

“Machete: Understanding the Historical and Social Relevancy of the First Latinexploitation Movie.”

Yohann Brulley — University of Versailles, Georgia State University

When Robert Rodriguez shot *Machete* [1] as a fake movie trailer featured in his and Quentin Tarantino’s 2007’s *Grindhouse*, nobody would have bet a penny on the eventual filming and actual release of a full-length movie. But in 2010, the story of Machete Cortez (played by Danny Trejo) [2a], a toughened former Mexican Federal Agent forced to turn hitman, was aired in movie theaters across the planet. While many had expected the movie to be nothing more than a way for Rodriguez to spread once again blood and gore all over the screen, *Machete* came as a surprising and refreshing reflection on the status of illegal immigrants in the South, focusing particularly on the controversial tension between border-crossing Mexicans and anti-immigration politicians vigilantes in Texas.

Even if the movie takes a rather light and humorous stance on the situation, the scenario mostly revolving around action scenes and gunfights, its subtext features an extremely coherent interrogation of the questions of race, national identity, and politics of systematic othering—enough to infuriate any incensed nativist. Senator John McLaughlin [2a] (played by Robert de Niro) seeks re-election through a heinous, stigmatizing campaign, comparing illegal immigrants to cockroaches, an attitude not far from that of anti-immigration supporter Arizona State Senator Russell Pearce. Von Jackson [2b] (played by Don Johnson) leads a group of border vigilantes patrolling south Texas and slaughtering what they call the “Mexican invaders,” immediately reminding the spectators/audience of Shawna Forde, an anti-immigration activist of the Minutemen American Defense group, who was recently condemned to death for the murder of Raul Flores and his daughter Brisenia.

This presentation aims at demonstrating the way in which Rodriguez uses *Machete* as both a deadpan mockery of clichés sticking to Latino immigrants [3] and as a reflection on the current criminalization of both illegal and legal Mexican workers,[4] who, while constituting the vast majority of low-wage workers in Texas (and gradually of the whole South), are

automatically and hypocritically stigmatized at the intersection of the notions of race, class, and identity—which might tempt us to see Machete, in some ways, as the very first Latinexploitation movie.

I’d like to start talking about the eponymous hero of the movie, Machete. Machete is a fascinating character in the way his plunge into illegality is a consequence of the murder of his wife and daughter by Torrez,[5] a Mexican drug lord played by Steven Seagal. Being threatened of death in his own country, Machete has to illegally cross the border and, end up looking for odd jobs at a day labor site in Texas. [6] One day, Machete is offered a deal he cannot refuse: a man who calls himself Booth is ready to pay him \$150,000 to assassinate anti-immigration State Senator John McLaughlin, who seeks re-election. Machete at first refuses to do it, but Booth gives him no choice,[7] abusing his situation as an illegal alien, saying “I can’t make you do this. But I can make sure something happens to you if you don’t,” implying he has the power to have Machete sent back to Mexico, or worse. What Machete doesn’t know is that Booth actually works for both Torrez and McLaughlin, and sees the (failed) assassination attempt as a way to help the Senator rise in the polls. [8] Our hero ends up getting framed, chased by the police for the attempted murder of Senator McLaughlin.

Machete is a strong, impressive character, played by Danny Trejo, a Mexican-American actor well known for his roles as baddies in low-budget movies and TV shows. He embodies the physically strong, [9] sexually powerful hero, who has been ripped of everything he possessed—his family, his money, his job—and tries to find his path in a foreign society with pride and honor. When Torrez sees the video of the failed assassination attempt, he asks Booth who the gunner is. Booth’s answer is short and clear: “Nobody. A day laborer from the streets,” implying the total anonymity and invisibility of day laborers. Machete is a true hero in the way he handles situations: he is strong, yet only uses his superhuman strength and fighting abilities when necessary; he’s honest, bringing back the money he borrows; [10] he sexually attracts female characters, but never abuses them [11]; he falls to the ground [12] but slowly rises to the top. [13] Another interesting fact is the way Machete is related to his favorite weapon, the machete. When Booth asks him to choose his weapons for the assassination, Machete doesn’t

pick the high-tech guns lying on the table, preferring by far the machete. Seeing this, Booth laughs, [14] and says “Machete, that’s only good if you wanna make a brutal point. But it’s low-tech, completely unsuited to our purposes.” This definition of the weapon totally suits the main character, who’s indeed ready to “make brutal points,” and is totally unsuited to Booth’s purposes (as he will kill his henchmen one by one), and can be seen as “low-tech” on a number of levels. Not only does Machete has great difficulties using cell-phones, and is shown as being unable to burn a CD on a computer, [15] he is also low-tech due to his origins, situation, and race—at least in the way Booth and the other antagonists see him.

Booth, Torrez, and Senator McLaughlin are not the only baddies of the movie. Von Jackson is the leader of a group of vigilantes who patrol the border and plainly shoot every single non-U.S. individual they meet. The characters are depicted as racist, violent, and uneducated. In a scene at the beginning of the movie, [16] Von and his group arrest a couple of illegal immigrants, threatening them with their guns. The vigilante’s first remark is [17] “Hablas Ingles? Well, I don’t speak much Mexican either,” followed by the sentence “You’re trespassing on my daddy’s land.” Von is motivated by a sense of duty based on the assumption that immigrants are invaders who threatens the centennial cultural and linguistic identity of the United-States. However, Von is aware of the fact that Texas and a good portion of the Western U.S. used to be Mexican territory, stating “Somebody’s got to keep watch on this great nation of ours. Otherwise, Texas will become Mexico once again.” [18] Paradoxically, Von Jackson defends his right to shoot what he sees as invaders on the ground of history, while at the same time acknowledging that a large part of the Southwestern U.S. used to be Mexican territory eventually annexed. At some point, Von even uses arguments based on false assumption: as he shoots the pregnant Mexican woman in the belly, he says “If it’s born here it gets to be a citizen, not different from you and me,” playing on the fantasy of the “anchor babies,” the urban legend which states that if an illegal immigrant gives birth to a baby on the U.S. territory, it automatically becomes a U.S. citizen—which is not the case at all in legal texts.

Senator McLaughlin’s campaign also relies on a series of shocking images and assumptions. Extracts from his campaign advertisements are shown periodically throughout the

movie. The first one shows images of worms and cockroaches, with a voice-over saying: [19] “Parasites have crossed our border and now are sickening our country... Leeching off our system... Destroying us from the inside... [...] [20] [McLaughlin] supports an electrified border fence! No amnesty for parasites! John McLaughlin wants to protect you from the invaders!” Immigrants are literally compared to parasites, [21] crawling “low-tech” creatures whose aim is to destroy the United-States from the inside. McLaughlin blames everything on the immigrants, going as far as comparing them to terrorists in one of his public speeches: [22] “Every time an illegal dances across our border it is an act of aggression against this sovereign state. An overt act of terrorism.” But McLaughlin is not the only one to convey the idea that every single problem of the state should be blamed on the immigrants. The news reports periodically shown throughout the movie are interesting to study in the way the information given by the media about the failed assassination attempt progresses. Right after the assassination attempt, the news report voice-over states that [23] “the gunman may have been of Mexican descent.” Twenty minutes after, the news report voice-over adds that “he may be in this country illegally.” The use of the modal “may” is pretty compelling, as it allows the media to give information without actually having any evidence of what they’re arguing, simply relying on stereotypes: a man who shoots anti-immigration Senator McLaughlin has to have Mexican origins, and even better, he could be an illegal immigrant himself.

