

Chicano cinema: a panoramic view

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The origins and development of an alternative cinema

Chicano narrative cinema is a very recent development in the business of movie-making in the United States, an industry that originated almost a century ago. Creatively self-determined, full-length narrative features—written, directed or produced by Chicanos—first received wide theatrical distribution as late as the 1980s.

As an artistic body of work, Chicano narrative cinema, defined as films with substantial artistic control by Chicanos, debuted only a few years earlier, in the

mid-seventies. Since then, it continues to evolve and develop aesthetically through increasingly compelling stories, strong characterization, varied genres and original and innovative narrative styles. Its evolution in filmic focus and style, which covers its less than 20-year history, reflects the times in which the works were produced and mirrors an implied audience and community posture.

The small handful of male Chicano directors, writers and producers is largely perceived by the industry as a marginal creative community with high-risk, unmarketable product. In fact, even today, Chicanos are the most under-represented ethnic group in influential positions which

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L.A. deportation raid in the 1930s (scene from *Break of Dawn*).

exert artistic control or foster cinema projects.¹ Not surprisingly, as twice a minority, Chicana filmmakers have been less successful at establishing themselves as key creative players in feature-length narrative cinema than their male counterparts.²

Thematically, Chicano narrative films of the 1970s and 1980s have shared certain trends. Historical revision of key events in the Chicano experience has predominated. Mexican/Latino immigration to the U.S. is a key cinematic issue. Another major source of inspiration for filmmakers has been the rich literary expressions of recent Chicano/a writers. Drama and music have also been important elements in Chicano cinema.

Most Chicano narrative cinema to date has been produced as independent films, outside major Hollywood studios: *Alambrista*, *Once in a Lifetime*, *El Norte*, *Break of Dawn*, *El Mariachi*, and *Tierra*. In a selected number of cases, such as *El Norte*, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortés*, and *El Mariachi*, corporate studios eventually incorporated them in their film distribution packages. A few Chicano cinematic productions were produced from the onset by a leading studio (*Zoot Suit*, *Born in East L.A.*, *La Bamba*, and *American Me*); or were realized, as in the case of *Stand and Deliver*, as a television production sponsored by PBS. Only *Raíces de Sangre* (Roots of Blood) was a Mexican state-produced Chicano film.

Full-length narrative features by Chicanos had a peculiar beginning. An enigmatic and unconventional young man from San Antonio, Efraín Gutiérrez, wrote, co-produced, starred in, and directed a dark trilogy of the Chicano experience: *Please Don't Bury Me Alive*, *Chicano Love is Forever*, *Junkie/Tecato Run*.³ Originally shot in 16mm and later blown up to 35mm, these movies narrate stories of Chicano youth on the fringes of society, facing a life that offers only despair, alienation, conflict and solitude. In Gutiérrez's films, the characters and narrative discourse attempt to construct a powerful individual—perhaps autobiographical—statement regarding those Chicanos/as who either self-destruct or are crushed by the institutions and society around them.

This trilogy contains similar characteristics. Aesthetically, these films were amateurish and experimental. In terms of distribution, the trilogy was shown mostly in Texas in the late 1970s. It was briefly shown in Mexico when the films were picked up by the Mexican distributor

Continental Films. By the early 1980s, however, the three features, along with the director, disappeared from sight.

In 1976, Jesús Salvador Treviño received an invitation from the Mexican government film producing company, CONACINE, to write, cast, and direct his script, *Raíces de Sangre*. He reflects on this time: "I had to go to Mexico, although I'm an American citizen, to direct my first feature. I found more sympathetic ears than here."⁴ Although the film was entirely produced and distributed by Mexican governmental agencies, over half of the cast, as well as the script and the direction, were Chicano. The overly ambitious plot focuses upon community and labor organizing against the *maquiladoras* (in-bond industries), which divide and exploit the Mexican-origin communities on both sides of the border.⁵

Jesús Salvador Treviño followed his earlier directorial debut with a pilot short film, *Seguín*. This movie was the initial episode of a projected historical epic of ten parts dealing with the Chicano community from the 19th century to the present. In Treviño's reconstruction of history, Juan Nepomuceno Seguín exemplifies a tragic hero who through naïveté and zeal cooperates with Anglo colonists in the struggle for separatism against Mexican President Antonio López de Santa Anna. As an analogy of the fate of other Chicanos in Texas and elsewhere, Seguín, after exhausting his usefulness to the Anglo conquerors of Texas, is marginalized and ultimately becomes a foreigner in his native land. In self-exile Seguín goes to Mexico and, subsequently, takes up arms for the Mexican cause against the North American invasion of 1846. Finally, years after the annexation of the Southwest by the U.S., Juan Nepomuceno Seguín is "pardoned" by the American government and allowed to live out his last years in his beloved Texas.

