

# The Tourism of Titillation in Tijuana and Niagara Falls: Cross-Border Tourism and Hollywood Films between 1896 and 1960

Dominique Brégent-Heald

Volume 17, numéro 1, 2006

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016107ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/016107ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

## Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

## ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

## Citer cet article

Brégent-Heald, D. (2006). The Tourism of Titillation in Tijuana and Niagara Falls: Cross-Border Tourism and Hollywood Films between 1896 and 1960. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 17(1), 179–203. <https://doi.org/10.7202/016107ar>

## Résumé de l'article

Dans l'imaginaire populaire, la ville de Tijuana au Mexique est célèbre pour ses lois libérales sur la prostitution, le jeu et les stupéfiants. À l'opposé, Niagara Falls au Canada n'offre apparemment à ses visiteurs que des divertissements sains. Pourtant, cette généralisation hâtive occulte les parallèles historiques qui existent entre ces villes iconiques frontalières. Dans les films hollywoodiens, Tijuana et Niagara Falls sont présentées comme des régions limitrophes de dispute et d'affrontement, et comme des endroits permissifs caractérisés par le sexe, le tourisme et la consommation. Cet essai explore les arènes culturelles entrelacées du film et du tourisme par le biais de l'analyse des représentations cinématographiques de Tijuana et de Niagara Falls comme destinations touristiques transfrontalières. En examinant comment les représentations cinématographiques de ces régions frontalières urbanisées ont changé au fil du temps, je démontre comment Hollywood, à titre d'industrie culturelle hégémonique, a réagi à l'évolution des relations entre les États-Unis et ses voisins du Nord et du Sud. Cette analyse propose une approche hémisphérique et comparative de l'étude des frontières urbaines, du tourisme et de la culture visuelle.

# The Tourism of Titillation in Tijuana and Niagara Falls: Cross-Border Tourism and Hollywood Films between 1896 and 1960

DOMINIQUE BRÉGENT-HEALD

## *Abstract*

*In the popular imaginary, Tijuana, Mexico is notorious for its liberal laws concerning prostitution, gambling, and narcotics. Conversely, Niagara Falls, Canada apparently offers visitors only wholesome attractions. Yet this sweeping generalization belies the historic parallels that exist between these iconic border towns. In Hollywood films, both Tijuana and Niagara Falls figure as liminal locations of crossing and collision, as well as permissive zones defined by sex, tourism, and consumption. This essay explores the intertwined cultural arenas of film and tourism by analyzing cinematic representations of Tijuana and Niagara Falls as cross-border tourist destinations. By examining how cinematic representations of these urbanized border regions have changed over time, I demonstrate how Hollywood, as a hegemonic culture industry, responded to the United States' evolving relationships with its northern and southern neighbors. This study offers a hemispheric and comparative approach to the study of urban borders, tourism, and visual culture.*

## *Résumé*

*Dans l'imaginaire populaire, la ville de Tijuana au Mexique est célèbre pour ses lois libérales sur la prostitution, le jeu et les stupéfiants. À l'opposé, Niagara Falls au Canada n'offre apparemment à ses visiteurs que des divertissements sains. Pourtant, cette généralisation hâtive occulte les parallèles historiques qui existent entre ces villes iconiques frontalières. Dans les films hollywoodiens, Tijuana et Niagara Falls sont présentées comme des régions limitrophes de dispute et d'affrontement, et comme des endroits permissifs caractérisés par le sexe, le tourisme et la consommation. Cet essai explore les arènes culturelles entrelacées du film et du tourisme par le biais de l'analyse des représentations cinématographiques de Tijuana et de Niagara Falls comme destinations touristiques transfrontalières. En examinant comment les représentations cinématographiques de ces régions frontalières urbanisées ont changé au fil du temps, je démontre comment Hollywood, à titre d'industrie culturelle hégémonique,*

*a réagi à l'évolution des relations entre les États-Unis et ses voisins du Nord et du Sud. Cette analyse propose une approche hémisphérique et comparative de l'étude des frontières urbaines, du tourisme et de la culture visuelle.*

When asked to reflect upon portrayals of Tijuana, Mexico, and Niagara Falls, Canada, in mainstream Hollywood films two contrasting images most likely come to mind. Tijuana appears as a seedy tourist destination for Anglo-Americans searching for illicit diversions. Conversely, Niagara Falls invokes caricatures of nervous newlyweds eager to consummate their marriage vows in a kitschy heart-shaped bed. Tijuana's potential for transitory interracial couplings juxtaposes the sanctioned sexuality and homogeneity of honeymooners visiting Niagara Falls. Tijuana, and by extension Mexico, are associated with prostitution, gambling, and intoxicants, while Niagara Falls, and by extension Canada, are linked to wholesome attractions. Yet despite these differences, Tijuana and Niagara Falls lie on the perimeters of the United States. As border towns, they both function as liminal locations of crossing and collision, as well as permissive zones, where tourists subvert the established routines and practices of everyday life.

In representing Tijuana and Niagara Falls, the film and tourist industries have projected two divergent images of commodified transnational eroticism, while simultaneously constructing an analogous discursive framework rooted in the titillating effects of border crossings. As John Urry has theorized, the Foucauldian 'tourist gaze' is fundamentally about pleasure, typically manifested through the asymmetrical power relationship between guests and host communities.<sup>1</sup> When film is added to the equation, the 'tourist gaze' is magnified by the 'scophilic gaze' (pleasure of looking) of the cinematic audience. Together, the intertwined cultural arenas of film and tourism shaped the sexually charged imagery associated with Tijuana and Niagara Falls.

This essay has a twofold purpose: first, to outline the parallel historical formation of Tijuana and Niagara Falls as cross-border tourist destinations; and second, to explore the disjunctive similarities within cinematic representations of Tijuana and Niagara Falls from the Progressive era through the end of the Classical Hollywood period. By examining how cinematic and tourist representations of these border towns have changed over time, the multiple ways in which these hegemonic culture industries responded to the United States' evolving relationships with its northern and southern neighbors will be revealed. The proliferation of scholarly works on the United States-Mexico border and the emerging body of literature on the United States-Canadian border,

---

<sup>1</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990).

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

particularly the region along the 49th parallel, indicate that borderlands history is a thriving field of internationalized intellectual inquiry.<sup>2</sup> These borderlands scholars have begun to challenge the nationalist assumptions within the discipline of history. This essay aims to add to this body of research by adopting an “inter-American studies” approach.<sup>3</sup> Although the quantity of films set in Tijuana vastly outnumbers Niagara Falls-themed motion pictures, a hemispheric perspective, which integrates the histories of Tijuana and Niagara Falls, complicates our understanding of border towns as spaces of sex and consumption.

Unlike most Mexican border towns that surfaced as transportation, mining, or agricultural centers in the nineteenth century, Tijuana became a “transfrontier metropolis” because of its emergence as an entertainment hub.<sup>4</sup> Following the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo created an international boundary separating Alta California (United States) from Baja California (Mexico). As an isolated peninsula, the Baja region is geographically separate from mainland Mexico, which enabled closer economic integration with southern California, particularly San Diego.<sup>5</sup> In turn, San Diego gradually shifted from a Spanish colonial settlement to an Anglo-American urban center. During the 1850s and 1860s, San Diego matured into a prosperous commercial seaport and by the early twentieth century had become a significant naval base. In 1885, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad completed the link between San Diego and San Bernardino sparking

---

2 While the breadth of borderlands scholarship is too vast to do justice here, some of the more recent contributions include: John J. Bukowczyk, Nora Faires, David R. Smith, and Randy William Widdis, eds., *Permeable Border: The Great Lakes Basin as a Transnational Region, 1650-1990* (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2005); Sterling Evans, ed., *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on Regional History of the Forty-Ninth Parallel* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Benjamin Herber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); Sheila McManus, *The Line which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press, 2005); Juan Mora-Torres, *The Making of the Mexican Border: The State, Capitalism, and Society in Nuevo León, 1848-1910* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001); Samuel Truett and Elliott Young, eds., *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Elliot Young, *Catarino Garza's Revolution on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

3 As Claire Fox and Claudia Sadowski-Smith postulate in “Theorizing the Hemisphere: Inter-Americas Work at the Intersection of American, Canadian, and Latin American Studies,” *Comparative American Studies* 2, no. 1 (2004): 5-38, it is only through an “inter-Americas studies” perspective that one can begin to challenge nationalism and U.S. domination in the hemisphere.

