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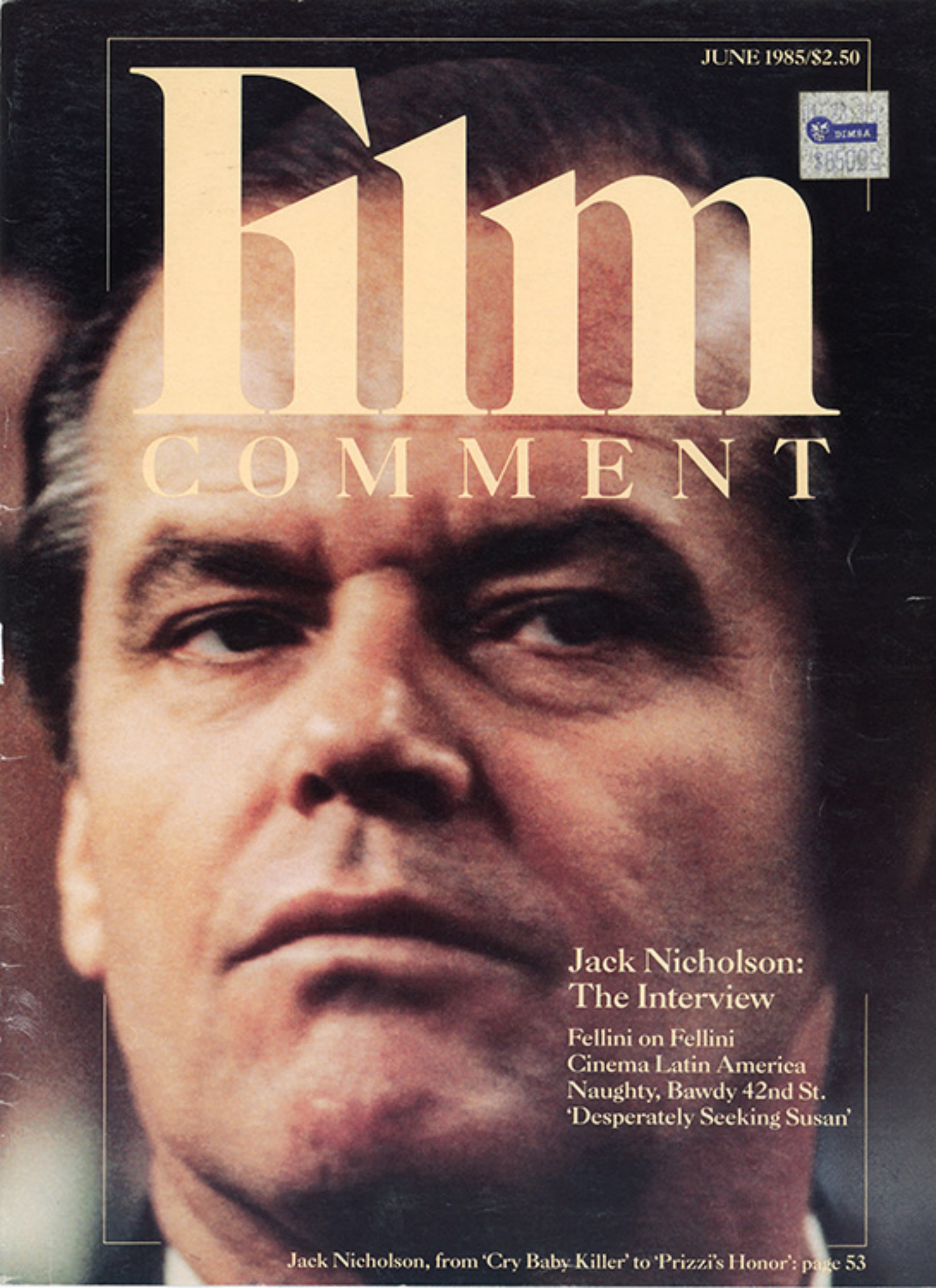
# Film COMMENT



## Jack Nicholson: The Interview

Fellini on Fellini
Cinema Latin America
Naughty, Bawdy 42nd St.
'Desperately Seeking Susan'

Jack Nicholson, from 'Cry Baby Killer' to 'Prizzi's Honor': page 53

# Mexico T

by Leonardo García Tsao

El Otro.