But interestingly, stereotypes are also exploited by Machete in order to progress in his quest. Right after the assassination attempt, when Machete understands he got framed by Booth and tries to escape the building in which he is, the first weapon he finds is a broom, which he uses to surprise one of his aggressors and then fight him. [24] As the door of the elevator opens in front of the aggressor, [25] he doesn’t seem to realize he’s facing the man he’s supposed to apprehend—maybe due to the fact that the image of a Latino holding a broom in an elevator is very common to him. In another scene, Machete tries to sneak inside Torrez’s house in order to find evidence of his involvement in the whole assassination scheme. He grabs tools and heads straight for the main entrance of the mansion, walks to the security agents who secure the place, and when asked who he is, plainly answers [26] “I’m the new gardener.” After

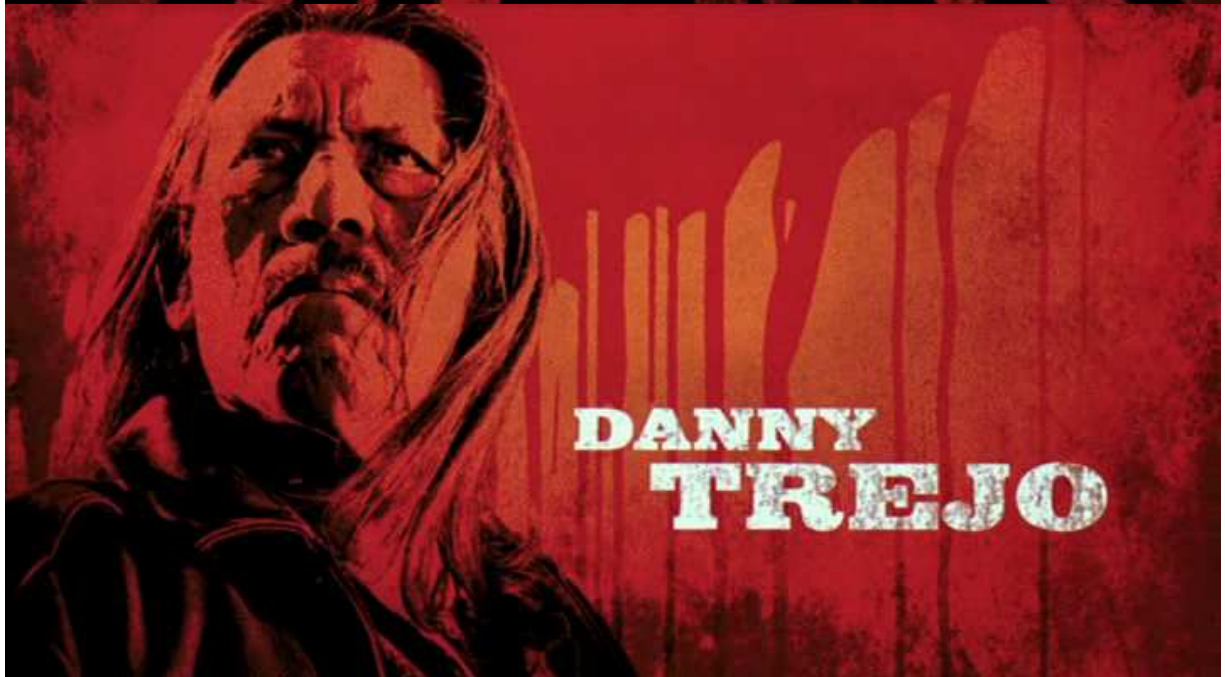
a second, the guards let Machete in, allowing him, through the exploitation of the stereotype of the Latino gardener, to not only break inside Booth’s office, but also to shoot an amateur erotic movie with his wife and daughter.[27] The irony of the stereotype is reinforced by the remark made by one of the guard to his colleague right after they let Machete in: “Did you ever notice how you let go Mexicans into your home just because he’s got gardening tools? I mean, no question asked. You just let him right in. He could have a chainsaw or a machete.” [28] But apart from putting forward with cynicism the stereotypes associated with the Latino immigrants, the movie also strongly underlines the utter hypocrisy of everybody involved when it comes to the question of illegal immigration.

