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Assassination of Ex-Presidential Candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio Featured in New Movie

by Carlos Navarro

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The movie industry has become an alternative forum in Mexico for shaping public opinion. While only a few movies that attempt to make a political or social statement have been produced, those films have brought a powerful message. One recent example is *Presunto Culpable* (Presumed Guilty), released in February 2011. The film, produced by Roberto Hernández and Layda Negrete, exposed a deeply flawed and often unfair judicial system ([SourceMex, March 23, 2011](#)). The movie attracted a large audience.

Another movie has been released with a similar following in Mexican theaters. The new flick, which producers are quick to point out is a work of fiction based on factual occurrences, is called *Colosio*. The plot is centered on events leading to the murder of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, who was gunned down in Tijuana on March 23, 1994 ([SourceMex, March 30, 1994](#)).

Just as *Presunto Culpable* attracted large crowds in 2011, *Colosio* has been a big hit at the box office this year. In its first two weeks, the film ranked among the five-most-watched features in Mexico's movie theaters. The Cámara Nacional de la Industria Cinematográfica y del Videograma (CANACINE) said the film had grossed about 27.6 million pesos (US\$2 million) between its debut on June 8 and the middle of the month. "In the period spanning June 15-17 alone, the movie brought earnings of 8.5 million pesos (US\$675,000) and attracted 165,967 viewers," said the online news and entertainment site Ehui.com.

Colosio is the second movie in recent election cycles to attempt to portray corruption in a PRI-led government ahead of an election. *La Ley de Herodes* was released in 1999, just months before the 2000 presidential election. The movie portrayed corruption in the PRI in the 1940s ([SourceMex, Dec. 15, 1999](#)). That election, won by Vicente Fox of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), ended the PRI's nearly seven-decade hold on the presidency ([SourceMex, July 5, 2000](#)).

Movie puts PRI in bad light

Colosio centers on a fictional semi-retired intelligence agent, Andrés, who is assigned by the PRI's secretary-general to run a secret parallel investigation, supposedly authorized by the president, of Colosio's killing. The producers do not use any names, but most Mexicans know that the president in 1994 was Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The film also implies a connection between the Colosio murder and the assassination of the party's secretary-general Francisco Ruiz Massieu ([SourceMex, Oct. 5, 1994](#)).

"[This character] is portrayed as a man who is given few resources to conduct the investigation," columnist Norma González wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Jornada*. "Even though he tries his best, he encounters a structure that operates outside the law where others 'decide what truth is and who knows the truth.' These are characters who have power above the law and operate in the shadows."

"The effect is like one of those parlor mysteries where everyone in the room has reason to want the victim dead: traffickers worried that Colosio would favor a rival gang; PRI hard-liners unnerved by his anti-corruption talk; rival politicians; members of the president's inner circle, fearing lost influence," said the Los Angeles Times.

Even though producers are out front in pointing out that this is a work of fiction, some elements could influence the public's understanding of the Colosio and Ruiz Massieu murders.

The scriptwriters and producers took great pains not to mention PRI politicians by name, other than Colosio (and his wife Diana Laura). But some characters are simply named The President (presumably Salinas de Gortari), the brother (Raúl Salinas de Gortari), the professional (Ruiz Massieu), and others. "If one does not see the obvious connections or is unaware of these references, the movie is simply a political thriller, although it fails as a murder mystery," novelist Jorge Volpi wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper *Reforma*.

Volpi argues that a work of fiction has the power to alter historical reality, especially when many suspicions exist. But he notes that the link to the Ruiz Massieu murder does not help clarify the Colosio killing. "The movie does explain why the system was responsible for the assassination of Ruiz Massieu but not its role in the Colosio death," he said.

Still, many questions remain unanswered, including the government's assertion that Colosio's murder was carried out by a lone gunman, Mario Aburto ([SourceMex, June 8, 1994](#), and [March 24, 2004](#)). "In the public consciousness, that theory never was—and current is not—credible because the suspicion of a state conspiracy, carried out during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, has not been disproved," Hugo Lara Chávez wrote in *NotiCine*. "On this premise, [director Carlos] Bolado weaves a fictitious tale about a nebulous investigation that took place that year."

Lara Chávez said the director resolves this dilemma through a series of flashbacks that reconstruct the tense atmosphere that Colosio had to face when dealing with the powers that controlled the PRI and which hypothetically ordered his assassination. "But several questions are left unanswered," said Lara Chávez. "Was there more than one shooter? Was there really a situation where another gunman pulled the trigger (and Aburto was made to take the fall)?"

But some real-life events give some credibility to the theory that there might have been a conspiracy involving Salinas de Gortari. For example, Colosio is said to have angered Salinas with a fiery speech at the Monumento a la Revolución, a famous Mexico City landmark, on March 6, 1994, in which he spoke of a country in distress, with a hunger and thirst for justice. He also spoke of the need to reform a system that gave so much power to the president and to require him to conform to the limits of the Constitution.

Columnist Martín Moreno said the speech made Salinas furious because it ran counter to the president's efforts to show the world that his was a successful and triumphant administration. "In just a few minutes, Luis Donald had shredded to pieces the image of the country that Salinas wanted to present abroad," said Moreno.

Moreno said other PRI insiders have been mentioned as part of the conspiracy, including the president's brother Raúl Salinas de Gortari and presidential counsel José María Córdoba. "The powerful presidential counsel was supporting Ernesto Zedillo as the PRI candidate," said Moreno.

Zedillo was selected to replace Colosio following the assassination and went on to win the presidency in July 1994 ([SourceMex, Aug. 24, 1994](#)).

Another character not portrayed prominently in the movie but who had strong aspirations of gaining the PRI nomination was ex-Mexico City mayor Manuel Camacho Solís. Moreno said Camacho was not happy when Colosio was selected to represent the PRI. "He always thought that Salinas was going to make good on his promise to make him his successor," Moreno said of Camacho, who remained with the PRI for a few years before switching party affiliation to the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD).

Could timing of movie affect July 1 elections?

The timing of the release just a few weeks before the July 1 election has led to charges of political motivations, since the movie does not put the PRI powerbrokers in the best light. "The movie depicts the PRI-led government of the time as a snake pit of shadowy, Machiavellian figures, the kind of people who seem comfortable around suitcases full of money and just nasty enough to crush anyone in their way," said the Los Angeles Times.

Many student protests that have erupted against PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto have linked him with the old guard of the PRI and warned that if he wins Mexico could fall back into the authoritarian state that prevailed for seven decades ([SourceMex, June 13, 2012](#)). There are allegations that Salinas is one of the powerbrokers behind Peña Nieto's presidential campaign ([SourceMex, Dec. 7, 2011](#)).

But producer Mónica Lozano insists that there is no effort to influence the choices of the voting public. Rather, she emphasizes that the producers and the promoters were thinking of getting the maximum exposure for the movie by releasing it during the summer movie season. She acknowledged, however, that the presidential race was also a factor to promote discussion about the Colosio and Ruiz Massieu assassinations and other historic events that took place in 1994, including the uprising of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas ([SourceMex, Jan. 26, 1994](#), and [Feb. 23, 1994](#)).

"Remembering the moment is very important because it is something we had denied and forgotten," Lozano said of the Colosio assassination. "The events of 1994 marked the next two decades, and I don't think its history is finished being written."

But no matter how strong a disclaimer the filmmakers offer about the intentions of their film, the public is bound to see this as political statement. "People aren't going to see this as a work of fiction and are going to consider this a political message," said Fernanda Solórzano, a prominent movie critic. "Yes, it's going to reinforce the anti-PRI sentiment." [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on June 26, 2012, reported at 13.77 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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