*Ariel Zuñiga's* E

After a long period of deep crisis for Mexican cinema, there still doesn't seem to be a light at the end of the projector. An average of a hundred films is produced each year, of which 80 percent originate with private production companies. Their one purpose: to make a good profit out of low-budget quickies.

These films fit three basic genre formulas. There's the bordello comedy with its whores-with-a-heart-of-gold clichés, low-brow humor, and soft-core porn. There's the working class neo-realism genre: the signal boxoffice success of *El Milusos* (*Man of a Thousand Jobs*, 1981) spawned dozens of imitations, all pretending to be gritty portrayals of the plight of Mexico City's proletariat, but actually hackneyed melodramas with demagogic points of view. And there's the borderline thriller with assorted bootleggers, drug dealers, country music singers, wetbacks, and so on. The latest success in that genre is *Lola la Trailera* (*Lola the Truckwoman*, 1984), a clumsy actioner that probably learned a thing or two from Hollywood B movies like *Truck Stop Women*, with a dash of bordello-genre conventions thrown in for good measure.

The remaining 20 percent of annual Mexican film production is divided between the state companies and the independents. Fifteen years ago, during former President Luis Echeverría's regime, the state was the main producer of "quality" pictures. Helped by grants from the Banco Cinematográfico, a now-extinct institution headed by Echeverría's brother, Rodolfo, a young generation of filmmakers—generally film school graduates—had a chance of getting their projects off the ground.

All that came to an end with the López Portillo government. Thanks to the disastrous administration of Margarita López Portillo, the president's sister, state film support was reduced to a minimum. When films were funded, they were often international co-productions helmed by foreign directors. *Red Bells/ Mexico in Flames* (1981), Russian director Sergei Bondarchuk's costly turkey, is the clearest example of that wrong-headed policy: it earned neither prestige nor boxoffice returns.

The López Portillo government left the country in a state of economic crisis that further stanched its cinema's growth. Nowadays, with the second largest foreign debt in the Third World and an ever-mounting inflation rate, the state is hardly in the position of backing any ambitious plan of film production. In the third year of President De la Madrid's regime, the results are still meager. Perhaps the solution will come from the independents, who with alternative ways of production, distribution, and exhibition are trying to find a way out of the morass.

Under the guidance of Alberto Isaac—himself a movie director and, for a change, not a presidential sibling—the De la Madrid government has made tentative steps toward encouraging the independents; already a couple of independent pictures and an experimental film contest have received partial state funding. But getting a film made doesn't guarantee it will be shown. In the Echeverría years those films produced by the state weren't handled properly, and most of them bombed at the boxoffice. Today, the few works of merit are seen merely by a minority in marginal exhibition circuits, *cine-clubs*, and film archives, while the large audiences flock to see American movies or the trash produced by the private companies. That trash has been around for so long that it's become a hard habit to break.

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During the López Portillo administration there was talk of returning to the "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema. That so called "Golden Age" happened during the Forties and resulted from a happy coincidence of historic events; World War II, for example, helped in gaining a strong commercial foothold in the Latin American market. And the country benefitted from the flowering of talent: Emilio Fernández, Fernando de Fuentes, and Alejandro Galindo, among others. At present, most filmmakers from that period are either dead or retired. The only true exception is famous cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, who recently did the photography for John Huston's *Under the Volcano*. It's sadly telling that in the same film, Emilio Fernández, the director with whom Figueroa did his best black-and-white work, could be seen in a bit part as a frail old man.

A new breed followed the Golden Agers 20 years later. These young directors deeply felt the influence of the French New Wave; some of them had been graduated from European film schools. Of this group, only Jaime Humberto Hermosillo has pursued a steady, individualist career. Unlike most members of his generation, Hermosillo hasn't directed TV programs, commercials, or routine outside projects; his films are often independent, state, or university financed. Recently, he moved from Mexico City (where Mexican cinema is essen-