

The New York Times

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2006

Just Across the Border, Mexican Laborers Work Cheap But Fight Hard

For an uplifting documentary, "Maquilapolis" sure is dismaying. The film, a "P.O.V." offering tonight on PBS, looks at life in the hundreds of foreign-owned factories that have sprung up along Mexico's border with the United States since the 1960's. These maquiladoras (the film's title means "City of Factories") are usually assembly plants: raw materials come in, and finished products or components go out. Corporations are attracted by tax advantages and cheap labor, and workers — many of

them single mothers, the film notes — are drawn to the border by wages a bit higher than elsewhere in Mexico.

The filmmakers, Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre, focus in particular on a small group of women who stood up for themselves and their fellow workers in a couple of skirmishes with the corporations and the government, which as portrayed here has not been exactly vigilant in looking out for the interests of common folk. One fight involved getting severance pay out of Sanyo when it closed a factory because it had found even cheaper workers in Asia. The

other had to do with an abandoned lead-reclamation plant whose toxic debris was ruining lives in the surrounding shantytowns.

The film is not conventional journalism. There is no attempt to let the industries or government have a say. But the series is not called "P.O.V." — point of view — for nothing: the filmmakers set out to show life as the workers see it, and they succeed, with often appalling clarity.

In one amazing scene a light rain begins to fall, and a tiny creek that flows through a squalid community of shacks suddenly, improbably, becomes a raging river. One of the

women explains that a rain, even a slight one, gives the factories on the high ground an excuse to jettison their wastewater.

The filmmakers give the documentary a personality with some offbeat cinematic techniques, and when the women win their little battles, you can feel their pride. But the empowerment vibe doesn't go far because you can also see that their dismal lives won't really improve that much.

Take Woody Guthrie's lyric from "Deportee" — "Is this the best way we can grow our big orchards?" — and replace the crops with television components, auto parts, oxygen masks, catheter bags and the other things these workers make, and you have this film's real message.

TELEVISION REVIEW

NEIL
GENZLINGER

Maquilapolis (City of Factories)

On most PBS stations tonight (check local listings).

Produced and directed by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre; Vivian Kleiman, executive producer; Darcy McKinnon, Annelise Wunderlich, co-producers; Daniel Gorrell, Sophia Constantinou, cinematography; Ms. Funari, editor; original music by Pauline Oliveros with the Nortec Collective and John Blue.