4 Lawrence A. Herzog, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space, and Politics on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 139.

5 John A. Price, *Tijuana: Urbanization in a Border Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 27.

a real estate boom, which drew large numbers of eastern Anglo-American land speculators to the area. The newcomers soon outnumbered the *californios*, prosperous ranchers of predominately Spanish descent, thus forever altering the cultural landscape of the southern Californian borderlands.<sup>6</sup> Despite the incursion of eastern wealth and middle-class refinement, San Diego retained its 'wild and wooly' attributes; gambling dens, saloons, and brothels remained common fixtures into the 1890s.<sup>7</sup>

In 1874, the Mexican government established a customs house in the rural Tijuana valley to control the unregulated flow of American goods. Once incorporated as a northern Baja California village in 1889, Tijuana exhibited the characteristics of frontier towns typical of the American West. Describing his first impressions of Tijuana, a correspondent for *The Nation* in 1889 stated, "There are more saloons in Tijuana than buildings ... some are in tents, open in front, with a counter in the center and empty beer barrels for seats."<sup>8</sup> However, Tijuana soon expanded due to sociopolitical changes north of the border.

In the context of the Progressive movement's drive to impose order, middle-class reformers in the United States pressured state and local legislatures to pass a series of sumptuary laws between 1909 and 1918, which outlawed such pastimes as gambling, prizefighting, and bookmaking, and closed down brothels and saloons. Meanwhile, Mexico had legalized gambling in Baja California in 1908 and horseracing in 1915. Pushed out by reform legislation, California-based proprietors of bars, breweries, and houses of prostitution opened entertainment facilities in Mexican border towns.<sup>9</sup> Even though the Mexican Revolution had begun in 1910, Anglo-American day-trippers flocked to the border. Postcards from the early years of the Mexican Revolution picture American citizens witnessing Mexican revolutionary battles in such border towns as Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Nogales.<sup>10</sup> Not even the *magonista* revolt

---

6 See Leonard Pitt, *Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californians* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

7 See Walter Gifford Smith, *The Story of San Diego* (San Diego: City Publishing Company, 1892).

8 Cited in Roberta Ridgely, "The Man who built Tijuana," *San Diego Magazine* 18 (January 1966): 58-61, 96-8.

9 For example, Oscar J. Martínez, *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juárez since 1848* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1978); Eric Michael Schantz, "All Night at the Owl: The Social and Political Relations of Mexicali's Red-Light District, 1913-1925," *Journal of the Southwest* 43, no. 4 (2001): 549-602; Lawrence D. Taylor, "The Wild Frontier Moves South: U.S. Entrepreneurs and the Growth of Tijuana's Vice Industry, 1908-1935," *Journal of San Diego History* 48, no. 3 (Summer 2002): <<http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/2002-3/> frontier.htm>, (viewed 9 January 2007).

10 Claire Fox, *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 81.

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

of 1911, which took place in the streets of downtown Tijuana, could keep curiosity-seekers at bay.<sup>11</sup>

Tourism emerged as Tijuana's chief growth industry in the summer of 1915, when a Mexican industrialist organized a fair, with the support of the Governor of Baja California North, to stimulate economic development in the region. To lure the large crowds attending the nearby San Diego Panama Canal Exposition, Tijuana offered an assortment of tawdry amusements, such as games of chance, bullfights, horse races, and prizefights, which were all illegal in California. For investors shut out by the moral temper in the United States, the success of the Tijuana Fair indicated the town's economic potential as a tourist magnet. The following year, James W. Coffroth, a renowned boxing promoter based in San Francisco, helped finance the building of a thoroughbred racetrack in Tijuana called the *hipódromo*. On 1 January 1916, approximately ten thousand Americans traveled on a new express train from San Diego to Tijuana to attend its inauguration.<sup>12</sup> *Hipódromo's* popularity subsequently led to the construction of other leisure enterprises, such as the Monte Carlo casino and the Sunset Inn restaurant-bar. The ongoing violence of the civil war in Mexico, worsening United States-Mexican relations, and the United States' entry into World War I, however, soon curtailed visits to Tijuana. In 1917-1918, American authorities imposed travel restrictions and deployed troops to forestall unauthorized immigration and unlawful activity along the border.<sup>13</sup>

Mexico's revolutionary period (1910-1920) coincided with the emergence of novel forms of visual culture in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Between 1907 and 1915, the American film industry evolved from a small-scale amusement enterprise into a mass entertainment industry.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, by the 1910s the center of film-making in the United States had moved from the northeast to the west coast. The rise of Tijuana and Hollywood as entertainment centres occurred concomitantly, nearly rivaling Tijuana's symbiotic relationship with San Diego. With

---

11 The *magonistas* were followers of anarchist leader Ricardo Flores Magón. In 1903, Magón had been forced into exile in the United States for openly criticizing Porfirio Díaz, Mexico's dictatorial president between 1876 and 1911, in his journal *Regeneración*. In 1905, Magón established the *Partido Liberal Mexicano* (PLM), a movement that attempted to overthrow the Díaz regime and institute socialist reforms in Mexico. As such, Magón and the PLM movement are seen as important precursors to the Mexican Revolution. See Lawrence D. Taylor, "The Magonista Revolt in Baja California: Capitalist Conspiracy or Rebellion de los Pobres?" *Journal of San Diego History* 45, no. 1 (Winter 1999): <<http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/99winter/magonista.htm>>, (viewed 9 January 2007).

12 Ridgely, "The Man who built Tijuana," 98.

13 Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 28.

14 Fox, *The Fence and the River*, 69.

15 See Elaine Bowser, *The Transformation of American Cinema, 1907-1915* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

their operations located in close proximity to Mexico, filmmakers could easily cover the revolutionary events in the borderlands.<sup>16</sup> In addition to these actualities, or non-narrative motion pictures, the Mexican Revolution captivated feature filmmakers of the early twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> In fictionalizing this volatile period in Mexican history, most films ignored the underlying anti-imperial impulse of the revolution, as well as a desire for land reform and democratic government. Since Tijuana and other Mexican border towns had become militarized zones, Hollywood featured them as pivotal staging areas for the illicit arms trade. For instance, *No Children Wanted* (1918) features an Anglo-American's scheme to smuggle arms into Mexico during the revolution.<sup>18</sup>

As violence repeatedly spilled north of the boundary, American citizens also lost property and suffered personal injury. Relations between Mexico and the United States deteriorated to the brink of war after Pancho Villa led an attack on the small border settlement of Columbus, New Mexico, in March 1916. In retaliation, President Woodrow Wilson sent the United States Army, under the command of General Pershing, to capture the elusive revolutionary organizer. Prior to the Columbus Raid and the failed Punitive Expedition, Villa had been a celebrated figure in American popular culture. Realizing the propaganda potential of the film medium, Villa even participated in a cinematic dramatization of his life.<sup>19</sup>

While accounts of the Mexican Revolution in the American media prior to 1916 had ranged from the Hearst newspaper empire's vilification of the revolution to John Reed's admiration of Pancho Villa, Anglo-American attitudes vis-à-vis rebel leaders hardened. In step with the slanted American press, silent westerns not only stereotyped Mexican revolutionaries as cutthroat bandits and villainous 'greasers', but also focused on the importance of securing the Mexican border as the linear divide between order and chaos. On screen, *gringo* cowboys invariably suppressed the *bandidos*, rescued the heroine, and bolstered notions of Anglo-American nationalism in the process. *The Heart of Paula* (1916) illustrates this triangular relationship. In the film, an Anglo-American mining engineer named Bruce McLean arrives in Tijuana, where he meets and falls in love with Paula Figueroa. However, the revolutionary outlaw Emiliano Pacheco also desires the señorita. Emiliano thus captures the American and tells Paula that he will free Bruce in exchange for sex. She agrees and Bruce flees

---

16 For example, *A Trip thru Barbarous Mexico* (State Rights, 1913); *Mexican War Pictures* (State Rights, 1913); and the pseudo-documentary, *The Battle of Torreon and The Career of General Villa* (Christy Cabanne, Mutual Film Corp., 1914).

