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[SCOTT L. BAUGH]

Mexican Americans

Before the Spanish conquest of Mexico in 1521, an assemblage of diverse indigenous societies developed alongside one another in what is now considered North America. Spain saw America as a land to be colonized, and, after conquering the Aztecs, Spanish forces allied with some Native American societies and began establishing New Spain. Spanish-sponsored explorations sought out fabled riches and new settlement locations in what is now the southwestern United States, but in the process they encountered and battled more Native American tribes, including the Apache and Pueblo peoples. Over the next three centuries, although the Spanish throne ruled the land and its imperial power grew, intermarriages between Spanish colonialists and Native Americans spawned significant political, social, and racial mixtures, the phenomenon called *mestizaje*.

By the time Mexico had gained its independence from Spain in the early 1820s, other European immigrants had begun trekking across the ever-growing United States in fulfillment of Manifest Destiny, some homesteading in the Texas portion of the Spanish empire. In 1836, perhaps carried by the spirit of the Alamo, Texas won independence from Mexico and, along with much of the adjacent territory, including portions of New Mexico, Arizona, California, Utah, Nevada, and Colorado, became part of the United States in 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In one stroke of the pen, natives of the region became U.S. citizens. Politically, a new identity was formed: what came to be known as the Mexican American or, later, Chicana and Chicano. More importantly, this political event made possible a new cultural enterprise, progressively evolving as *chicanismo*. Echoing Octavio Paz and José Vasconcelos, Arnoldo Carlos Vento and other Chicano historians argue that the definitive characteristic of Chicano culture is its existence in between dominant cultures, assembling the very best of the divergent American cultures into *movidas* or modes of survival (281). In its mixture historically are various Native American, Iberian Spanish, Moorish, Celtic-Gaelic, Jewish, and colonial Mexican influences, all of which play a part in Chicano identity in the face of the larger American society.

Feature films made in the United States have chronicled Mexican American history and Chicano culture in many ways. The earliest period is marked by some social problem melodramas and many westerns that often misrepresented U.S.-Mexican themes and characters, stressing an assimilationist view. After World War II and reaching a fevered pitch in the late 1960s and 1970s, militarist and nationalist separatism marked a new generation of Chicanos and Chicanas who fought for their social rights and expressed the significance of their cultural background; some films treating this period revise cultural statements made by earlier films and social histories and highlight issues of concern often overlooked by studio fare. Finally, from 1980 to the present, films depicting Mexican Americans have crossed over into the mainstream while at the same time allowing mainstream culture to cross over to Mexican

American cultural expressions. This period celebrates American multiculturalism and hints at the benefits of pluralistic social politics through cultural syncretism or *mestizaje* in U.S. films.

Losing Ground: 1848–1940

Traditionally, United States social histories rely upon an immigration narrative, characterizing American society according to what Caroline Ware calls a "common rootlessness" shared by immigrants to the "New World" (62–64). Overlooking indigenous populations and their varied cultures, social histories favor a Eurocentric vision of the United States. Studio films generally have upheld the perdurable Anglo-Saxon vision of America, and this is most easily recognized in the majority of films treating the historical period before World War II.

The very few studio films that treat pre-Columbian America tend to show natives as "savages." *The Fall of Montezuma* (1912), *The Captive God* (1916), and *Kings of the Sun* (1963) generalize Europeans as civilized and the natives as warring, if "noble," brutes. More often than not, however, studios overlook this period in favor of an America with European settlers.

The vast majority of feature films that treat U.S.-Mexican themes and characters from the nineteenth century to World War II are westerns, resulting in easily prescribed and negative stereotypes—for male characters, the greaser-bandit, the lecherous "Latin lover," and the doltish sidekick; for females, the self-sacrificing maiden and the cantina whore. Many of the most popular westerns subsume these stereotypes, as in Howard Hawks's classic *Red River* (1948), when two Tejanos are shot for defending their homeland, or John Ford's classic *The Searchers* (1956), which portrays natives of the region as frighteningly inhuman. By definition, these stereotypes give oversimplified and one-dimensional characterizations, but worse yet they unfairly define natives as being ruled by their passions—both violent and romantic—and reveal contempt on the part of mainstream society for Mexican and Mexican American culture.