Conversely, *Alambrista* (1979), directed by Robert Young, was a landmark film in the evolution of Chicano cinema. This sensitive feature relates the odyssey of a Mexican undocumented worker, Roberto, from his native village in rural Mexico to the agricultural fields of California. During Roberto's misadventures, he realizes the constant exploitive conditions faced by undocumented workers in the U.S. Progressively, he is overtaken by feelings of alienation and hopelessness which lead him to voluntarily turn himself in to the authorities so they can deport him to Mexico.⁶

This movie is one of those rare films in which artistic quality and social commentary are superbly linked.⁷ The script and performances achieve their purpose in every detail, capturing both the human emotions as well as the material

¹ Chon A. Noriega, ed., *Chicanos and Film. Essays on Chicano Representation and Resistance*. New York, 1992, pp. 159-188.

² Rosa Linda Fregoso's *The Bronze Screen* (Minneapolis, 1993) is a most authoritative discussion of the participation and contribution of Chicanas in film.

³ Gregg Barrios, "Efraín Gutiérrez y el nuevo cine chicano," *La Opinión*, August 18, 1985. This is one of the few articles on the cinematic works of Efraín Gutiérrez.

⁴ Interview with Jesús Salvador Treviño, Los Angeles, June 12, 1990.

⁵ Jim Miller, "Chicano Cinema: An Interview with Jesús Salvador Treviño," *Cineaste* VIII, 1978, and Jesús Salvador Treviño, "Raíces de Sangre, First Feature Film Directed by a Chicano," *Somos*, June-July 1978, are two informative published interviews with Treviño.

⁶ *Variety*, July 14, 1978.

⁷ Katherine Díaz, "Luis Valdez, The Making of *Zoot Suit*," *Caminos*, September 1981.



Oscar Chávez as Pedro J. González in *Break of Dawn*.

circumstances that characterize the migratory experience. The film dialogue is spoken in both English and Spanish (with appropriate subtitles), which lends great authenticity. The docu-drama format has seldom been better employed in a feature film.

The next crucial film in Chicano narrative cinema was Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*. This movie, adapted from his successful play of the same name, recounts one of the most dramatic episodes in Chicano/a history: the Sleepy Lagoon incident in Los Angeles in the early 1940s.⁸ During those years, Chicano youth expressed their cultural individuality by a dress mode known as the zoot suit. The dominant society, particularly members of the police and armed forces, found such expressive behavior questionable and alien to their conception of the "American way of life." Chicano zoot suiters were persecuted and arrested at will. An incident of an unsolved killing in a Chicano neighborhood triggered massive arrests and the conviction of twenty-five zoot suiter youths in a celebrated trial that was characterized by a total disregard for due process of law.

This film attempts with success to combine theatrical and filmic techniques. *Zoot Suit* recreates the ambiance of the period and portrays a segment of the Chicano community in the 1940s. The principal male characters are well-developed and characterized, especially "El Pachuco," played with true inspiration by Edward James Olmos. The energy of the choreography and the musical score are exceptional. As a political statement and an artistic film, *Zoot Suit* is certainly one of the landmark achievements of Chicano cinema.

In this phase of Chicano narrative cinema, the tradition of combining artistic qualities with social and political commentary was the dominant one. Representative of this filmic current is *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortés* (1981), directed by Robert Young and with Edward James Olmos in the starring role.⁹ The feature narrates the tragic circumstance by which the

title character became a popular Chicano hero and a symbol of the plight of Mexicans in south Texas.¹⁰ The performances, photography, and direction merit special recognition. The story and the characters vividly reconstruct a society characterized by class interests and racial inequalities. As with other films by Robert Young, the characters never fall into stereotypes, but reveal the full complexity of human nature.¹¹ In a well-performed role, Edward James Olmos moved one step closer to becoming, for now, the one bona fide Chicano screen star.

Two years later, director and screenwriter Gregory Nava debuted with *El Norte* (1983). This independent film, originally produced and planned for the PBS series "American Playhouse," became one of the most successful independent films of recent times. *El Norte* depicts the complex and often tragic drama of Central American immigration to the United States. The film has been acclaimed for its creative photography, inspiring musical score, careful direction, and overall outstanding acting performances, particularly by two leading stars, Zaide Silvia Gutiérrez and David Villalpando, who debuted in this feature.¹² The dialogue is maintained in the native languages, Spanish or Maya, adding realism to the story. Among North American critics and audiences, the film received high praise and significant economic success.

