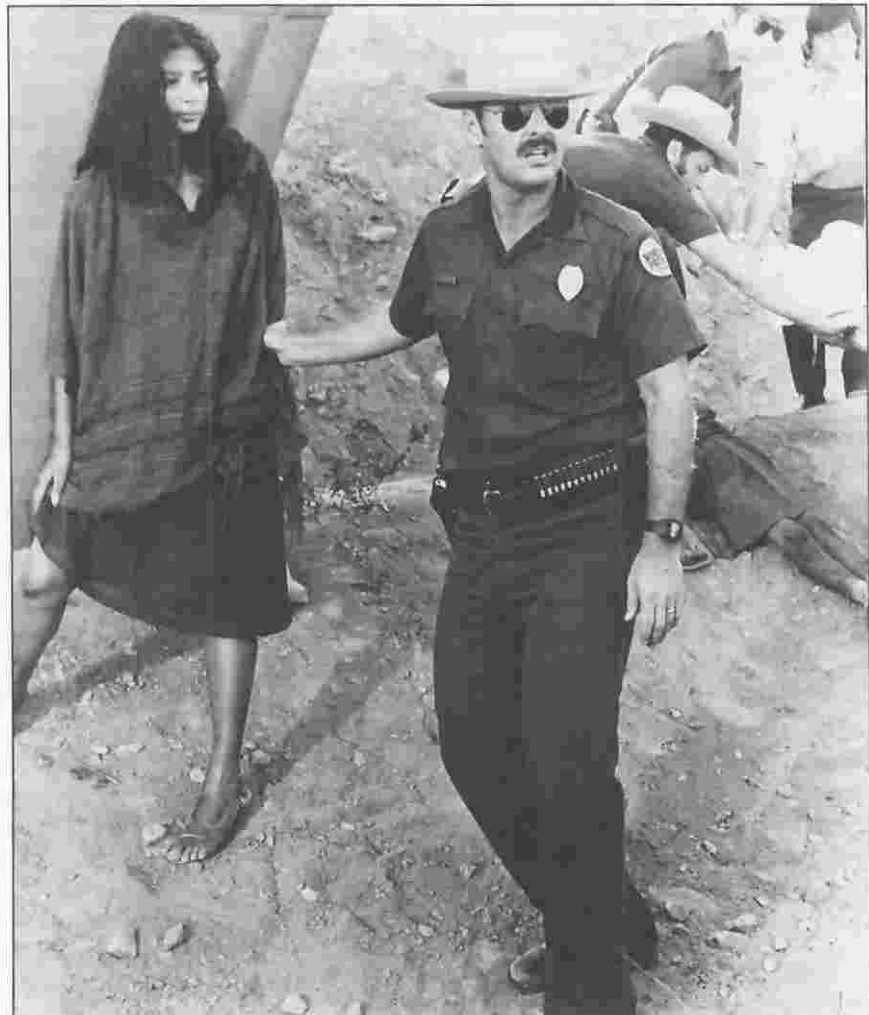
*The Border*, despite fine performances by Jack Nicholson and the supporting cast and solid directing, is highly routine and stereotypical. The villains are all totally bad, corrupt, with only a single motivation: money. The women are either pure, kind, innocent and helpless like Maria, or sexual ornaments interested only in immediate gratification, like the Nicholson character’s wife. The undocumented workers in *Borderline* are objects as well and not real characters. Nowhere in the film do we learn anything about the Mexicans—not even about Maria or her brother. Their plight is never addressed. Whatever social message was intended is obscured again by the superficiality of the characters and the plot. In spite of the fact that the performances and direction of *The*

*Border* exceed those in *Borderline*, its faults and overall purposes are similar. However, in *The Border* at least the Border Patrol is represented as morally corrupt thugs and violators of civil rights rather than the guardians of our sovereignty.<sup>21</sup>

After *The Border*, Hollywood has not premiered any major film addressing the immigrant experience. Yet given current national concern on immigration, it is likely only a matter of time before American cinema will return to the theme of immigration. Based on previous trends, the films to come will be more of the same.

The celluloid immigrant has appeared on the silver screen throughout decades of time and dozens of features. For the most part, though, film representation of Mexican immigration, with the exception of a few select features, does not do justice to the complexity, humanity, triumphs and tragedies of the journey “North from Mexico.” ❧

<sup>21</sup> *Motion Pictures*, February 13, 1982, A-18.



Jack Nicholson and Elpidia Carrillo in *The Border* (1982).