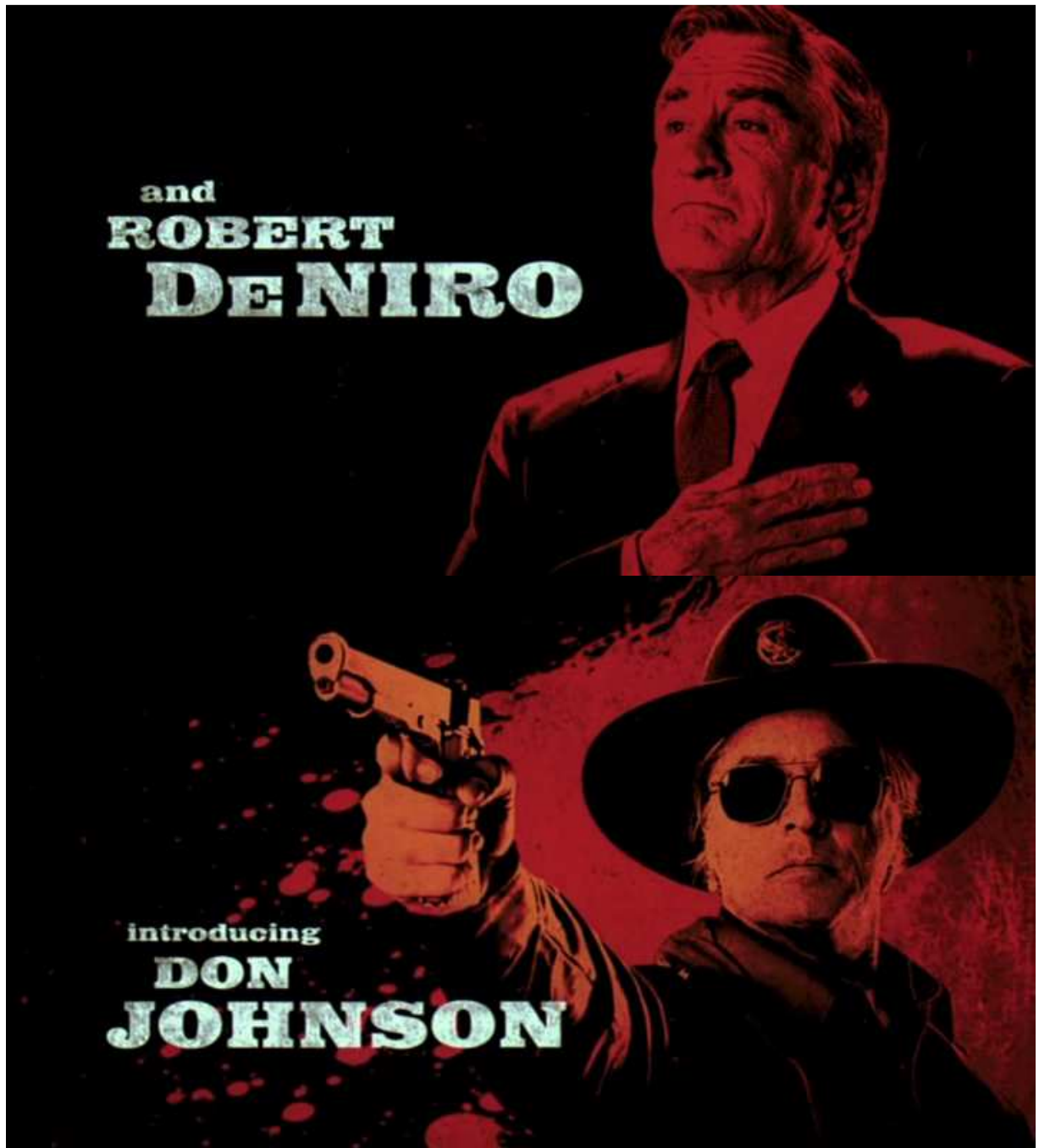
As Booth explains to Machete when he offers him to kill the Senator, “What the State Senator fails to understand is that this state runs on illegal labor. Thrives on it. Keeps costs down. Keeps the wheels turning. We bust that up and we’re fucked. For the sake of both our peoples, the Senator must die.” By pretending to want to defend the well-being of the state of Texas, Booth is shown as toying with a point of view used by some defenders of illegal immigration: it actually brings way more money than it costs to the state of Texas. In the movie, all the baddies are shown as having motivations which are actually totally unrelated to the issue and debate of illegal immigration. Senator John McLaughlin doesn’t really care about illegals, he simply seeks re-election—even if he enjoys shooting a few *mojados* with Von Jackson, he carefully asks the whole scene to be filmed, saying “burn me a DVD, my high-dollar supporters are gonna like that.” [29]. Booth and Torrez want McLaughlin to be elected because if an electric fence is built along the border,[30] they will be able to control more easily the drug-trafficking taking place between Mexico and the United-States. Finally Von has nothing against illegal immigrants in themselves: he’s just plainly racist and hates everything that is not white, his group of vigilantes resembling a band of heavily-armed white supremacists. [31] Beyond this exploitation of the general theme of illegal immigration for personal benefits, the movie also shows the characters as paradoxically deeply influenced by a Latino culture they declare as inferior.

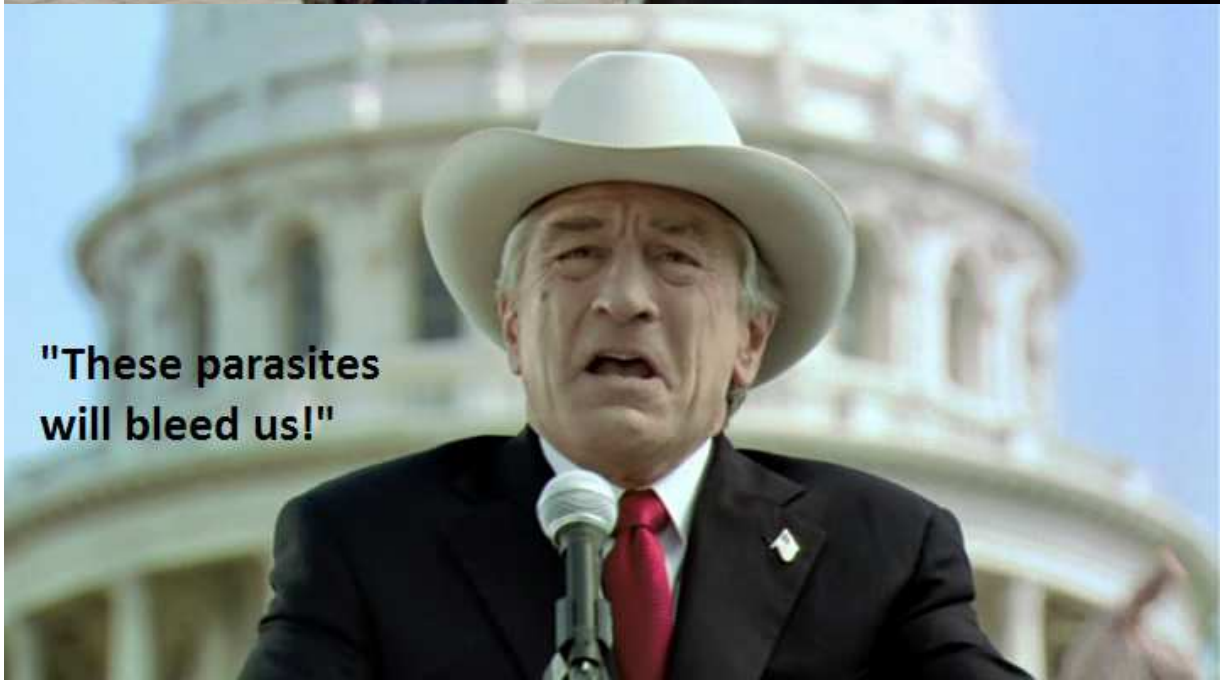
A good example is the way the characters relentlessly use words of Spanish in their discourse, which is peppered with references to Mexican food and culture. When Booth and his henchman discover with horror that Machete is a former Mexican Federal Agent, the henchman says: “That’s right, CIA, FBI, DEA, all rolled in one mean fucking *burrito*,” [32] while right before, Booth had been enjoying a meal of *tacos* and *salsa* with his family. A bit later in the movie, when McLaughlin discovers that Machete is still alive, he tells Booth: [33] “Well, this *cucaracha* has got AK-47s and he’s laying waste to everything that gets in his fucking path! I can’t walk outta here like a fucking *piñata* waiting to get whacked.” The richest intervention, linguistically speaking, takes place when a dying Booth confesses to Machete he worked closely with Torrez in order to control the drug market: [34] “We could have been rich. Torrez would have stopped all those cheap shit across the border... Did I tell you that he had competed with every *pendejo* with a dime bag and a dream? So we financed Von, gave him and his men guns. Our own little border patrol. But Torrez wanted the whole *enchilada*. So I thought, why not let politics do what guns couldn’t? Funny thing is I thought that it would be a more peaceful resolution, not that tortured *taco*.” This last sentence doesn’t only demonstrate the clear influence of Latino culture on characters, it also emphasizes the crooked nature of immigration politics in the South, which literally exploit the condition of the workers for votes and money. This is something Border Agent Sartana Rivera, played by Jessica Alba, understands progressively throughout the movie. When she first arrests Machete, she tries to explain to Machete he shouldn’t resort to violence, and that he should trust the U.S. system: [35] “I know what they did to your family. And if I were you, I wouldn’t trust anyone either, but it’s different here, laws are enforced. And people control them, not drug lords. The system works here,” to which Machete answers: “Says you.” By the end of the movie, having discovered how politics and drug-lords were manipulating the issue of immigration, Agent Rivera is utterly transformed by her discoveries. When near the end of the movie, Machete is endangered, she is shown standing on top of a car, riling up a crowd of day laborer: [36] “Yes, I’m a woman of the law, and there are lots of laws. But if they don’t offer us justice, then they aren’t laws! They are just lines drawn in the sand by men who would stand on your back for power and glory. Men who