17 Titles include *The War Extra* (State Rights, 1914); *The Man O' Warsman* (Thomas E. Shea, Broadway Picture Producing Co., 1914); *On the Border* (Selig Polyscope Co., 1909); and *The Gringo* (Overland Feature Film Corp., 1916).

18 *No Children Wanted* (Sherwood MacDonald, General Film Co., 1918).

19 *The Life of General Villa* (Christy Cabanne, Mutual Film Corp., 1914).

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

back across the border. Film exhibitors could then choose between one of two finales to show audiences. In the tragic ending, Paula commits suicide rather than sleep with the guerilla leader; in the happy conclusion, Bruce and a posse of cowboys rescues Paula and kills Emiliano.<sup>20</sup> Either way, Tijuana figures as both a locus of miscegenous desire and as a line dividing the civilization above from the conflict below.

Ultimately, such characterizations served to reinforce and justify American expansionism as well as racism and social prejudice.<sup>21</sup> While unflattering stereotypes date back to the sixteenth-century Black Legend, when the English spread tales of barbarism to encourage intervention in the Spanish colonies, as well as dime novels of the Gilded Age and Western pictures preceding the Mexican Revolution, these cinematic representations appeared at a time when United States-Mexican relations were at a nadir.<sup>22</sup> During the Díaz regime (1876-1911), American corporations had invested heavily in Mexico, but the revolutionaries threatened to nationalize most foreign-held industries. The negative portrayals of border bandits thus revealed a broader capitalist anxiety towards the socialist activities occurring in such border towns as Tijuana. For example, *Hitting the High Spots* (1918) not only features nefarious Mexican insurrectionists, but centers on an Anglo-American engineer who crosses the border to prevent the loss of a lucrative American oil concession.<sup>23</sup>

While silent Hollywood films typically depicted Tijuana as a revolutionary stronghold, early films envisioned Niagara Falls as a sublime landscape. Consisting of two distinct cascade systems, the American Falls and the Horseshoe Falls, the cataract spectacularly delineates the border between Canada and the United States. Although the town of Niagara Falls, Ontario, was not incorporated until 1881, the symbolic power of the Niagara region has much longer historical legs. Following the American Revolution, the Niagara boundary indicated not only a physical separation, but also distinguished British North America, later Canada, as an alternative society from its southern neighbor. Moreover, just as Tijuana was a strategic location during the Mexican revolutionary wars, the Niagara frontier was also a pivotal theater of battle during the War of 1812. At the Battle of Lundy's Lane, British North American

---

20 *The Heart of Paula* (William Taylor, Paramount Pictures Corp., 1916). *New York Times* (3 April 1916), 11; *Variety* (7 April 1916).

21 See Marguerita de Orellana, *Filming Pancho Villa: North American Cinema and Mexico, 1911-1917* (London: Norton, 2002).

22 On stereotypes of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, see Arthur Pettit, *Images of the Mexican American in Fiction and Film* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1980); Juan Alonzo, "From Derision to Desire: The 'Greaser' in Stephen Crane's Mexican Stories and D.W. Griffith's Early Westerns," *Western American Literature* 38, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 374-401.

23 *Hitting the High Spots* (Charles Swickard, Metro Pictures Corp., 1918).



forces successfully repelled the American advance. Thereafter, the Niagara region played a key role in the nascent formation of the imagined Canadian national identity.<sup>24</sup>

Like Tijuana, Niagara Falls emerged as an important leisure center in the nineteenth century. Yet these two destinations were quite different. While the appeal of vice-based amusements attracted visitors to sojourn in Tijuana, the Romantic Movement inspired elite travelers to holiday in Niagara. After the construction of canals and railroads increased access to the region in the 1830s, painters, writers, and later photographers traveled to Niagara and produced romanticized artistic and literary accounts of its beauty.<sup>25</sup> Niagara Falls then became an essential stop on the North American 'grand tour' — a whirlwind journey through the cultural and natural landmarks of the United States and Canada. Realizing its economic potential, boosters marketed Niagara Falls as a postnuptial resort for upper-class newlyweds. The Falls present a unique blend of romance, danger, and passion, which made Niagara an inviting sexual destination.<sup>26</sup> The popularity of the Niagara honeymoon increased steadily. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, seven bridges spanned the Niagara Gorge, thereby enhancing accessibility to the region. While cross-border tourism to Tijuana was discouraged during the World War I period, due to tensions between Mexico and the United States, the war boosted Niagara Falls' tourist industry. Travel advertisements directed at Americans framed cross-border trips in the language of wartime patriotism and bilateral friendship.<sup>27</sup>

The first films of Niagara Falls, however, attempted to convey its transcendent qualities. In April 1896, large-screen motion picture projection had come to the United States. By September, Mutoscope released a series of film shorts presenting various images of Niagara Falls, the Gorge, and rapids.<sup>28</sup> Later topical films not only conveyed images of the region's organic attributes, but also presented Niagara as a symbol of technology and progress. Shots of Niagara-bound trains and steamships juxtaposed the speed of modern technology with

24 Patrick McGreevy, *The Wall of Mirrors: Nationalism and Perceptions of the Border at Niagara Falls* (Orono, ME: Borderlands Monograph Series, 1991), 8.

25 On Niagara in nineteenth-century art and literature, see Elizabeth McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and Linda L. Revie, *The Niagara Companion: Explorers, Artists, and Writers at the Falls, from Discovery through the Twentieth Century* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003).

26 See Karen Dubinsky, *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymooning and Tourism at Niagara Falls* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

27 *Ibid.*, 123.

28 *Lower Rapids, Niagara Falls* (American Mutoscope Co., 1896); *Niagara Gorge from Erie R.R.* (American Mutoscope Co., 1896); *Pointing Down Gorge, Niagara Falls* (American Mutoscope Co., 1896); *Taken from Trolley in Gorge, Niagara Falls* (American Mutoscope Co., 1896); *Upper Rapids, from Bridge* (American Mutoscope Co., 1896).

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

the rushing waters of the waterfalls, whirlpools, and rapids.<sup>29</sup> As industrialists harnessed the enormous power of the waterfalls to produce electricity, the iconography shifted away from the sublime towards an industrialized landscape. Though preservationists decried industrial development, visitors to Niagara marveled at steel suspension bridges, hydroelectric facilities, and even the Shredded Wheat factory, located on the American side of the Niagara River.<sup>30</sup>

Between 1896 and 1906, the American Mutoscope and Biograph Co. and the Edison Mfg. Co. released over 40 actualities displaying panoramic views of the cataract and surrounding scenery. During cinema's formative years, spectators enjoyed motion pictures for their ability to reproduce lifelike motion as opposed to narrative complexity. These pioneering images of Niagara Falls thus form part of what Tom Gunning calls the "cinema of attractions," a term which describes early cinema's ability to show rather than tell.<sup>31</sup> Exhibitors crisscrossed North America presenting these short films, which undoubtedly heightened the tourist appeal of this natural wonder.

By the early 1900s, important changes were occurring in film exhibition. Nickelodeons, which were converted storefront theaters dedicated to exhibiting motion pictures, first appeared in 1905 and rapidly spread to urban centers throughout North America. Their advent altered the nature of spectatorship and precipitated fundamental shifts in representation giving birth to the modern cinema. Film form and content increasingly became more elaborate. Filmmakers, such as Edwin S. Porter who worked for Edison's motion picture company, increasingly crafted films with longer narratives.<sup>32</sup>

The first story film set in Niagara Falls was tourist and honeymoon-themed; Porter's *The Honeymoon at Niagara Falls* (1906) centered on a bridal couple sightseeing in Niagara Falls.<sup>33</sup> By the World War I period, American tourists honeymooning at the Falls became a common Hollywood trope, as seen in *The Honeymoon* (1917), *Persuasive Peggy* (1917), and *All Wrong* (1919).<sup>34</sup> Although not set in Niagara, other films concluded with couples who, upon

---

29 *Niagara Falls Station* (American Mutoscope and Biograph Co., 1899); *Steamship "Chippewa"* (American Mutoscope and Biograph Co., 1899); *The Approach to Niagara* (American Mutoscope and Biograph Co., 1899); *Circular Panorama of Suspension Bridge and American Falls* (Edison Mfg. Co., 1901).

