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Two movies with outdated stereotypes: 'Machete' and 'The Town'

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NCR Today

Robert Rodriguez's strangely watchable Mexploitation grindhouse film 'Machete' takes place in an unnamed Texican city. A former undercover cop with the Mexican federal government, Machete (Danny Trejo) -- whose weapon of choice is a machete -- is in Texas on the run from drug lord Torres (Steven Segal with a Spanish accent) who is in league with well-placed U.S. officials.

Machete connects with 'the network' of Latinos and those of other ethnicities that care for the undocumented in need. They join Machete against a militia headed by Lt. Stillman (Don Johnson), with the collusion of Senator McLaughlin (Robert di Niro), that wants to get undocumented immigrants out of the U.S.

It's complicated. But Machete's brother (Cheech Marin) is a priest. Among other unpriestly behaviors, the padre breaks the seal of confession. He's crucified by Torres' men.

The senator's aide, Booth (Jeff Fahey), tries to manipulate all sides and his wife and daughter, April (Lindsay Lohan), are kidnapped. In the end April dresses like a nun and blows away the opposition with a high-powered weapon.

Hitchcock would not have allowed his characters to break the seal of confession; Rodriguez mows it down with a semi-automatic. Everyone breaks rules in Rodriguez's universe, but his extreme film makes a point about the breakdown of law -- and the moral, ecclesial, and civil consequences on society. The Wild West is back, and what are you going to do about it?

Lindsay doesn't make a good nun and Rodriguez's attempts to exploit Catholicism are overdone and

unsympathetic. It's hard to say if the director, who also worked on the 'Spy Kids' franchise, is going for shock or if he is making a statement. I would say both. Exploitation and grindhouse genre films do this.

The film, however, makes statements about the irony of the fence being constructed along the U.S.-Mexican border.

All the efforts to keep undocumented people out are letting drugs through in unprecedented quantities. The gentle, funny 2004 film 'A Day without A Mexican'-- in which Californians wake up one day to find out that all the Mexican workers in entry level or under-the-table pay who keep everything going have disappeared -- makes a statement, too. It's just not so in-your-face.

'Machete' bleeds.

It is also an interesting film to consider in light of The "DREAM Act" being proposed in Congress.

Ben Affleck's 'The Town' (based on Chuck Hogan's novel *Prince of Thieves*) won the box office this weekend. This time four Charlestown, Mass. Irish-American thugs -- who have inherited the family business so to speak -- rob banks. In their big robbery they dress as nuns and wield automatic weapons as they rob, kill, and maim their way through Boston.

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I shall make my whine one last time: Why do they have to dress as nuns? Most women religious don't even wear the garb these costume designers dream up. For that matter, even when nuns are represented sympathetically, you can tell the crew didn't opt for a consultant. I can spot the cardboard used in the habit every time.

And while I am whining, what's the deal with making films about a Boston that no longer exists?

About ten years ago another sister and I taught media literacy to students at Charlestown High School in Boston. Maybe four kids out of every thirty were of Irish, Italian, or other European descent. The kids were African-American, Haitian, Hispanic and Asian. Young people in Boston and nearby environs don't even have those accents any more; you have to go beyond the I-495 to Worcester and beyond to find it.

'The Town' does allude to the changing face of Charlestown and Southie (South Boston), but I think filmmakers need new stories -- and new costumes. It's not funny anymore -- if it ever was.

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