deserve to be cut down! [...] We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us!" Through this particular intervention, Rivera voices her refusal to comply with a corrupt system basing its laws on crooked assumptions, adding the well known Mexican-American motto "we didn't cross the border, the border crossed us," which is a direct reference to the effects of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which marked the end of the Mexican-American War with the cession of 55% of Mexico's territory to the United-States, turning by the same token the Mexican citizens living in the region into U.S. citizens. The scene is followed by a huge battle involving all the Mexican immigrants of the region, led by Machete, fighting Von Jackson's forces.

Which leads us to our final question: can Machete be considered the very first Latinexploitation movie? [37] Even if a big yes would be tempting, my answer has to be yes and no. Blaxploitation movies from the 1970s, such as *Shaft*, [38] were a way to appeal to an urban African-American audience, through the depiction of tough Black heroes—however, the heavy reliance on stereotypes led to the death of the genre, which was heavily attacked by many Civil Rights organizations. *Machete* could be seen as appealing to a Mexican-American audience, through the depiction of its tough hero, and the positive role given to Latino figures in the movie. However, as we've seen, Rodriguez constantly plays with stereotypes in order to demonstrate how people rely on them, and at the same time points out the hypocrisy of a political and economic system which lies on corruption and exploitation. Far from simply "exploiting" Latino issues in Texas and in the South (which is what politicians and drug lords do), Rodriguez prefers to use irony, cynicism, and humor to point out, through the medium of a fast-paced action movie, the whole political and social machine at work behind this phenomenon of real-life exploitation. *Machete* may not be the first Latinexploitation movie, but it can definitely be seen as the first counter-Latinexploitation movie ever shot.

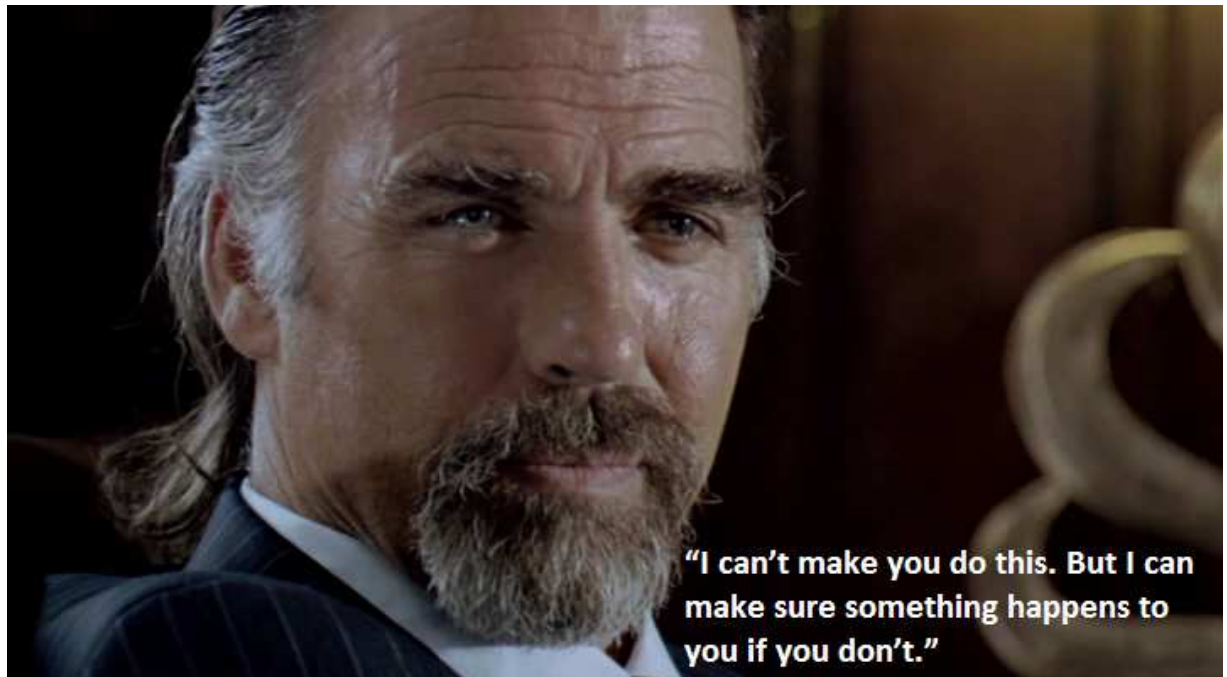






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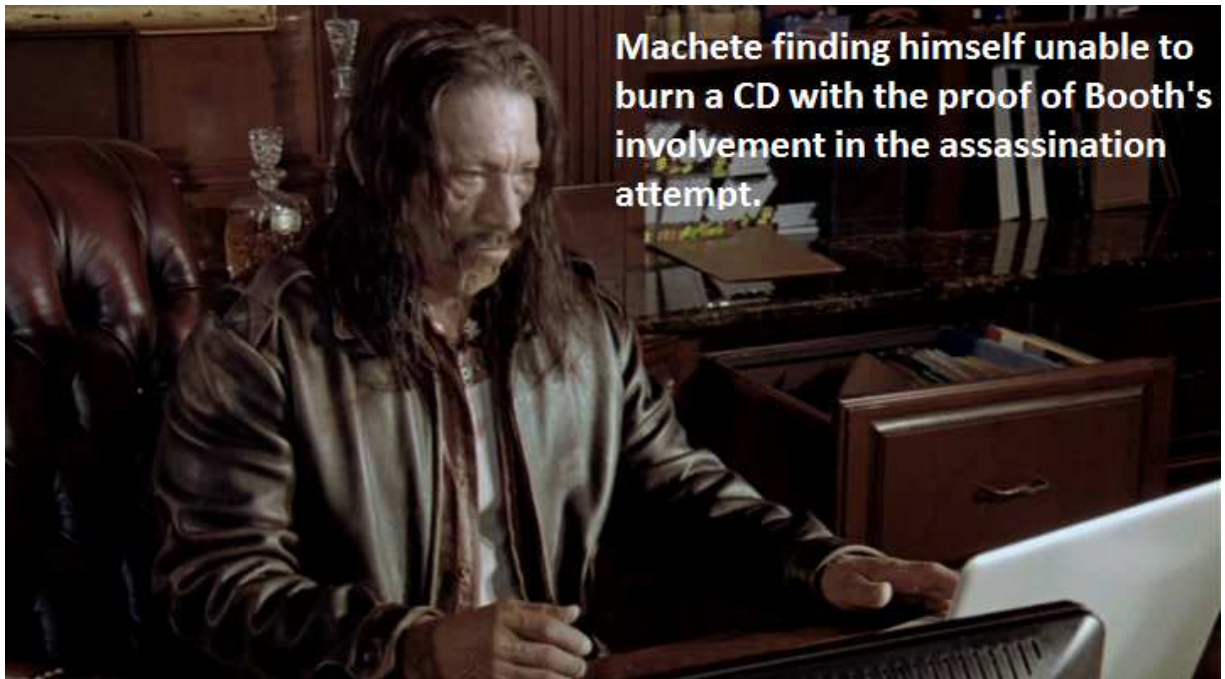