30 See William Irwin, *The New Niagara: Tourism, Technology, and the Landscape of Niagara Falls, 1776-1917* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

31 Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

32 See Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907, Vol. I: History of the American Cinema* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990); Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

33 *The Honeymoon at Niagara Falls* (Edwin S. Porter, Edison Mfg. Co., 1906).

34 *The Honeymoon* (Charles Giblyn, Select Pictures Corp., 1917); *Persuasive Peggy* (Charles J. Brabin, State Rights, 1917); *All Wrong* (William Worthington, Pathé Exchange, Inc., 1919).

resolving a conflict, announce they will spend their honeymoon at the Falls.<sup>35</sup> Niagara had thus become convenient Hollywood shorthand for the happy ending. American feature films cemented Niagara's reputation as the "honeymoon capital of the world," which in turn reinforced the sex-based tourist industry. Whether comedic or dramatic, the Niagara Falls setting — as both a honeymoon locale and as a liminal border town located on the perimeter of the United States — enabled the narrative exploration of gender relationships. The frank examination of intimacy and sexual roles in Niagara-set films indicated the waning of the Victorian cultural consensus and the coming of the modern age.<sup>36</sup>

After a brief post-war recession, the United States entered a period of economic prosperity in the 1920s, manifested in the psychology of conspicuous consumption. The widespread ownership of automobiles, the creation of a highway infrastructure, and improved roadside services democratized the travel industry in this decade. Cars profoundly affected notions of time and distance allowing for quick trips across international borderlines. Moreover, many companies now incorporated paid vacations as part of their corporate welfare benefits packages. As a result, more working-class Americans could set aside holiday time.<sup>37</sup>

By the 1920s, tourism had become one of Canada's most profitable industries. In 1929, tourism revenue was six times as great as the net value of fisheries production, and equaled the net value of production in the Canadian forest, mining, and construction industries.<sup>38</sup> To attract the large number of potential visitors, Niagara Falls transformed into a modernized 'jazz age' tourist town marked by dance pavilions, bowling alleys, autocamps, and, from 1925 onwards, the nightly multi-hued illumination of the waterfall. The availability of commercialized amusements and the influx of American tourists drew criticisms from many locals and travel writers who complained that Niagara Falls had become a vulgar tourist trap.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, the growth of the mass tourism industry in North America overlapped with a cultural renaissance in Mexico. With the military phase of the revolution over by 1923, Mexican high art and folk art flourished, develop-

---

35 *The Goat* (Donald Crisp, Famous Players-Lasky Corp.; Artcraft Pictures, 1918). Also, *The Rush Hour* (E. Mason Hopper, Pathé Exchange, 1937); *Nice Women* (Edwin H. Knopf, Universal Pictures Corp., 1931); *After Tomorrow* (Frank Borzage, Fox Film Corp., 1932); *Madison Square Garden* (Harry Joe Brown, Paramount Publix Corp., 1932); *Beyond the Law* (D. Ross Lederman, Columbia Pictures Corp., 1934).

36 On the role that the motion picture industry played in the decline of Victorianism in the United States, see Larry May, *Screening out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

37 Cindy S. Aron, *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

38 Senate of Canada, *Debates*, 17th Parliament, 5th Session, 25 April 1934.

39 Dubinsky, *The Second Greatest Disappointment*, 134-6.

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

ing a following amongst the American cultural elite and tourists alike.<sup>40</sup> The Mexican government, in concert with segments of the private industry, actively solicited American tourists. They believed an expanding international tourist industry would create jobs and earn foreign exchange.<sup>41</sup> From the 1920s through the 1940s, Mexico's Government Tourist Office ran advertisements in the United States mass media promoting Mexico "as a land of Romance and Eternal Spring."<sup>42</sup>

Idyllic representations of the unspoiled landscape contrasted with the reputation of border towns as destinations for vice-based pleasure. From January 1920, the Volstead Act enforced the Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the manufacture, sale, importation, or transportation of alcoholic beverages in the United States. Although most of the travel literature in this period continued to extol the beauty of the primordial Canadian wilderness and positioned Mexico as a pastoral Arcadia, while paradoxically emphasizing the availability of modernized tourist infrastructures, Americans regularly crossed the border into Niagara Falls and Tijuana in search of beer, wine, and spirits.

Between 1919 and 1933, Prohibition caused tensions between the United States and its northern and southern neighbors. American officials were frustrated by Canada's limited cooperation in helping to enforce the Volstead Act. Although the temperance movement had been active in Canada, the regulation of liquor was a provincial responsibility. Following World War I-era temperance acts, most provinces gradually returned to their 'wet' status. Canadian entrepreneurs reaped the profits from the lucrative legal and illegal trafficking of liquor (rum running), as well as from increased tourism in such Canadian border towns as Niagara Falls.<sup>43</sup> This image of Niagara Falls, however, was largely absent from American feature films. For example, *The Crowd* (1928) positions Niagara Falls as the pinnacle of domestic bliss in opposition to rampant materialism of the city.<sup>44</sup> John, the protagonist, is an 'everyman' trying to find meaning in an overcrowded and alienating New York City. After meeting Mary on a blind date,

---

40 On American-Mexican cultural interactions from the 1920s to the 1940s, see Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1992).

41 Daniel Cooper Alarcón, *The Aztec Palimpsest: Mexico in the Modern Imagination* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 177.

42 *New York Times* (3 May 1936), XX6. For a discussion on how the Mexican government portrayed Mexico to attract foreign travelers, see Alex Saragoza, "The Selling of Mexico: Tourism and the State, 1929-1952," in Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, eds., *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 91-115.

43 On cross-border tourism during the prohibition era, see Stephen T. Moore, "Defining the 'Undefended': Canadians, Americans, and the Multiple Meanings of Border during Prohibition," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 3-32.

44 *The Crowd* (King Vidor, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Distributing Corp., 1928).

they quickly marry and take the Niagara-bound sleeper. The Falls stand for the timelessness and authenticity of their love. John points to the cataract and tells Mary in an intertitle, "My love will never stop, Mary. It's like these falls." The happiness of their conjugal visit to Niagara Falls serves as a counterpoint to their return to a cramped apartment and eventual disintegration of their marriage.

Other silent films did portray Niagara Falls as a dangerous location. In the *Man from Beyond* (1922) and *The Adventurous Sex* (1925), men rescue their respective sweethearts from going over the crest of the falls.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Hollywood employed the Niagara border setting as a short-term refuge for American criminals in *Over Niagara Falls* (1914) and *The Rubber Heels* (1927).<sup>46</sup> The leaders of these murderous and thieving gangs of smugglers, however, each meet their demise by plunging from the precipitous cliffs above the cascade. Rather than deterring visitors, such thrilling storylines added to Niagara's allure. Since the 1830s, tourism guidebooks routinely promoted stories of not only romance, but also tales of suicides and accidents, along with the escapades of daredevil tightrope walkers and barrel stunts.<sup>47</sup>

The Prohibition era accelerated tourism along the Mexican border as well. Situated within walking distance of the border crossing, Tijuana's downtown tourist quarters catered to thirsty Americans.<sup>48</sup> On 4 July 1920, an estimated 65,000 tourists jammed *Avenida Revolución*.<sup>49</sup> More than five million people crossed the border into Tijuana in 1931 alone.<sup>50</sup> Traversing the border represented more than a physical transition from one country to another, but also symbolized a moral transgression. As the Director of Publicity for the Board of Home Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church in San Diego wrote:

Tijuana is not so much a place as a condition which extends for some eighteen hundred miles along our Mexican border. It has all the lure of that poetic country where "there ain't no Ten Commandments" and a man's wish is law. It represents a step over the line which means to many the temporary breaking from accepted standards and the letting down of moral conduct.<sup>51</sup>

---

45 *The Man from Beyond* (Burton King, Houdini Picture Corp., 1922); *The Adventurous Sex* (Charles Giblyn, Associated Exhibitors, 1925).

46 *Over Niagara Falls* (Sterling Camera & Film Co., 1914); *Rubber Heels* (Victor Heerman, Paramount Famous Lasky Corp., 1927).

47 Patrick McGreevy, *Imagining Niagara: The Meaning and Making of Niagara Falls* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 41-70, 168.

48 For example, a feature article on vice establishments in Tijuana provided readers with a detailed account of how to drink Tequila properly. Kenneth L. Roberts, "Souse-West," *The Saturday Evening Post* 196, no. 49 (7 June 1924), 6-8, 52, 54-5.