Born in East L.A. (1985) once again addresses the theme of immigration, but does so from a strikingly original perspective. Combining parody with social satire, director, writer and star Cheech Marín takes direct aim at various U.S. and Mexican institutions, character types and perceptions. As the story unfolds Rudy Robles, played by Cheech Marín, accidentally gets caught in an INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) raid, and unable to prove his legal citizenship, is deported to Tijuana, Mexico. Rudy, who cannot speak Spanish, finds himself experiencing the tribulations of Mexican immigrants in a foreign country. After a series of mishaps while attempting to cross to the U.S., he begins to adapt to border circumstance. The film closes with hundreds of undocumented immigrants led by the protagonist overrunning the Border Patrol, and crossing into the U.S. with the song "Coming to America" as background music.

As *Born in East L.A.* was the first narrative comedy of Chicano cinema, it enjoyed critical acclaim and respectable box-office success.¹³ This movie was the recipient of first prize at the Havana Film Festival of 1988 because of its many artistic merits.

⁸ Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico*, pp. 227-231.

⁹ Michael Healy, "Gregorio Cortés, Superbly Crafted Small Film," *Denver Post*, August 31, 1984.

¹⁰ See Américo Paredes, *With the Pistol in His Hands* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1958), which forms the basis of the narrative story of the film.

¹¹ "Edward James Olmos and Robert Young with 21 Reasons Why You Should See *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortés*," *Caminos*, September 1982.

¹² Vincent Canby, "El Norte: A Fine Movie Fueled by Injustice," *New York Times*, January 22, 1984; Janet Maslin, "Film: *El Norte* Promised Land for Guatemalans," *New York Times*, January 11, 1984.

¹³ Chon Noriega, "Cafe Orale: Narrative Structure in *Born in East L.A.*," *Tonantzin* (San Antonio, Texas), February 1991.

Two important and very diverse Chicano narrative films were exhibited in 1987: *Break of Dawn* and *La Bamba*. *Break of Dawn*, written and directed by Isaac Artenstein and produced by Jude Eberhard, is based upon the life of Pedro J. González, the first Spanish-language radio celebrity in the U.S. in the late 1920s. He also became a political and community activist on behalf of the rights of the Mexican-origin population during the decade of the 1930s. As a consequence of his struggles on behalf of his people, González fell victim to injustice. He was falsely accused of rape, and, ultimately, imprisoned for six years in San Quentin. The film masterfully traces all these events and concludes with his release from prison.

The script of *Break of Dawn* clearly reveals a deep sympathy and understanding of the story and the events. History and film are seldom combined with such outstanding results. This film is an important and creative production which has been the recipient of well-deserved praise.¹⁴ However, the lack of an adequate production budget, as well as the fact that no major U.S. studio distributed it, seriously limited its audience and popularity. This fact shows just how difficult is the producer's job of selling a Chicano-theme film with a Mexican-origin cast to decision-makers at the studios and networks who are culturally unaware of, or basically uninterested in, the Chicano experience.

La Bamba is a major chapter in the evolution of Chicano narrative cinema. This impressive box-office and critical success greatly enhanced the directorial career of Luis Valdez.¹⁵ The film, more than any other Chicano film to date, carried an ethnic theme to receptive audiences within the U.S. and in foreign countries. The linear narration of *La Bamba* traces the rise of Ricardo Valenzuela (alias Richie Valens) in his quest to become a rock-and-roll celebrity. His short-lived stardom came to a tragic end when an airplane accident took his very promising life. The film, though, is much more complex than a musical biography. On one level, the central character is polarized with the conventional characterization of his brother portrayed as his "antithesis." Richie Valens embodies the "perfect" son, talented, loyal, responsible and caring. Conversely, the other son (well acted by Esai Morales) is portrayed as selfish, violent, *macho*, irresponsible, jealous and self-destructive.

On an artistic level, *La Bamba* is a notable film. Luis Valdez is unquestionably a creative talent who has mastered well the tasks and challenges of directing commercial cinema. The combination of a success story, a rock-and-roll fable, the musical score performed by Los Lobos, and a sympathetic hero made for a sure winner.