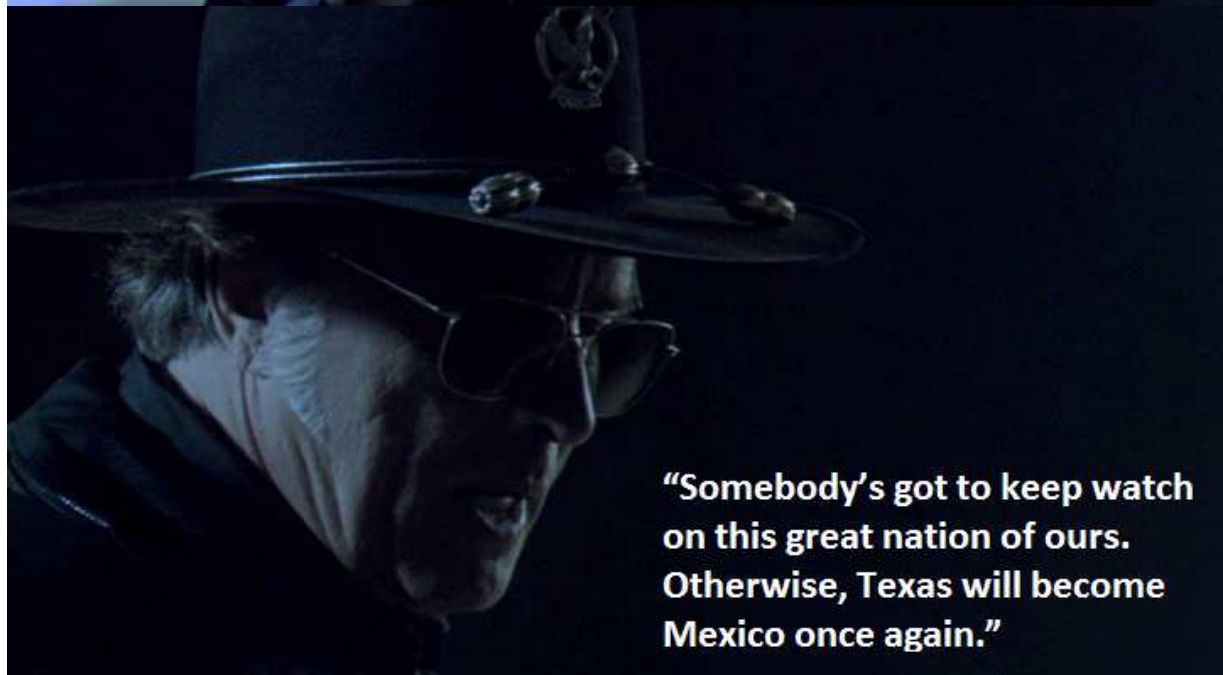






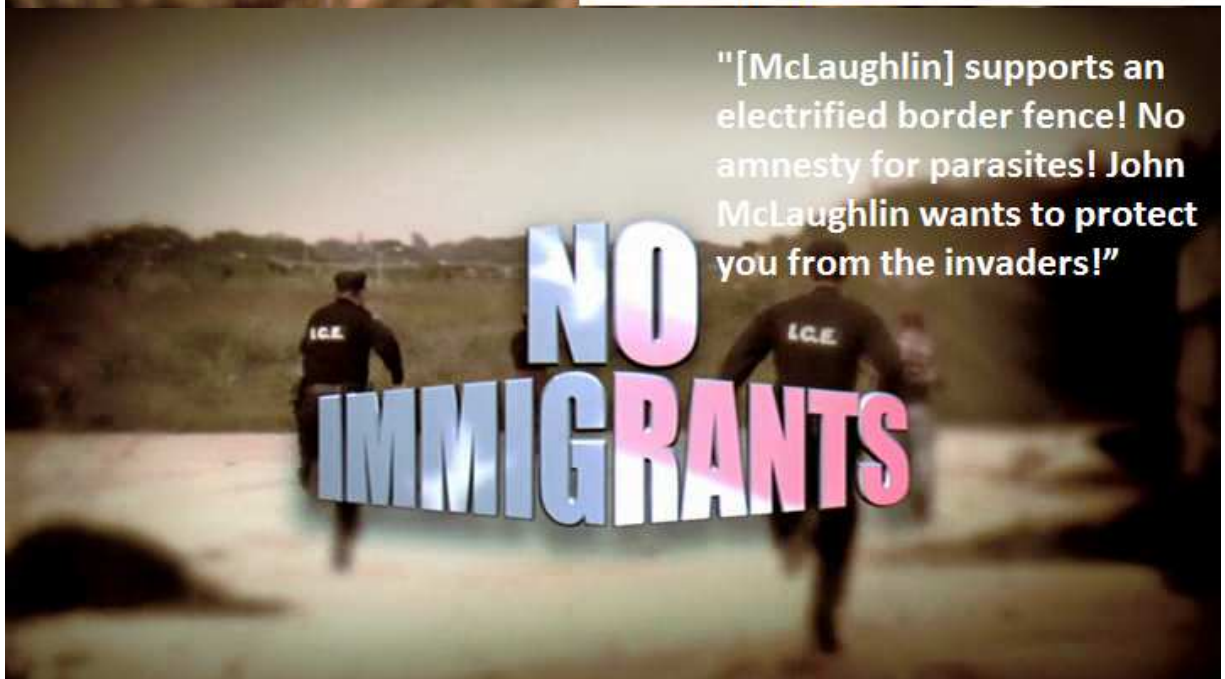
Machete finding himself unable to burn a CD with the proof of Booth's involvement in the assassination attempt.







"Parasites have crossed our border and now are sickening our country... Leeching off our system... Destroying us from the inside..."