49 Daniel D. Arreola and James R. Curtis, *The Mexican Border Cities: Landscape Anatomy and Place Personality* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1993), 99.

50 Price, *Tijuana*, 57.

51 Jay S. Stowell, "What shall we do with our Tia Juanas?" *Outlook* 144 (15 September 1926), 78-80, 79.

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

In San Diego, a center of Progressive reform and Prohibition sentiment, a voluntary organization thus tried to discourage young Anglo-Americans from visiting the “vice-ridden” border by stopping cars en route to Tijuana and urging them to turn back.<sup>52</sup>

During the winter of 1926, a tragedy involving a San Diego family holidaying in Tijuana seemed to validate the moralists’ worst fears about the city. After a night of excessive drinking, several *mexicanos* allegedly drugged, kidnapped, and raped sisters Audrey and Clyde Peteet, aged 19 and 26. Unable to live with the shame, Thomas Peteet, his wife, and daughters returned home and committed suicide.<sup>53</sup> Subsequently, the United States ordered that the border at San Ysidro be closed three hours earlier, at 6 p.m., and re-open the next day at 8 a.m. The fear surrounding travel to Tijuana was temporary, as Americans quickly resumed their trans-border saturnalia. As a *New York Times* feature article on Tijuana stated, “there have been killings and worse, ... but the spice of danger adds a zest to the pleasure of thousands who visit them [casinos and bars] from this side of the frontier.”<sup>54</sup>

Hollywood films between 1919 and 1934 reinforced the image of Tijuana as a bacchanal border town teetering on the edge of social and moral responsibility. Tijuana was a place where Anglo-American tourists lost all sense of propriety and binged before returning to the ascetic United States. For example, in *Riders Up* (1924), *Golf Widows* (1928), *The Speed Classic* (1928), and *Fast Companions* (1932), Anglo-Americans travel to Tijuana, where they gamble and drink to an excess, or watch the horse races.<sup>55</sup> In some films, Anglo-Americans remain indefinitely; the border town no longer represents a temporary break but rather a permanent site of moral decay. For instance in *Sweepstakes* (1931), a jockey expelled from the United States circuit for allegedly throwing a race travels to Tijuana, where he deteriorates into a gambler and a drunk.<sup>56</sup> Only after his trainer encourages him to sober up and enters him in the prestigious Tijuana handicap does he leave behind Mexico’s flophouses and re-settles in the United States. *The Champ* (1931) echoes this theme of an exiled sports hero floundering in Tijuana.<sup>57</sup> Andy is a has-been boxing cham-

---

52 *Ibid.*, 80.

53 Thomas Peteet’s suicide note allegedly read, “I and my family are of the best Southern blood. Death always was preferred to dishonor to our women,” reprinted in *New York Times* (12 February 1926), 3. For a revisionist account of the Peteet case, see Vincent Cabeza de Baca and Juan Cabeza de Baca, “The ‘Shame Suicides’ and Tijuana,” *Journal of the Southwest* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 603-35.

54 T.J.C. Martyn, “A Tinsel Monte Carlo on our Border,” *New York Times* (19 January 1930), 79.

55 *Riders Up* (Irving Cummings, Universal Pictures, 1924); *Golf Widows* (Erle C. Kenton, Columbia Pictures, 1928); *The Speed Classic* (Bruce Mitchell, First Division Pictures, 1928); *Fast Companions* (Kurt Neumann, Universal Pictures Corp., 1932).

56 *Sweepstakes* (Albert Rogell, RKO Pathé Distributing Corp., 1931).

57 *The Champ* (King Vidor, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corp., 1931).

pion living in a derelict rooming house with his young son. Although he tries to reform his drinking and gambling habits, Andy fails repeatedly due to Tijuana's salacious environment.

Although American tourists could enter Tijuana and Niagara Falls with relative ease, the United States increasingly tightened border controls during the Prohibition era. The architects of the Immigration Act of 1924, which established quotas based on national origins, believed that the smuggling of illegal aliens, liquor, and narcotics across international borders were linked. During congressional debates, the Assistant Secretary of Labor argued that Canadian smugglers not only brought liquor into the country, but also exacted "a price of \$500 for every Asiatic they succeed[ed] in landing on this side of the border."<sup>58</sup> Albert Johnson, Chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization and co-author of the restrictive immigration act, advocated for the expenditure of federal funds to defray the costs of policing the northern and southern borders. On 28 May 1924, Congress passed the Labor Appropriation Act, which established the United States Border Patrol to secure "the statutory wall erected around the United States as a barrier to foreign rum and narcotics and undesirable immigrants."<sup>59</sup> (emphasis added)

Once more or less fluid, the United States increasingly believed that the porous border towns required systematic enforcement. Yet the United States policed the Mexican border at Tijuana with greater intensity compared to the Niagara border region largely due to racialized images of Mexicans and Mexican border towns, most notably Tijuana. This prompted the Tijuana Chamber of Commerce to write a letter to President Herbert Hoover stating, "[W]e do not consider ourselves an inferior race whose contact means danger at night nor as a body afflicted with an infectious plague and consequently request equal consideration and the same treatment accorded other peoples."<sup>60</sup> Moreover, racial hostility intensified with the Great Depression, which prompted massive socio-economic changes and record high unemployment amongst Anglo-Americans. Thereafter coded as 'alien', local and state authorities deported hundreds of thousands of *mexicanos*, many of whom were actually American citizens, from the southwest between 1929 and 1935. Pressured by this wave of repression and Americanization, thousands of Mexican nationals also left the country voluntarily. The Immigration Service now seized nearly five times the number of suspected undocumented immigrants in the Mexican border region than in the Canadian borderlands.<sup>61</sup>

---

58 *New York Times* (19 April 1924), 2.

59 *Ibid.* (10 May 1925), XX15.

60 Cited in Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper*, 47.

61 Mae N. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 70.

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

Negative representations of Tijuana and Mexico begin to change by the mid-1930s. In 1935, Warner Bros. released *In Caliente*, a musical set and partially filmed in Agua Caliente, a luxurious resort complex situated three miles south of Tijuana's central tourist district.<sup>62</sup> Opened in 1928, the luxurious Agua Caliente was a perennial destination for Hollywood's elite. Due to the primacy of the star system, a central component in the standardization of film product in the studio era, the publicized presence of movie stars in Tijuana helped to raise the cachet of the Mexican border town. The film presents a story of transcultural romance, in which an American magazine publisher vacationing at "Mexico's Pleasure Paradise" falls in love with a dancer named *La Española*, played by Dolores Del Rio. The studio's publicity campaign for the film perpetuated intoxicating images of the Mexican border town as an exotic leisure centre. The pressbook urged theater managers to create a Mexican atmosphere in their lobbies and arrange tie-ins with local stores to convey "a below-the-border background." Warner Bros. suggested that travel agencies could give away a week's vacation to the resort as a prize and encouraged tie-ins with railroad, bus, airline, and travel companies by arranging colorful window displays that included stills from the film.<sup>63</sup>

Warner Bros. intended such positive (albeit one-dimensional) images of Mexico to promote Pan-American unity and counter Axis influence in Latin America.<sup>64</sup> Between 1935 and 1945, Hollywood consciously reconfigured its portrayals of Mexico and of Mexicans in voluntary compliance with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy, in which the United States pledged to move away from its previous policy of armed intervention in Latin America in favor of supporting territorial integrity and sovereignty. Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull considered the cultural sphere to be a key element in bolstering relations between the United States and Latin America. To that end, Roosevelt established the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA) in August 1940. Director Nelson A. Rockefeller considered film to be an integral component in the CIAA campaign, and created a separate Motion Picture Bureau to liaise between Hollywood and the United States government.<sup>65</sup>

Hollywood actively endorsed Pan-American neighborliness. William H. Hays, director of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association

---

62 *In Caliente* (Lloyd Bacon, First National Pictures, Inc.; The Vitaphone Corp., 1935).

63 USC Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California, *In Caliente* pressbook, 1935.

64 On the studio's cinematic battle against Hitler, see Michael Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers: Warner Bros.'s Campaign against Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

65 The CIAA was originally named the Office for Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations between the American Republics. See United States Office of Inter-American Affairs, *History of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1947).