The inspiring *Stand and Deliver* (1988) continued the effective portrayals of real-life heroic figures by Edward

James Olmos. On an elementary level, the film narrates the efforts and tribulations of mentor/math teacher Jaime Escalante in bringing about social change through education for Chicano youth. Yet on a deeper perspective, *Stand and Deliver* pays homage to the triumph of the spirit and the will to struggle against discrimination, indifference and fatalism. This movie achieved a modest box-office success, overall high acclaim, and an Oscar nomination for Edward James Olmos for best performance by an actor.¹⁶

The two-fold success of this body of narrative cinema, financially and artistically, brought about the expectation that the so-called "Decade of the Hispanic" might resonate in the film industry. Chicano filmmakers anticipated that major production companies would now acknowledge the significantly large audience that responded well to Latino themes and stars. Therefore, investment in such new filmic projects would be expedient. Yet they were wrong. Mainstream Hollywood continued its previous policy on Chicanos, stereotyped them—usually as villains or prostitutes—or outright neglected them.

Various years passed for the next narrative feature, *American Me* (1992), to premiere. This individualistic effort by Edward James Olmos, who served as director, co-screenwriter, coproducer and star, is an intense and disturbing portrayal of Chicano gang/prison life. In this nihilistic character study, Olmos attempted a didactic, anti-crime social message for current and future Chicano youths.¹⁷ The morality tale fictionalizes the rise and fall of the so-called Mexican prison mafia. The odyssey begins with the brutal violence directed at Chicanos in the Zoot Suit riots and continues to the very end.

The film conveys a message of hopelessness about breaking the cycle of violence and revenge. Although *American Me* did not gain the economic remuneration it expected, critics and viewers applauded its courage, artistic experimentation and strength of discursive narrative.

The Waterdance (1992), written and codirected by Neal Jiménez, represents the advent of a second generation of Chicano filmmakers. Unlike the previous Chicano Movement generation, in which directors self-imposed the mandate to emphasize political issues, this later generation displays clear differences with the past. Attuned to a more general audience acceptance and wider-interest themes, these most recent filmmakers are striving to merge Chicano topics and/or characters with mainstream cinematic appeal.

With a great deal of sensitivity, *The Waterdance*¹⁸ focuses upon character studies of three paraplegic men.

¹⁴ David R. Maciel, "Cine chicano: Entrevista con Isaac Artenstein," *Dicine* (Mexico City), May 1989.

¹⁵ Susana Cato, "El cine chicano impone su imagen en la pantalla norteamericana," *Proceso*, September 19, 1987.

¹⁶ Victor Valle, "The Latino Wave," *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1988.

¹⁷ Nelson Caro's "Entrevista con Edward James Olmos," *Dicine*, November 1992, is an insightful view of Olmos' stated purpose and design of *American Me*.

¹⁸ The exact significance of the title apparently alludes to "the miraculous self-assurance of these paraplegics if they are to survive and keep their sanity: it is like dancing on water." Vincent Canby, "Heroism and Humor as Paraplegics Learn," *New York Times*, May 13, 1992.

The movie narrates its story through the interaction of the three main characters with each other and their plight. Unlike other films that deal with physical disabilities, *The Waterdance* approaches this issue with compassion, humor, complexity and optimism. In large part autobiographical, the plot revolves around the aftermath of a paralyzing accident suffered by an aspiring young Chicano writer. Ethnicity is subtly and effectively woven into a broader universal theme of friendship, love, intimacy, despair and ultimate hope. Strong character development and an unusually well-written dialogue are at the core of the film. A solid direction and masterful acting by the entire cast make for the very impressive directorial debut of Neal Jiménez.¹⁹

A much different production is the impressive debut feature *El Mariachi* by Robert Rodríguez. This movie is an action adventure story of a lone *mariachi*, who is falsely mistaken for an infamous hit man, since both wear black and carry a guitar case. The well-narrated story has all the

ingredients of the best action genre: continuous action, romance, humor, well-defined characters and crisp dialogue. The narrative never falters and more than delivers all its objectives.

A notable aspect of *El Mariachi* is that the film was a total one-person show, originally produced with a budget of merely 7,000 dollars. Director Rodríguez was also the scriptwriter, cinematographer, sound person, editor and sole producer. Regarding his movie, Rodríguez stated that: "I shot every scene in one take.... I just fed the actors the line and moved on...."²⁰ Entirely spoken in Spanish and set along the border (in Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila and Del Rio, Texas), *El Mariachi* is one of the most remarkable debuts by a Chicano director.

La Carpa (The Tent, 1993), a one-hour movie directed by Carlos Avila and produced for PBS broadcast on "American Playhouse," is one of the most current Chicano narrative films. Interestingly, all the Chicano

¹⁹ Brian D. Johnson, "Redefining Manhood," *Muclean's*, June 8, 1992.

²⁰ Terrence Rafferty, "Have Guitar Will Travel?," *The New Yorker*, February 22, 1993.



