

“Maquilapolis.” Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre, dirs. (Film Review)

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Abstract:

A review of the film “Maquilapolis” (city of factories), produced and directed by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre.

Keywords: Globalization | Labor Force | Labor Rights | Mexico | Film Review

Article:

Globalization has been blamed for many of our current social problems: environmental degradation, marginalization of women and children, global stratification and continued disenfranchisement of the working class. Many of these problems are attributable to a shift in the economic structure brought upon by Neoliberal reforms. Production in the Neoliberal global economy has changed dramatically since the mid-twentieth century, when most international trade was linked to manufacturing needs of core countries. Natural resources were shipped from low-income countries in the global South to the industrialized North where they were made into finished products. This trade model has all but disappeared in today’s post-industrial global division of labour. Today companies favour outsourcing their manufacturing to assembly plants in low-cost labour markets. This has led to the creation of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) where factories import raw materials and produce finished goods for export without tariffs, thus reducing costs and increasing profits for transnational corporations like Sanyo, Sony and Panasonic. In the last twenty years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of EPZs. According to the United Nations International Labour Organization (2007) there were over 2700 EPZs in 116 countries employing more than 63 million people (<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/sector/themes/epz/stats.htm>). The majority of those employed in the EPZs are in China, Bangladesh and in the *maquiladoras* (export assembly plants) along the US/Mexican border.

Maquilapolis is a film by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre. I first became aware of Vicky Funari’s work at the 2001 Pacific Sociological Association showing of *Live nude girls unite!* (2000), a film she co-directed and edited on the unionization of exotic dancers at a strip club in San Francisco. Like *Live nude girls unite!*, the focus of *Maquilapolis* is on the everyday lives of women and their efforts to combat marginalization and exploitation through collective action. The documentary is set in a Tijuana squatters’ camp called *Chilpancingo* located in a gulch just below the factories. It describes the economic, social and environmental impact of these

assembly plants on the residents of *Chilpancingo*. The difficult, repetitive and labour-intensive work within the factories is shown, as well as the hazardous conditions outside where air pollution and water contamination threaten the residents of the areas surrounding the factories.

The film follows two women, Carmen and Lourdes, as they fight for economic and environmental justice. We learn that in the global 'race for the bottom' many workers in the *maquilas* have been abandoned as factories move to even cheaper labour markets in Southeast Asia. Carmen was employed by Sanyo until the company moved its operations to Indonesia, leaving her not only unemployed but without the legally required severance pay. The film follows her as she and other workers unite to confront Sanyo through the Labor Arbitration Board to obtain their unpaid severance. Lourdes participates in the formation of the *Collectiva Chilpancingo* to challenge *Metales y Derivados*, an abandoned battery reclamation factory (owned by the San Diego firm New Frontier Trading Corporation). Lead, acid and other contaminants have been found to be seeping out of the factory and into the groundwater used by the residents of *Chilpancingo*. Through protests at the PROFEPA offices (*Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente* or Federal Ministry for Environmental Protection) and a binational media campaign, they are successful in convincing the US EPA and the Mexican PROFEPA to engage in a clean-up of the site.

The greater part of the film is a series of video diaries and interviews conducted by Carmen, Lourdes and other members of the collective. These auto-ethnographic accounts are interwoven with background information on the *maquilas* and artistically shot video montage interludes (no doubt influenced by Sergio De La Torre's background in performance art). The film's website (www.maquilapolis.com) provides the backstory on the process of working with several non-profit environmental and women's rights groups to train the women to document their story.

I have shown *Maquilapolis* to a third-year undergraduate course on Globalization. The film could easily be used in other social science and humanities courses to discuss social movements and collective action, gender and globalization, poverty, the environment, labour rights, global economics or development. While the 68-minute film leaves little time for discussion in some class formats, students were engaged and curious to learn more. One student noted, 'I thought the use of personal life narratives in the film helped connect the audience with life in the *Maquilas*.' However, several students noted that the artistic montage sequences felt overly manufactured and took away from the reality of the workers' situations as well as slowing the pace of the film.

While less focused on the macro-structural issues that create situations of global injustice and environmental ruin, the film fits well with other anti-globalization/labour rights films like: *Life and debt; No logo: Brands, globalization & resistance; and Maquila: A tale of two Mexicos*. *Maquilapolis* is engaging and informative, focusing on the human impact of complex international economic relations and the manufacturing zone at the US/Mexico border.