(MPPDA), argued that the film industry had a duty to promote “cultural interchange and friendly understanding between nations,” but particularly between the United States and Latin America as neighbors “living on the same side of the road and only a little distance apart.”<sup>66</sup> As a result, the major studios produced Hispanic-themed films; to ensure authenticity, producers hired technical experts and studios created in-house research departments. Moreover, in March 1941, the Production Code Administration (PCA), the film industry’s mechanism of self-censorship, hired a specialist to scrutinize scripts in order to eliminate potentially offensive portrayals of Latin Americans or Latin American republics.<sup>67</sup> For the time being, Hollywood avoided picturing Tijuana as a permissive zone so as not to offend Latin American audiences in general and Mexico in particular, which was a steady consumer of motion pictures, film equipment, and technology.

The film industry’s Good Neighbor-era promotion of intercultural harmony in Tijuana contrasted with notions of homogeneous “heterosexual citizenship” in Niagara Falls.<sup>68</sup> As the iconic destination for an event honeymoon, Niagara Falls figured as a liminal zone; a pilgrimage to Niagara Falls was a rite of passage where individuals shifted from one life-stage to another, “passing over all the taboos” separating the lives of singles and married couples.<sup>69</sup> Anthropologist Victor Turner first applied the concept of liminality to describe the uneasy state of transition between life stages.<sup>70</sup> For Turner, the liminal period is a purely metaphorical and temporary state for which there is an ultimate resolution. However, Turner’s notion of liminality can also be applied to the space between physical locations, such as border towns, which similarly requires its own set of customs and conventions to organize behavior.

Classical Hollywood films depicted Niagara as a liminal environment where normative couples could discover sex and sexuality while staying within the confines of the film industry’s self-regulatory framework. The MPPDA had established the PCA in 1934 to ensure filmmakers complied with the

---

66 Will H. Hays, “Cultural Interchange and the Cinema,” *Think* 4 (December 1938): 21, 45.

67 See Brian O’Neil, “The Demands of Authenticity: Addison Durland and Hollywood’s Latin Images during World War II,” in Daniel Bernardi, ed., *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 359-85. On Hollywood’s Good Neighbor Policy, see Allen Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983); Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

68 On Niagara’s sexual and gendered connotations, see Dubinsky, *The Second Greatest Disappointment*, 2.

69 Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 118.

70 Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93-111.

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

Production Code, a set of moral standards to govern film content adopted in 1930. For example, the Code forbade scenes containing excessive violence, vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, and sexuality. The film industry devised this system of self-regulation to appease vociferous moral reformers and counter the possibility of state-run censorship boards.<sup>71</sup> The trope of the honeymoon, however, allowed filmmakers to explore sexuality and sexual transition without provoking the censors.

Typically, the humor in Niagara-set films revolves around sexually inexperienced honeymooners who visit Niagara not to see the waterfalls, but to unleash their repressed sexual energies. In *Out all Night* (1933), for example, a naive couple elopes to Niagara Falls and barricade themselves in their hotel room for three days to consummate their marriage. In *Lucky Partners* (1940), two couples chat in a hotel elevator about how long they have been in town. One of the women responds that they have been there a week. Upon being asked how she liked the falls, her husband cheekily replies, "I don't know. We are seeing them tomorrow."<sup>72</sup>

In the film *Niagara Falls* (1941), characters openly question the merits of committed relationships.<sup>73</sup> On their way to Niagara, newlyweds Sam and Emmy encounter a broken-down car and meet Margy and Tom, whom they assume are quarreling lovers. In reality, the pair had just met and had been bitterly arguing over the virtues of bachelorhood versus marriage. They part ways and, coincidentally, both couples arrive at the same hotel. Not realizing that Margy and Tom are not a couple, Sam offers them the bridal suite so they can reconcile. Margy and Tom then fall in love and quickly marry. However, hotel guests panic when they believe that an unmarried couple is staying there. Mistaken for the impure couple, Sam and Emmy's honeymoon abruptly ends when the hotel ejects them from the premises. *Niagara Falls* thus reveals the slippage between connubial and illegitimate sexual encounters, but ultimately upholds the sanctity of marital relations.

In the wake of World War II and the emergent Cold War, Canada became an integral part of American-led defense partnerships. The period was also marked by enhanced economic and cultural relationships between the two nations, leading Canadian nationalists to decry the degree of intensifying cultural imperialism.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, mass consumption and the export of cultural commodities was a central element in America's Cold War ideology, and the

---

71 On censorship during the studio era, see Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

72 *Out all Night* (Sam Taylor, Universal Pictures Corp., 1933); *Lucky Partners* (Lewis Milestone, RKO Radio Pictures, Inc., 1940).

73 *Niagara Falls* (Gordon Douglas, United Artists Corp., 1941).

74 John Herd Thompson and Stephen J. Randall, *Canada and the United States: Ambivalent Allies* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 184.

travel industry played a key role in furthering the economic and cultural diplomacy goals of the United States government.<sup>75</sup> Niagara Falls benefited from the rapid growth in the mass tourism industry. As Karen Dubinsky argues, between 1947 and 1960 post-nuptial tourism to Niagara Falls surged in the context of domestic containment, sex-role conformity, and hyper-consumerism.<sup>76</sup>

The big-budget feature *Niagara* points to the tensions between McCarthyist-era anxieties, the post-war American-Canadian relationship, and the drive to promote mass consumption and tourism.<sup>77</sup> In the film, Marilyn Monroe plays Rose Loomis, a scheming seductress who, along with her lover, plots to murder her mentally unbalanced husband, George, by making his death at Niagara Falls appear as a suicide. Meanwhile, Polly and Ray Cutler arrive in Niagara Falls on a delayed honeymoon and stay at the same motel as the Loomises, where they become entangled in Rose's machinations. Rose's scheme, however, backfires. George seeks revenge on his duplicitous wife and strangles her — according to the Code, there must always be "compensating moral value." George attempts to escape by stealing a motorboat but the craft runs out of gas, drifts in the current, and plummets down the Horseshoe Falls.

Reviewers of the film contended that the clichéd story was a thinly veiled attempt to titillate audiences, as the filmmakers devised numerous scenes to show the voluptuous Rose in various stages of undress.<sup>78</sup> While *Niagara* transformed Monroe from starlet to box office draw, Twentieth Century-Fox also hoped that the Technicolor scenery of Niagara Falls would entice theatre-goers. Writer Charles Brackett apparently wanted to set the script in Niagara Falls after he had vacationed there in 1951.<sup>79</sup> Throughout the 1950s, the ailing Hollywood studios used Technicolor and widescreen technology to attract Americans away from home-centered suburban recreation. Indeed, the poster for the film marries the two attractions by featuring Monroe reclining on the crest of the falls as a cascade of water rushes over her body.

Yet, as one critic observed, "[H]owever admirably constructed Miss Monroe may be, she is hardly up to competing visually with one of the wonders of this continent, and the cataract keeps stealing scenes from her."<sup>80</sup> The flat-

---

75 Christopher Endy, *Cold War Holidays: American Tourism in France* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 5.

76 Karen Dubinsky, "'Everybody Likes Canadians': Canadians, Americans, and the Post-World War II Travel Boom," in Shelley Baranowski and Ellen Furlough, eds., *Being Elsewhere: Tourism, Consumer Culture, and Identity in Modern Europe and North America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 320-47.

77 *Niagara* (Henry Hathaway, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp., 1953).

78 See *Variety* (21 January 1953), 6; *Saturday Review* (7 February 1953), 26; *New Yorker* (31 January 1953), 53; *New York Times* (22 January 1953), 20.

79 *Niagara Falls Review* (9 April 1952).

80 *The New Yorker* (31 January 1953). *The Toronto Daily Star* made a similar comment, 21 February 1953, 39.