These character types appear in the earliest silent westerns, such as Griffith's *The Greaser's Gauntlet* (1908), William S. Hart vehicles like *The Grudge* (1915), and a string of other "greaser" films, and continue in the sound era as the bandit/*bandito* stereotype in *Western Code* (1933), *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1947), and, to violent extremes, in *Ride Vaquero* (1953) and *Bandolero!* (1968). One strand of the western reveals the greaser-bandit in the form of the "good badman," modeling a Hispanic Robin Hood. Perhaps the two most popular of this type are the Cisco Kid series and the Zorro franchise, both inspired by *The White Vaquero* (1913) and *The Caballero's Way* (1914). The Zorro films center on an American of Spanish ancestry in Old California who tirelessly fights tyrannical power in the name of American-style justice with bandit-style methods. The series begins with Douglas Fairbanks starring in the title role in *The Mark of Zorro* (1920) and *Don Q, Son of Zorro* (1925) and subsequently stars Robert Livingston in *The Bold Caballero* (1936), Duncan Renaldo in *Zorro Rides Again* (1937), Reed Hadley in *Zorro's Fighting Legion* (1939), and Tyrone Power in *The Mark of Zorro* (1940). The Cisco Kid series, the more prolific of the two, also features a Robin Hood–type bandit slightly more in touch with his "Latin lover" side. The series stars Warner Baxter, Cesar Romero, Duncan Renaldo, and Gilbert Roland in the title role with such titles as *In Old Arizona* (1929), *The Arizona Kid* (1930), and *The Cisco Kid* (1931). The Cisco Kid and Zorro series both eventually made their way to television and had a lasting influence on the bandit character, for example in Anthony Quinn's martyr character in *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943) or his dignified marquis character in *California* (1946) and the parodic *Three Mesquiteers* series beginning in 1935.

Over time, as the stereotypes developed, their social functions gradually grew. Two other strands of westerns that treat specifically the Battle of the Alamo and the Mexican Revolution reflect this development in Hispanic characters and their relationship to U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. In treating the Alamo and the events in the mid-1830s surrounding the Texas War for Independence, studio films often portray Mexicans and Tejanos as villains or hapless victims of their nation's social condition; in either form, the characters' downfalls simply allowed studios to appease contemporary mainstream tastes. *Martyrs of the Alamo* (1915), directed by W. Christy Cabanne and produced by D. W. Griffith, remains one of the most controversial inasmuch as it borrows some racist politics from the contemporary Griffith hit film *Birth of a Nation;* as a matter of fact, the production company advertised the film as *The Birth of Texas* to resonate with Griffith's classic Civil War film. In *Martyrs, The Man from the Alamo* (1953), *The Last Command* (1955), and *The Alamo* (1960), historical veracity appears less important than dramatization of a staunch patriotism that has become practically synonymous with the battle's legend. John Wayne's *The Alamo,* for example, provides only glimpses of General Santa Anna and his Mexican troops and instead attacks the disloyalty of a fellow Anglo as a covert statement against the communist threat of the previous decade.

Similarly, *Viva Zapata!* (1952) treats the Mexican Revolution of 1910 but stands instead as an expression of explicitly anticommunist values during the Cold War. Many silent films reveal a racist contempt for Mexican history and, by extension, U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage. Gary D. Keller, Alfred Charles Richard Jr., and other film historians note that because the Mexican Revolution occurred just as the U.S. film industry began gaining power and prestige, the revolution and its characters provided filmmakers with a convenient villain, and consequently these films entrenched negative Hispanic stereotypes in the American collective imagination (Keller, 71; Richard, xxv). *The Mexican Joan of Arc* (1911) and *The Mexican Revolutionists* (1912), although portraying a slightly more sympathetic portrait of the Mexican Indian rebels, still offer stereotypical characters, mostly bandits; others are less politically sensitive through their use of bandit-revolutionary characters, the most sensationalistic of which include *Villa Rides* (1968), *The Professionals* (1966), and *The Wild Bunch* (1969). *The Treasure of Pancho Villa* (1955), *They Came to Cordura* (1959), and *The Old Gringo* (1989) and deal only indirectly with the revolution or its history, using it as a backdrop for romantic adventures with varying degrees of success and, as a result, ignore the significance of the Mexican Revolution to American history.

The most provocative films treating Chicano themes and characters combine the western with the social problem genre, drawing attention to issues of concern to Americans. In *The Man from Del Rio* (1956), Anthony Quinn plays a Texas sheriff of Mexican descent, who never wins over the bigoted townspeople whom he protects, and in *The Outrage* (1964), an adaptation of Akira Kurosawa's classic *Rashomon* set in the Wild West, a Mexican bandit serves as the villain and raises awareness to the stereotypes surrounding the character; both films highlight the discrimination and racial inequity in American culture. *Giant* (1956) symbolizes through the marriage of a white cattle baron's son to a Tejana and the birth of their son the "browning" of the Texas family as well as the fading Eurocentricism of its patriarch. And in the Cold War classic *High Noon* (1952), Katy Jurado's character is introduced as the stereotypical cantina whore with a heart of gold, yet by the end of the story she centralizes the ethic of social responsibility and convinces other wavering characters to deny their own selfishness and to act in the name of justice.