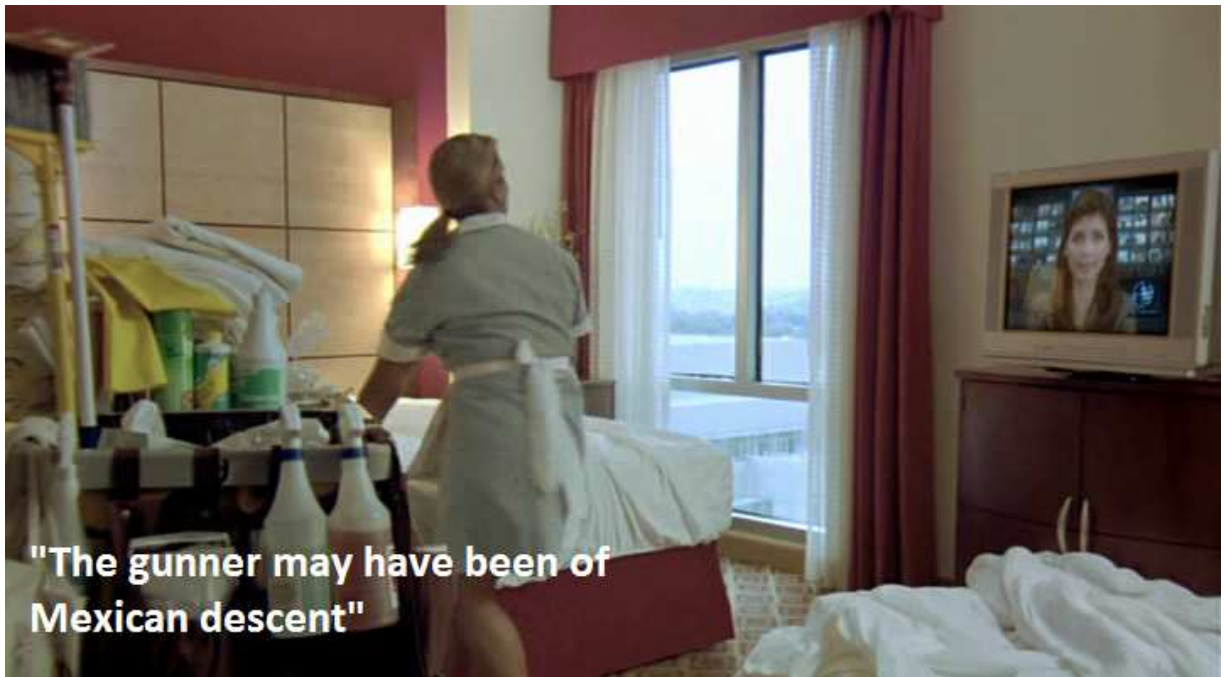
"[McLaughlin] supports an electrified border fence! No amnesty for parasites! John McLaughlin wants to protect you from the invaders!"

**NO
IMMIGRANTS**



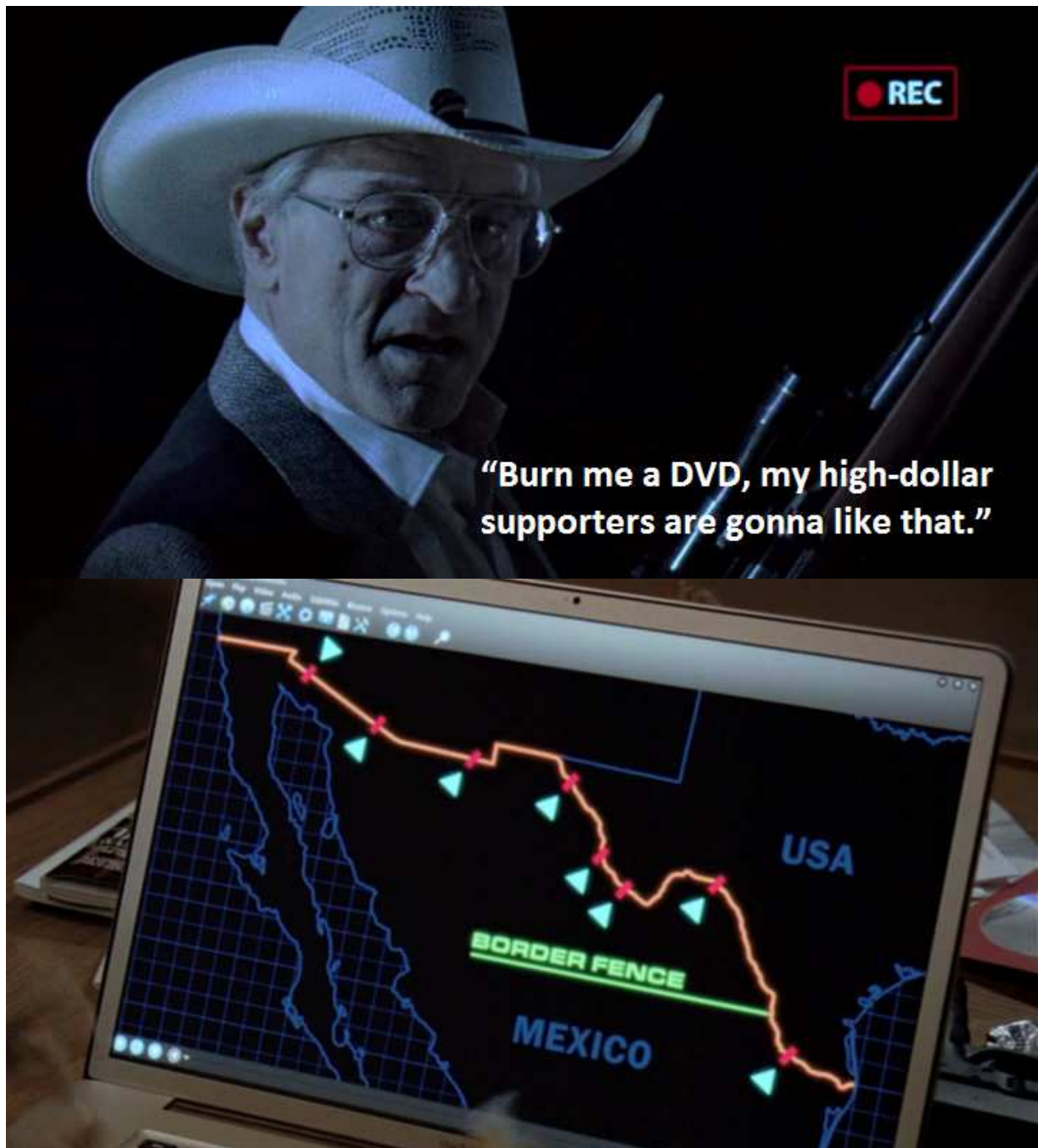
“Every time an illegal dances across our border it is an act of aggression against this sovereign state. An overt act of terrorism.”