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

tering on-screen portrait of Niagara Falls was directly due to the involvement of Canadian officials behind-the-scenes. William L. Houck, a member of the Ontario Legislature and one-time mayor of Niagara Falls, had voiced public concern that the plot would scare tourists away by sullyng the town's reputation as a cheerful honeymoon destination. Upon hearing of the film project he declared, we "do not want to convey the impression that murders are on the rampage here."<sup>81</sup> He later insisted that the corpse of one of the characters be discovered on the American side of the border, rather than the Canadian, since the latter would "be bad for the tourist business."<sup>82</sup> A provincial liaison thus worked with Twentieth Century-Fox to guarantee that the film would maximize tourism to Ontario.<sup>83</sup>

Filmed on location, *Niagara* at times appears more as an elaborate tourism video than a film noir; during the film, characters sightsee on the *Maid of the Mist*, visit the *Cave of the Winds*, or go on a *Journey behind the Falls*. On screen, the streets are spit-shined clean, while local citizens and authority figures are polite. For example, when the Cutlers drive up to the border, a friendly Canadian customs inspector spices the encounter with a hint of playful sexual innuendo. The tourist elements thus belie *Niagara's* bleak narrative, which centers on murder, psychological ambiguity, and dangerous sexuality — themes that reinforce the Cold War atmosphere of fear and paranoia.

Merchants and local officials were thrilled at the potential tourist dollars generated by the film.<sup>84</sup> Jean Peters and Casey Adams, who portrayed the Cutlers, took part in a publicity-aimed ceremony for the 10,000th honeymoon couple to visit Niagara Falls and personally bestowed them with gifts from local businesses.<sup>85</sup> Following the film's box office success, the town enjoyed a record-breaking number of visitors. According to the General Manager of the Niagara Parks Commission, one hundred thousand more vehicles entered in June 1953 than the previous summer.<sup>86</sup> Tourists, however, were likely disappointed to learn that the Rainbow Cabins, where the Loomises and Cutlers stayed, was a constructed set torn down after production wrapped.

The use of mainstream American films to bolster tourism to Canada was also generally an outcome of the 1948 Canadian Cooperation Project (CCP). When Canada threatened to impose quotas on imports of Hollywood product, the President of the Motion Picture Export Association of America suggested that increased tourism could ease Canada's trade deficit with the United States. According to the resulting agreement, studios would shoot more features

---

81 *Niagara Falls Review* (14 April 1952).

82 *Ibid.* (2 June 1952).

83 *Ibid.* (9 April 1952).

84 *Ibid.* (27 January 1953).

85 *Globe and Mail* (2 June 1952), 1-2.

86 *Niagra Falls Review* (11 July 1953).

north of the border and would encourage scriptwriters to include references to Canada expressly to promote tourism. Moreover, to ensure authentic representations, Hollywood would employ Canadian technical advisors in films with Canadian content. Finally, American theatres would show a greater number of Canadian-made travelogues and National Film Board documentary short subjects.<sup>87</sup>

Beyond the film's sexualized and consumerist iconography, the simultaneous premieres of *Niagara* in both Niagara Falls, Ontario, and New York City, indicated the importance of the narrative's setting on the United States-Canadian border. Twentieth Century-Fox flew special prints of the film "directly from Hollywood" to the Buffalo Airport, where they were taken by helicopter to the middle of the Rainbow Bridge. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the New York State Police greeted the helicopter and escorted the prints to the respective sides of the border.<sup>88</sup> The civic fanfare surrounding the film's opening echoed the intimate relationship between Canada and the United States in the 1950s.

While Hollywood and the tourist industry promoted Niagara's safe sexual allure, coinciding with bi-national rhetoric that touted the United States-Canada boundary as the world's longest undefended border, Tijuana increasingly appeared as a transgressive location in the post-war period. With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 and the reinstatement of racetrack betting in California, Anglo-American tourism to Tijuana and other Mexican border towns drastically declined. Vice-based tourism also suffered due to heightened Mexican nationalism and a national moralization campaign. Under President Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico nationalized foreign-owned properties, thus driving out remaining American 'border barons'. In 1935, the same year *In Caliente* was in theatres, Cárdenas declared gambling illegal and ordered the casinos, including Agua Caliente's, closed.

By the early 1940s, however, both sides of the United States-Mexico border experienced industrial and demographic growth due to rising federal expenditures, military buildup, an expanding private sector, and the Bracero Program, an institutionalized program of agricultural Mexican guest labor in the United States. Between 1941 and 1945, cross-border consumption intensified as Americans traveled to Tijuana to purchase commodities rationed by the U.S. Office of Price Administration.<sup>89</sup> In addition, soldiers and marines on furlough from the military base in San Diego indulged in the border town's new red-light district.<sup>90</sup> Between 1940 and 1960, the number

---

87 Pierre Berton, *Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of our National Image* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 171.

88 *Niagara Falls Review* (19 January 1953).

89 Price, *Tijuana*, 59.

90 Keith Monroe, "Tijuana: Border Hell Town," *Coronet* 40 (September 1956): 123-8.

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

of American tourists crossing the Mexican border jumped from eight million to 39 million.<sup>91</sup>

The post-war years found Mexico continuing to enjoy political stability and unprecedented economic growth. Despite this so-called ‘Mexican Miracle’, American travel literature described Tijuana as a “Mecca for all who would take in or be taken in by peep shows, ‘feelthy’ postcards, schemes, opium dreams, confidence rackets, blackmarkets and blackjack.”<sup>92</sup> Once again, many San Diegans were so alarmed that they campaigned to restrict the entrance of United States minors to Tijuana. Concerned citizens particularly linked the availability of narcotics in Tijuana with the growth of juvenile delinquency across the border in the United States. The California Pharmacy Board issued a public warning that “addiction to barbiturates and amphetamines has become one of the major problems among juveniles in southern California.” Moreover, ‘goof balls’ (barbiturates) from Mexico were the number one cause of poison deaths in the Los Angeles area.<sup>93</sup> Tijuana had become a “border hell town” — the only place where teenagers can “step in to a saloon and buy drinks, then stroll back to the washroom and buy marijuana, then wander into a book store and study pornographic books and pictures, then walk along the main street and pick up a prostitute, and top off the evening by stopping at an all-night pharmacy.”<sup>94</sup>

Post-war Hollywood films similarly portrayed Tijuana as a gaudy mélange of street vendors, strolling musicians, and flashing neon lights. In *Jeopardy* (1953), a California suburbanite on a family road trip to Mexico exclaims, “Tijuana’s fun; like a carnival. Strange people, strange words, you name it, they’ve got it. It’s a boomtown with tourists instead of oil wells. And, if you want to build up your sales resistance, well this is the place.”<sup>95</sup> Likewise, *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953) and *Naked Alibi* (1954) portray honky-tonk Mexican border towns as “other-directed” environments, that is, spectacles designed for consumption by foreigners.<sup>96</sup> Other post-war films reinforced the connection between the Mexican border town and narcotics. *Borderline* (1950), *Federal*

---

91 David E. Lorey, *The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century: a History of Economic and Social Transformation* (Wilmington, MA: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 88.

92 Curtis Zahn, “Shady Lady South of the Border,” *Travel* (September 1947): 26-8.

93 Monroe, “Tijuana: Border Hell Town.”

94 Ibid.

95 *Jeopardy* (John Sturges, Loew’s Inc., 1953).

96 *The Hitch-Hiker* (Ida Lupino, RKO Radio Pictures, Inc., 1953); *Naked Alibi* (Jerry Hopper, Universal Pictures Co., Inc., 1954). On Mexican border towns as “other-directed” environments, see James R. Curtis and Daniel D. Arreola, “Through *Gringo* Eyes: Tourist Districts in the Mexican Cities as Other-directed Places,” *North American Culture* 5, no. 2 (1989): 19-32. On images of borders in film noir, see Dominique Brégent-Heald, “Dark Limbo: Film Noir and the North American Borders,” *The Journal of American Culture* 29, no. 2 (June 2006): 125-38.

*Man* (1950), and *Johnny Stool Pigeon* (1949) feature government agents assigned to stop drug syndicates from smuggling their product across the border via Tijuana, which figures as the headquarters for violent drug gangs.<sup>97</sup> As such, Hollywood focused on the supply-side of the drug problem and ignored the issue of demand emanating north of the border.