Other social problem films treat contemporary periods and raise consciousness to issues of concern. In *Bordertown* (1935), Paul Muni portrays an intelligent and motivated Mexican American law student, who, in spite of graduating at the top of his class, is thrown out of a courtroom and disbarred for his temper. Although the messages in the film are inconsistent—when the Mexican American tells a white woman of his love for her, her reply is, "We aren't from the same tribe, savage!"—the film draws critical attention to the prevailing attitudes toward the Mexican American generation before World War II and sets the stage for later social problem films. Chicano historians point to the discrimination surrounding the mass deportations of Mexican Americans during the Depression, which is treated in several films. *Break of Dawn* (1988), based on the documentary *Ballad of an Unsung Hero* (1983), tells the story of Pedro J. Gonzalez, a telegraph operator for Villa in the Revolution who comes to the United States after the war and earns a reputation as a popular radio personality. Gonzalez uses his on-air influence to draw attention to the discriminatory practices of the Department of Labor's "Operation Deportation" during the Depression and is subsequently deported himself. Like *Break of Dawn*, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1983) and a short, *Seguin* (1981), employ independent production methods to create more explicitly subversive social statements. *Seguin* revises the history of the landed Tejanos who fought in the Battle of the Alamo. A revisionist western, *Gregorio Cortez* reveals one plot in English that follows a typical western plot of a posse hunting a fugitive Mexican bandit interwoven with a subversive plot in the form of a Spanish-language *corrido*, a border ballad, that provides his perspective and defends his actions. Code-switching English and Spanish, not only in the dialogue but imbedded in the continuity, hints at the multicultural strength inherent in filmed histories. These three films recount historical material treated unfavorably in some studio films and critically revise the stereotypes and themes, while initiating new film forms and aesthetics. These filmmaking strategies appear even more prominently in Chicano films that treat American society during and after World War II.

Moving Forward: 1945–1990

Historians point to World War II as a significant turning point for U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage (Gutiérrez, 312–18). War films that reveal their service and sacrifice in wartime include *A Medal for Benny* (1945) and *Hell to Eternity* (1960), highlighting the irony of ethnic discrimination in American culture. A number of melodramas and social problem films carry forth this point and advocate equality in a statement of American democracy in the post–World War II years.

The noted actor Ricardo Montalbán, founder of NOSOTROS, an organization dedicated to improving the representation of U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage in popular culture, plays in several social problem films. Montalbán brings to the big screen sympathy for characters who struggle against ethnic and class discrimination—in *Right Cross* (1950) as a young Chicano boxer, in *Mystery Street* (1950) as a police officer fighting for justice, and in *My Man and I* (1952) as a fruit picker who is cheated out of his wages. Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) dramatizes the injustice that is part of bordertown life for Chicanos and Chicanas in the 1950s, although it indulges in sensationalism and ignores the irony of Mexican immigrants to the United States being political aliens in a land once considered their homeland. From midcentury up through the 1970s, Chicano social history and the films that chronicle it put to test the debate over assimilation and nationalism; this can be seen most clearly in film treatments of immigration.

Only a few films present sympathetic and, at times, accurate depictions of life on the border and the act of crossing the border. Films such as *El Norte* (1983), told from the perspective of a Guatemalan brother and sister, and *The Border* (1982) dramatize injustices in U.S. immigration policy and the horrific extent to which immigrants will go to get to the North. *Esperanza* (1985), directed by Sylvia Morales, and *Despues del Terremoto/After the Earthquake* (1979), directed by Lourdes Portillo and Nina Serrano, are two shorts that offer a uniquely Latina perspective on immigration issues. *Alambrista!* (1977) and *Raices de Sangre* (1976) use border crossing as a trope for a nationalistic argument against economic exploitation of immigrants. Similarly, *Salt of the Earth* (1954), *The Lawless* (1950), and *El Corrido* (1976) treat the conditions of working-class Chicanos after World War II and point to the function of labor-reform activism and unionization as socially acceptable modes of political resistance, a matter revisited in Jeremy Paul Kagan's crime thriller *The Big Fix* (1978).