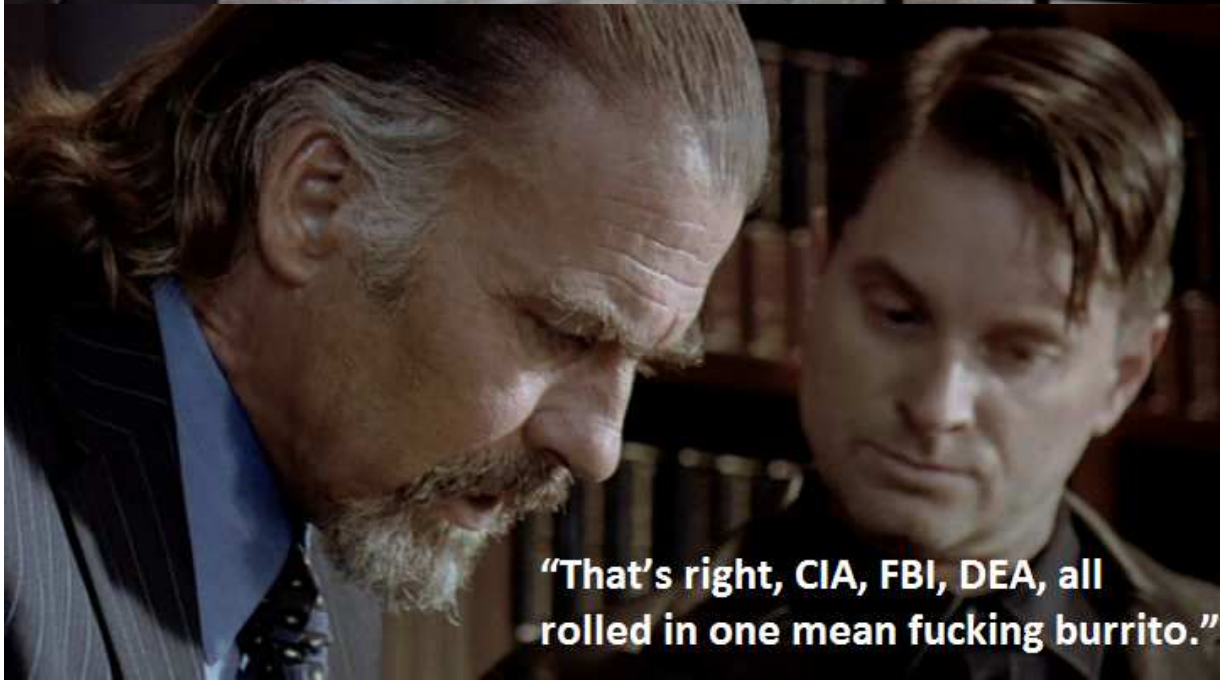


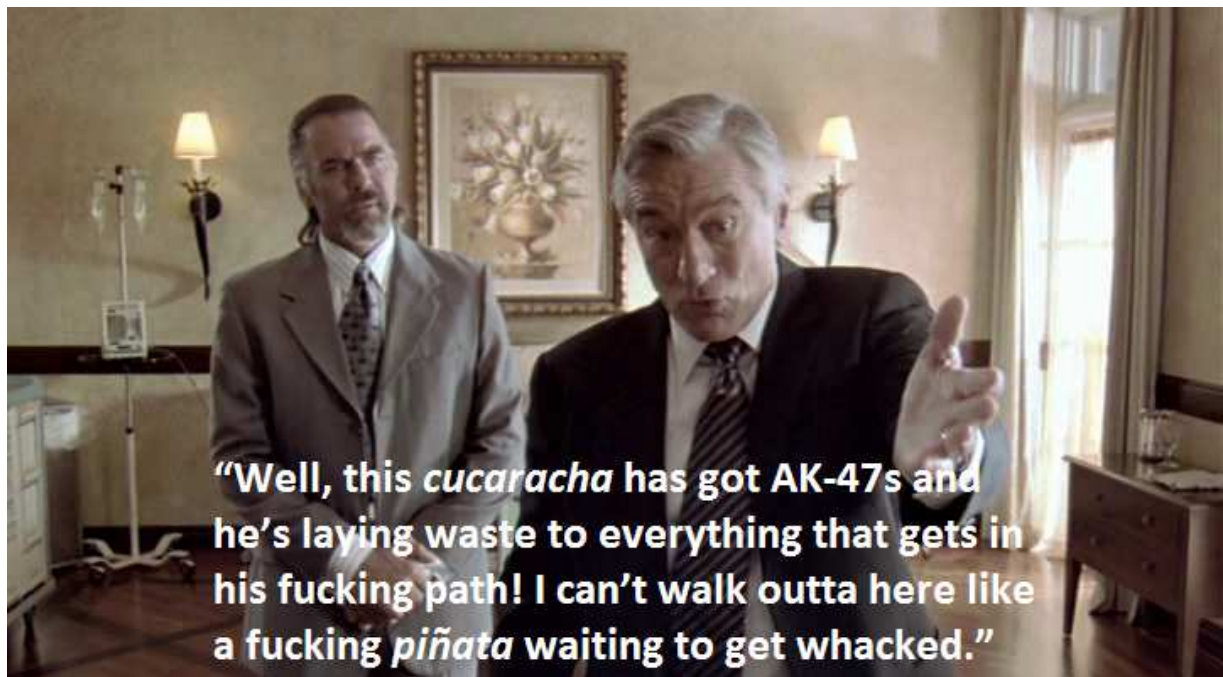




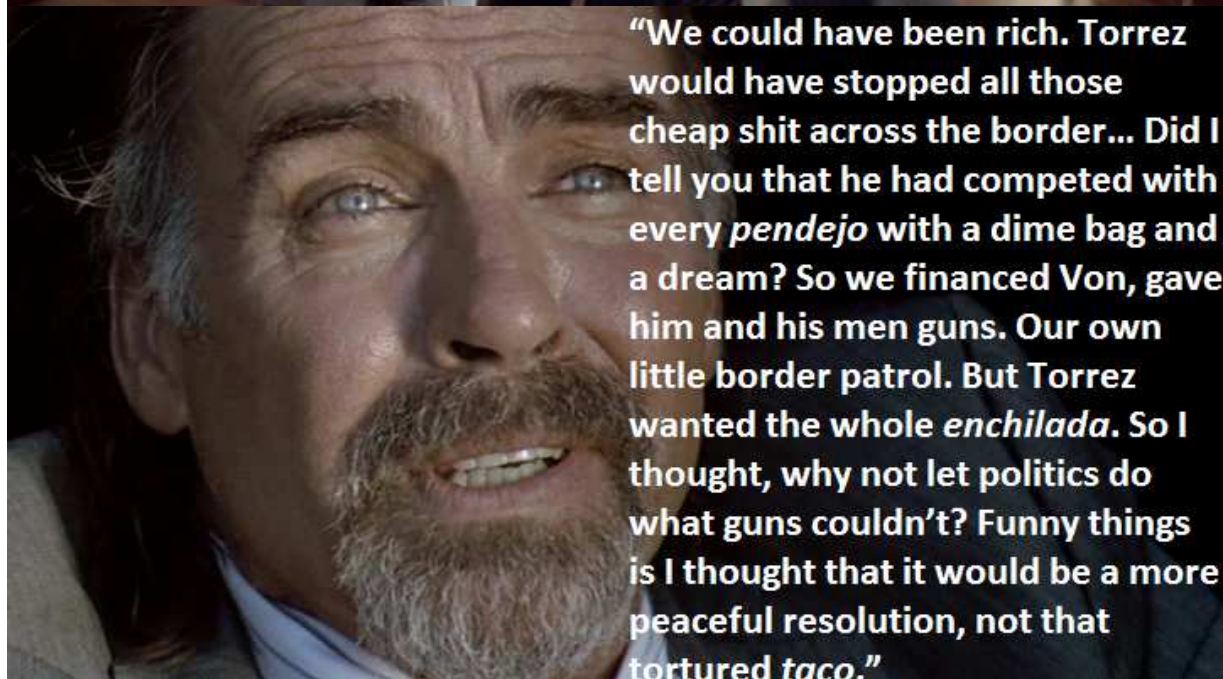




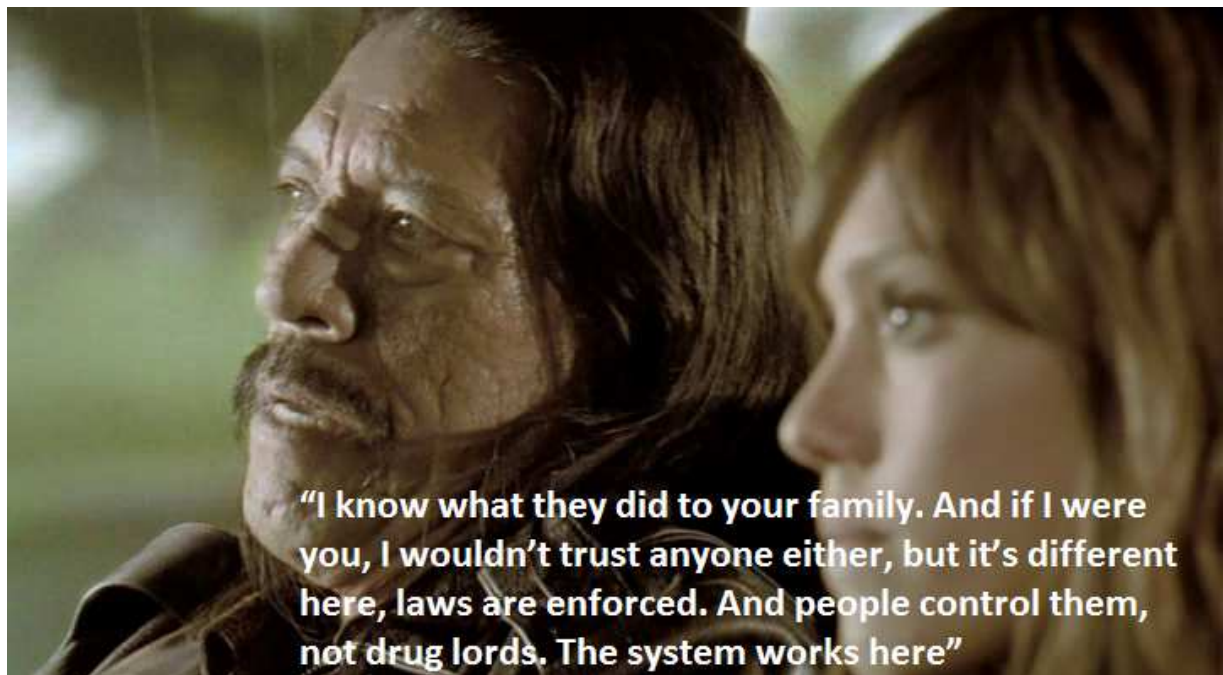




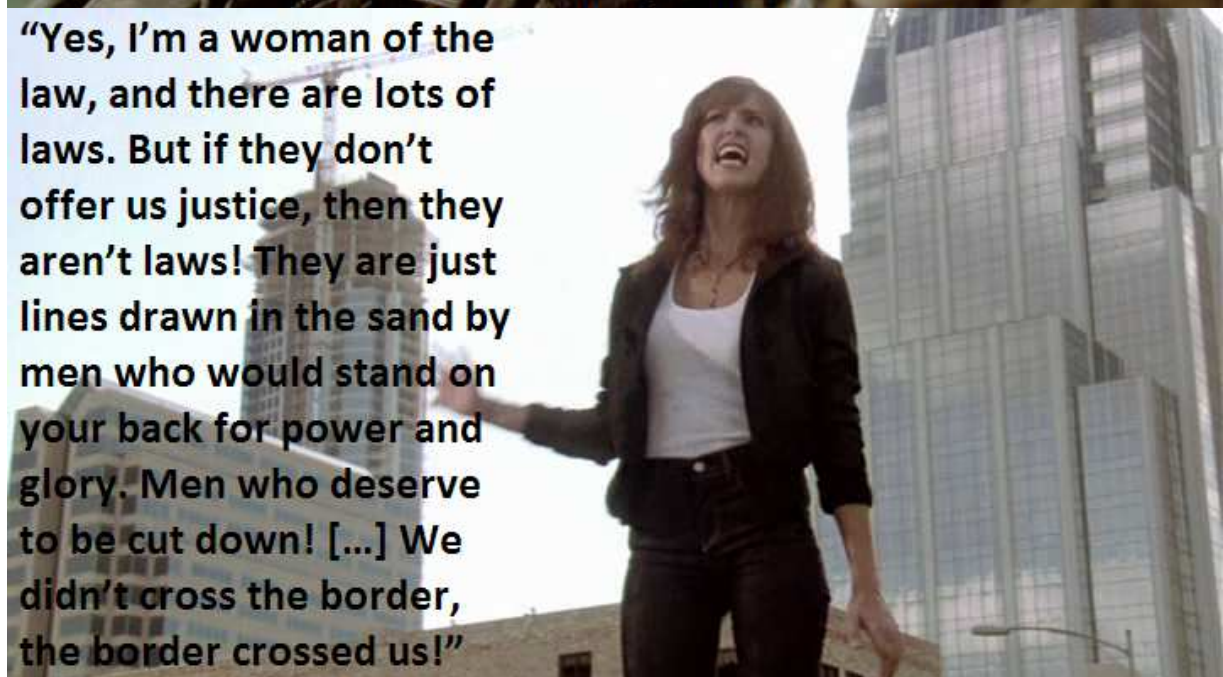
“Well, this *cucaracha* has got AK-47s and he’s laying waste to everything that gets in his fucking path! I can’t walk outta here like a fucking *piñata* waiting to get whacked.”



“We could have been rich. Torrez would have stopped all those cheap shit across the border... Did I tell you that he had competed with every *pendejo* with a dime bag and a dream? So we financed Von, gave him and his men guns. Our own little border patrol. But Torrez wanted the whole *enchilada*. So I thought, why not let politics do what guns couldn’t? Funny things is I thought that it would be a more peaceful resolution, not that tortured *taco*.”



“I know what they did to your family. And if I were you, I wouldn’t trust anyone either, but it’s different here, laws are enforced. And people control them, not drug lords. The system works here”



“Yes, I’m a woman of the law, and there are lots of laws. But if they don’t offer us justice, then they aren’t laws! They are just lines drawn in the sand by men who would stand on your back for power and glory. Men who deserve to be cut down! [...] We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us!”