These post-war visions contrasted with the elegance that had characterized Agua Caliente and the sympathetic images of Mexico during the Good Neighbor Policy era. The border between San Diego and Tijuana now figured less as a *borderland* symbolizing inter-American cooperation and more as a *boundary* requiring policing. By the 1950s, concerns regarding the smuggling of narcotics resulted in the increased militarization of the United States-Mexico border. As during the Prohibition era, federal authorities frequently linked the trafficking of illegal substances with unlawful immigration across the border. Rising apprehension over unauthorized Mexican migrants climaxed in 1954 with Operation Wetback, a campaign reminiscent of the repatriation movement of the Depression era. Spearheaded by Joseph Swing, the Commissioner General of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Operation Wetback was a military-style campaign in which state and local officials seized and deported thousands of undocumented workers, as well as legal residents of Mexican descent.<sup>98</sup>

By the mid- to late 1950s, negative depictions of Tijuana in mainstream films also accelerated due to structural changes in the motion picture industry, namely the decline of the PCA's authority, the gradual dismantling of the studio system, and the concomitant rise of independent film productions. New companies, such as American International Pictures, specialized in low-budget movies geared toward young adults. Typically, these teen-exploitation pictures were suggestive tales detailing the escapades of sordid youth.<sup>99</sup> For example, in *Eighteen and Anxious* (1957) and *The Young Captives* (1959) high school students run for the Mexican border to elope.<sup>100</sup> Such films portray Tijuana as a parent's nightmare — a hotbed of sex, drugs, and rock n roll. Publicity

---

97 *Borderline* (William A. Seiter, Universal Pictures Company, Inc., 1950); *Federal Man* (Robert Tansey, Eagle-Lion Films, Inc. [Pathé Industries, Inc.], 1950); *Johnny Stool Pigeon* (William Castle, Universal Pictures Company, Inc., 1949). *The Tijuana Story* (László Kardos, Columbia Pictures Corp., 1957) portrays the border town as a city wracked by vice and corruption, and controlled by the Mexican mob.

98 See Juan Ramon García, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

99 See Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 326.

100 *Eighteen and Anxious* (Joseph Parker, Republic Pictures Corp., 1957); *The Young Captives* (Irvin Kershner, Paramount Pictures Corp., 1959).

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

campaigns capitalized on the generation gap by advertising, "Parents will be shocked but ... youth will understand."<sup>101</sup>

In the film *Touch of Evil* (1958), director Orson Welles, a passionate advocate of Mexican-American civil rights, purposefully plays with these cinematic conventions of Mexican border towns by drawing upon simplistic and racist portrayals, which he then distorts or satirizes.<sup>102</sup> Based on the pulp fiction novel *Badge of Evil*, Welles deliberately exchanged the novel's setting from Los Angeles to a fictitious Mexican border town called Los Robles to explore issues of race and national identity.<sup>103</sup> Although the narrative unfolds in a fictionalized setting, the location represents Tijuana, where Welles intended to film the picture.<sup>104</sup>

The stylized opening of *Touch of Evil* establishes the heady atmosphere of a Mexican border town as the camera follows a couple through its carnivalesque streets. However, when they arrive at the borderline, an inhospitable American customs official grills Mike 'Miguel' Vargas, the prominent head of Mexico's Pan-American Narcotics Commission, and his Anglo-American bride Susan. The mood on the border control post is pointedly confrontational and foreboding. Unlike the congenial border-crossing scene in *Niagara*, in this case the American customs officer casts doubt upon the legitimacy of Mike and Susan's marital union. After crossing the border into the United States, the newlyweds lean in to kiss as a bomb detonates indicating the explosive nature of the pending racial/cultural miscegenation.

From this point, the narrative twists back and forth across the labyrinthian borderlands.<sup>105</sup> Susan pleads with her husband to take her to a motel on the American side, where she believes she will be "safe." Yet Quinlan (Orson Welles), the corrupt American detective investigating the explosion, orders a gang of *mexicano* thugs to kidnap her; they bring her back across the border to a

---

101 AFI *Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States* electronic database, entry *Eighteen and Anxious* (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyk-Healey, 1999), <[http://afi.chadwyck.com/film/full\\_rec?action=BYID&FILE=../session/1171459462\\_321&ID=52166](http://afi.chadwyck.com/film/full_rec?action=BYID&FILE=../session/1171459462_321&ID=52166)>, (viewed 18 April 2006).

102 On how Welles parodies ethnic stereotypes, see William Anthony Nericcio, "Of Mestizos and Half-Breeds: Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*," in Chon A. Noriega, ed., *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 47-58.

103 John C. Stubbs, "The Evolution of *Touch of Evil* from Novel to Film," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1985): 19-39.

104 In an interview, Welles claimed that Mexican censors would never let him make Tijuana look "scrubby." Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles*, rev. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 310.

105 For a detailed analysis of *Touch of Evil*, see Stephen Heath, "Film and System: Terms of Analysis," *Screen* 16, no. 1-2 (1975): 7-77, 91-113. Also, Terry Comito, "Welles's Labyrinths: An Introduction to *Touch of Evil*," in Tony Comito, ed., *Touch of Evil* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 35-42.



seedy Los Robles hotel, where they shoot her up with drugs and place her at the scene of an orgy. She is subsequently discovered, in the words of a police investigator, “half-naked on one of the beds, drugged,” and surrounded by “reefers, drugs, and heroin.” As Vargas had earlier told his wife, “This isn’t the real Mexico, you know that. All border towns bring out the worst in a country.”

With such relentless images of Tijuana and Mexican border towns as landscapes of vice, the Mexican government devised policies to clean up their reputation. In 1961, President Adolfo López Mateos established the *Programa Nacional Fronterizo* (PRONAF), which curtailed prostitution, provided for public beautification projects, improved the tourist infrastructure, and constructed cultural and shopping centers in Mexico’s border cities.<sup>106</sup> An outcome of PRONAF was the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), which the Mexican government instituted in 1965 to stimulate the lagging economies of northern Mexico and provide employment for agricultural laborers displaced by the defunct Bracero Program. Also known as the *Maquiladora* Program, BIP transformed *la frontera* into a corridor of export processing industries.<sup>107</sup>

Largely because of their prominent portrayal in mainstream cinema, Tijuana and Niagara Falls are both iconic North American border towns. Yet these cinematic images shifted in step with changing socio-political circumstances. Before World War I, Tijuana’s vice-based tourism industry grew in the context of Progressive-era reforms in the United States, while on-screen the border town appeared as a centre for revolutionary insurgency. At the turn of the twentieth century, Niagara Falls enjoyed its status as a resort town for elite honeymooners, but democratized in the post-World War I period as it transitioned into a modernized tourist town. During the Prohibition era, both Tijuana and Niagara Falls became popular destinations for thirsty Americans, which resulted in the United States tightening control over both its northern and southern borders. However, racial hostility during the Great Depression intensified the policing of the Mexican border. From 1935 through the end of the World War II period, the theme of inter-American harmony supplanted negative images of Tijuana and Mexico under the aegis of the Good Neighbor Policy. Finally, both Tijuana and Niagara Falls developed into honky-tonk tourist towns in the context of the post-war travel boom. Yet, while Niagara Falls epitomized Cold War culture of consensus and conformity, and a symbol of American-Canadian amity, Tijuana appeared as a dangerous criminal underworld, resulting in the increased militarization of the border zone.

Through it all, Hollywood, alongside the tourist industry, projected images of Niagara Falls and Tijuana as locations of consumption and sexual exchange, albeit to varying degrees. In the Canadian border town, sexual affairs were

---

106 Arreola and Curtis, *The Mexican Border Cities*, 106.

107 Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper*, 45.

THE TOURISM OF TITILLATION IN TIJUANA AND NIAGARA FALLS: CROSS-BORDER TOURISM AND HOLLYWOOD FILMS BETWEEN 1896 AND 1960

marital-based and homogenous in nature, while in the Mexican border town, on-screen romances tended to be interracial or transcultural. In either case, when American tourists cross the Mexican and Canadian borders to indulge in commodified transnational eroticism, they not only enter a tourist trap, but also a slippery border space — a liminal zone of contact between asymmetrical nation states. Since it is precisely on the border where national identities are upheld and simultaneously challenged, examining the changing iconographic and narrative elements surrounding Tijuana and Niagara Falls in cinematic and tourist discourse ultimately reveals hegemonic conceptions of Mexico and Canada.

\* \* \*

**DOMINIQUE BRÉGENT-HEALD** is an Assistant Professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland and is currently writing a monograph on images of the Mexican and Canadian borders in Hollywood films between 1896 and 1960.

**DOMINIQUE BRÉGENT-HEALD** est professeure adjointe à la Memorial University of Newfoundland. Elle rédige actuellement une monographie sur les images des frontières mexicaines et canadiennes dans les films d'Hollywood entre 1896 à 1960.