In opposition to the tradition of immigration suggested by most U.S. histories, historian Rudolfo Acuña argues that, because the American Southwest is a native territory for Chicanos and Chicanas, crossing the border can be a figurative reclamation of Aztlán, their ancient homeland. During the turbulent civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Acuña's thesis gives rise to Chicano nationalism, a separatist social policy in counterattack against an equally exclusionary U.S. domestic social policy. Much of the literature written at the time by Chicanos and Chicanas professes nationalism, and several films, such as *I Am Joaquin* (1969), which adapted Corky Gonzalez's legendary epic poem and became the first Chicano film, and the documentary-styled *Yo Soy Chicano* (1972), carry forward this social philosophy. Several film scholars, including Chon Noriega, locate oppositional and resistant politics at the core of Chicano film, primarily as these films respond to misrepresentation in mainstream films.

Studio-produced films misrepresent to a large degree the anger and frustration of the Chicano generation, especially in treating gangs—in *Warriors* (1978), *Walk Proud* (1979), *Boulevard Nights* (1979), and *Blood In, Blood Out: Bound by Honor* (1993). Edward James Olmos's *American Me* (1992) subverts the violence of the gang exploitation films by naturalistically depicting the life story of the father of one of the largest gang and prison "families," looking back to the 1940s through the 1970s. The first studio-produced feature film directed by a Chicano, Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* (1981) presents a revisionist history of a significant moment in the formation of Chicano culture; *American Me* and many of the most effective Chicano films produced since 1980 enact this strategy. In *Zoot Suit*, as in *Distant Water* (1990), the Southern California zoot-suit riots of the 1940s are dramatized. *Pachucos* and *pachucas* wore "drape shapes" as a self-expressive act of independence and rebellion against a biased society; mainstream society saw their nonconformity, especially during the tense period of World War II, as un-American. *Zoot Suit* further reveals the discrimination that the legal system brought against one zoot-suit gang in the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial. Valdez highlights the biases and subjectivity of mainstream society in the 1940s maltreatment of Chicano youth by counteracting the law and state authority with multiple perspectives and even multiple endings to this film story. After Valdez failed to reach as wide an audience as he had wished with *Zoot Suit*, he was determined to make a film with social relevance that a mainstream audience would appreciate. *La Bamba* (1987) depicts working-class conditions to emphasize the success story of Ritchie Valens, a Chicano rock and roll singer, and his climb to fame.

Of course, *La Bamba* does more than simply tell this biographical story. Released within months of *Born in East L.A.* (1987), *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988), and *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *La Bamba* heads what has been called "Hispanic Hollywood," mainly due to

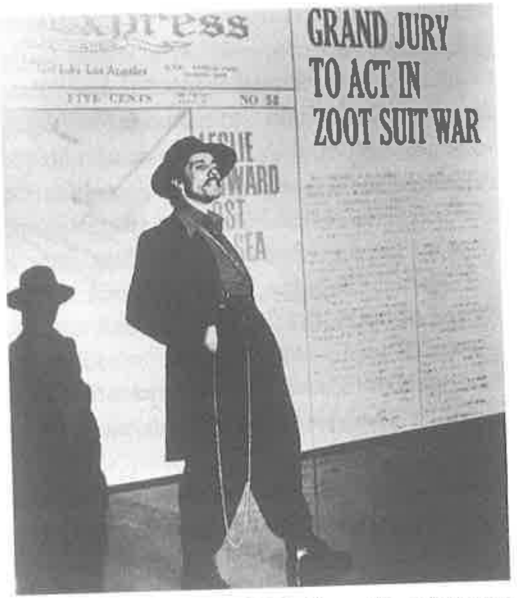

FIGURE 29. *Zoot Suit* (1981). Playwright and director Luis Valdez uses theatrical techniques in the film when he has El Pachuco (Edward James Olmos) directly address the audience, informing them that *Zoot Suit* combines fact and fiction to explore a chapter of Mexican American history. Courtesy Universal Pictures.

its box-office and critical success. Coming on the heels of *Zoot Suit* and *Gregorio Cortez,* these four films and the debates surrounding their production and marketing centralize the most controversial and critical issue involved in Chicano studies. In film as well as social history, the main issue is acculturation: to what extent should a native minority assimilate into or separate from a dominant mainstream? Where most studio films from the first half of the century favor assimilationism and some post–World War II independent films allow Mexican Americans self-expression of nationalism, by the late 1980s, studios and the mass market to which they make appeals showed interest in depictions of Chicano culture, just as many filmmakers—including Luis Valdez, Moctesuma Esparza, Jesús Salvador Treviño, Ramon Menendez, Alfonso Arau, and Robert Rodriguez—have benefited by crossing over to the mainstream. Depictions of Mexican American characters and themes suggest movement away from the traditional stereotypes and toward multiculturalism.