La Bamba is a major chapter in the evolution of chicano narrative cinema. Lou Diamond Philips played the role of rock-and-roll celebrity Richie Valens.

characters speak their dialogue in Spanish. Set in Depression-era California, *La Carpa* is a bittersweet story of a young, shy, hard-working Mexican field laborer whose life is transformed when a raucous, ragged traveling “carpa” troupe comes to town. As a very subtle form of social history, the film portrays *la carpa* as a unique mediating force for exploring the political and social problems experienced by small rural communities of that era.

It took Luis Valdez over a decade to direct a film again. In 1994, he teamed up with producer Moctezuma Esparza and media entrepreneur Ted Turner to film a contemporary remake of the classic western character, *The Cisco Kid*. This version has Jimmy Smits (the Cisco Kid) and Cheech Marín (Pancho) caught up in Mexico fighting on the side of President Benito Juárez against French imperialism. This light-hearted action comedy succeeds on a purely entertainment level as a movie made for television.

Tierra (The Earth, 1994), directed by Severo Pérez, is the most recent Chicano film. It is faithfully based upon the classic novel, *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* (...And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him Up) by Tomás Rivera. The story is told through the eyes and experiences of the son of the protagonist family. It recounts the exploitive working conditions and lives of Chicano/a agricultural laborers in California. The film succeeds on the level of powerfully capturing the hardships and meager existence of the working-class Chicano/a community prior to the Chicano Movement years. This well-intentioned production, though, falls somewhat flat in its narration. The film suffers from too rigid a tone in its narrative structure. The technique of combining the narration with events on screen, as they unfold, is counterproductive, and proves more distracting than creative. In addition, the performances of the protagonists are quite uneven. A few are excellent, particularly that of Rose Portillo as the lead, as well as some secondary characters, but others are uninspiring.

Future perspectives

Clearly, Chicano/a filmmakers have already achieved modest commercial success, and have contributed significant cinematic productions. Recently, a second generation of Chicano film directors has begun to make strides in breaking the impasse. At the same time, veterans are building on past experiences and accomplishments to seek alternative directions.

Yet the future of Chicanos/as in cinema is uncertain, at best. It would seem that when Chicanos/as do appear on screen, the portrayals continue to abide by past trends in conveying a one-dimensional aspect of the Chicano experience in film: crime and drugs.

The major studios still do not believe in the economic viability of Chicano multi-theme programs. Unlike the recent Black filmmaking flowering and the awakening of

Native American themes, no such interest in Chicano themes or directors has been manifested by Hollywood. Even when opportunities are occasionally offered to Chicano directors by Hollywood, this usually involves their surrendering all artistic control and filming the project as dictated by others.

In addition, the “catch-22” of major Hollywood studio financial backing is the casting hurdle, for if a producer packages a good script with a proven, creative director, he will invariably want stars to complete the package. At present, there are few established Chicano/a stars.

To a large degree, Chicano narrative cinema to date has been produced independently, and this continues to be the case. In order to tell their own stories without submitting to Hollywood industrial whims, Chicanos/as have had to turn outside of the mainstream for production resources and exhibition channels. The problem with that model is that if Chicano/a filmmakers only pursue the independent route, they will be limited in budget, exhibition and distribution opportunities for their productions. To significantly improve the status of Chicanos/as in cinema, it is evident that several changes within the industry must occur:

1. A much larger number of Chicanos must establish themselves as key creative players—screenwriters, producers, directors—and decision-makers at the major studios and networks.
2. Compelling Chicano/a stories will not be told until a more significant number of genuine producers can emerge. They need to be well-versed in the business of development, packaging, financing, deal-making, production, post-production, distribution, promotion and marketing. Currently, far more Chicana/o directors and writers (albeit underemployed) exist than producers.
3. It will be vital to pursue more aggressively the distribution of Chicano/a films. The art and university circuit as well as local television stations might offer important outlets.
4. In addition, other possibilities for Chicano/a films might exist for exhibition with the growing cable television networks. Since these recently-created national cable stations are striving to break new ground and supersede existing major networks, some could be interested in employing a Chicano thematic agenda as one alternative direction in programming. For instance, HBO and TBS have already expressed interest, and have funded Chicano theme productions.

One hopes, then, that these possibilities will translate into more visibility and influence for Chicanos/as in cinema. Perhaps in the not too distant future, Chicano media images will be determined to a major degree by Chicanos/as and not by outsiders. If that were to come about, Chicanos will finally cease to be the “convenient villain” or the perpetual “dark señorita” on the screen, and be the complex, dynamic and vibrant community that they are. ❧