In "crossing over" markets and traditions in the 1980s, Chicano films took advantage of big budget production and distribution methods; more audiences seeing such films made them that much more effective as vehicles for change in a democratic, multicultural society. Moreover, that mainstream audiences had been "crossing over" to traditionally marginalized cultural ideas and values hinted at a shift away from nationalistic debates to pluralistic syncretism in late-twentieth-century American society. The diversity of production methods and stories reflect how many recent Chicano films disrupt previously drawn film types and contribute to American multiculturalism. Films such as *Born in East L.A.* and *A Million to Juan* (1993) use comedy to undercut the greaser-bandit-*vato* stereotype. These two films, along with *Stand and Deliver* and *The Milagro Beanfield War,* effectively appeal to a mass market and present a socially conscious statement about Chicano rights without enacting a defensive, exclusionary nationalism. Moreover, as films reveal specific aspects of Chicano culture for a mainstream audience, such as Valdez's rendition of the Christmas *Pastorela* (1991) or the handful of films on the Day of the Dead holiday like *Anima* (1989), a fuller appreciation of American multiculturalism results. Like *Zoot Suit* and *American Me,* the short *Espejo* (1991) and *Mi Vida Loca* (1994) portray an insider's view of the inner-city social condition and from a Latina perspective. As these topics are treated for a mainstream audience, traditionally ignored viewpoints are shared with more of American society. Films such as *Fools Rush In* (1994), the love story of a Chicana artist and an Anglo architect; *Selena* (1997), a biopic reminiscent of *La Bamba* though offering a Latina hero; and *Spy Kids* (2001), a family-oriented spy spoof, treat the theme of multiculturalism explicitly.

Like *American Me, Zoot Suit, Gregorio Cortez, Seguin,* and several others, *My Family/Mi Familia* (1995) offers a revisionist history of Chicanos through its story. The film set a weekend per-screen average record when it opened as part of Cinco de Mayo celebrations in 1995, helping to prove its acceptance in American culture. *My Family* comes as close to epic as any Chicano film, covering three generations of Chicanos in California starting before the territory was part of the United States. The father's migration north from *"un otro pais,"* another country and another world, the mother's deportation during the Depression, one son's involvement in World War II, another son's assimilation and upward mobility through becoming a lawyer, one daughter's involvement in the Catholic Church—each family member disrupts a stereotype and becomes part of a larger Mexican American family and an American cultural constellation. Perhaps the most significant part of the family history covers the two youngest sons, the older involved in zoot-suit-type gangs and eventually executed by a policeman, the younger, scarred by witnessing the elder's death, becomes a prison inmate and must overcome a tradition of victimization. In retelling the histories, *My Family* provides mainstream audiences traditionally ignored aspects and viewpoints that are part of American multiculturalism.

Into the Future

The twenty-first century promises a hopeful future for multiculturalism. The 2000 Census reports that Latinos and Latinas, two-thirds of them of Mexican heritage, constitute 12 percent of the U.S population, and it projects that the Hispanic population will increase by more than 2 percent over the next three decades. Across a variety of areas, including politics, education, commerce, and arts, Mexican Americans continue to contribute in increasing numbers to America's multicultural, democratic society. U.S. feature films have become significantly more diverse, especially in terms of themes, characters, production methods, and an ever-growing appreciation by mainstream audiences since World War II. The diversity of film types and characters benefits modern American society as an expression of democracy and multiculturalism. Many of the earliest character types and themes in U.S. film reflect the legacy of colonization. Where the Chicano civil rights movement provided independent cultural expressions, it injected an exclusionary social politics to counteract an equally exclusionary Eurocentric American tradition. The last years of the twentieth century offered hope through cultural syncretism and pluralistic integration of U.S. society, highlighted by film treatments of Mexican American history.

References

Filmography

The Alamo (1960, F)
American Me (1992, F)
The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez (1983, F)
Bandolero! (1968, F)
Blood In, Blood Out: Bound by Honor (1993, F)
The Border (1982, F)
Bordertown (1935, F)
Born in East L.A. (1987, F)
Boulevard Nights (1979, F)
Break of Dawn (1988, F)
The Caballero's Way (1914, F)
California (1946, F)
The Captive God (1916, F)
The Cisco Kid (1931, F)
Despues del Terremoto/After the Earthquake (1979, F)
El Norte (1983, F)
Espejo (1991, F)
Esperanza (1985, F)
The Fall of Montezuma (1912, F)
Fools Rush In (1994, F)
Giant (1956, F)
The Greaser's Gauntlet (1908, F)
The Grudge (1915, F)
Hell to Eternity (1960, F)
High Noon (1952, F)
I Am Joaquin (1969, F)
In Old Arizona (1929, F)
Kings of the Sun (1963, F)
La Bamba (1987, F)
The Last Command (1955, F)