

Running the United States–Mexico Border: 1909 Through the Present

Gary D. Keller
Arizona State University

The United States-Mexico border places into contact one of the most developed countries in the world with a poor country, qualifying it as a “shatter zone,” an area where the culture is the result of the often troubled relationship of unequal partners. Because of the unusual nature of the border itself and because of various factors ranging from the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to the emergence of Westerns as the primary product of the United States film industry, and other economic, sociocultural and technological reasons, a very large number of movies have been and continue to be made about the border by the United States film industry. The genre has also been cultivated to a less pervasive but significant extent by the Mexican film industry.

No one knows precisely how many films focus on the United States-Mexican border, but the Mexican Revolution alone produced hundreds of them, primarily but not exclusively documentaries, docudramas, and fiction features loosely based on historical events.

Rather than concentrating on a few select films or one specific period, this study is an overview of the border films and strives to explain some of the major cultural, technological, historical, and economic factors that spurred them. The study is broadly divided into three sections. The first establishes the conventions of the border in the popular mind, placing attention on the role first of mass-produced dime novels and subsequently of popular films. The second section reviews some of the most salient of those border conventions. The third shows how contem-

porary Chicano/Latino border films function to subvert and debunk those same conventions.

The Border As an Example of a Mass-Produced Cultural Artifact

United States film has often been called a “dream factory” partly because of its catering to wish fulfillment (the “dream”) and its manufacture according to assembly-line models (the “factory”). However, the “dream factory” can be traced to an earlier and coincident form of manufacture, the pulp fictions, which, beginning in the 1860s, were mass-produced by what were contemporaneously called the “fiction factories.” These factories, beginning about 35 years before the invention of cinema, were known for their fabrication of cheap, popular, widely distributed fictional works in accordance with conventions later adopted by the U.S. film industry. Among other genres, detective novels and Westerns were mass-produced first by the fiction factories. Subsequently film emerged as a technology and the film industry inherited this tradition and very frequently adapted the earlier and coincident pulp novels to cinematic treatment.

There are remarkable parallels between the production, marketing, and distribution of Western novels of the pulp variety and the subsequent and coincident production, marketing, and distribution of Western films beginning around the turn of the century and running through the silent period. The “fiction factories,” as they were known beginning in the 1870s, featured the creation of formulaic plots, characters, and genres, manufactured in accordance with assembly line production models and readily consumed by a mass audience totaling millions of readers. Both pulp fiction and subsequently film were produced and marketed by easily identifiable genres providing variations on familiar plots and experiences that made participation an easy experience on the part of the consumer. Capital investment in both industries was centered not in production but in distribution. A steady turnover of product was necessary in order to ensure revenues that depended on regular consumption of the products on a continual basis, not on high consumption of any one particular product. In both factories, the writer was de-emphasized

(the writers of pulp fiction were often unknowns or pseudonyms) and the works were primarily marketed by genre and the types of characters (and in the case of film, the portrayal of characters by film stars).

The two intertwined entertainment industries were both mass distributed by means of creative new methods. Both industries were the result of technological advances; both took society by storm; and both were characterized by enormous unit production. By the 1870s, the number of cheap popular fiction titles that were produced greatly surpassed all serious and genteel fiction combined. Both industries went national soon after their establishment.

We can conclude that the border served very well the needs of the “fiction factories” and subsequently the film “dream factories.” These industries had a key role in elaborating the notion of the border around distinctive cultural features in order to both maximize sales potential and establish an autochthonous, uniquely American mass culture both for domestic consumption and for export that was unlike what was obtained in Europe or other regions. Elsewhere, in collaboration with Estela Keller (1998), I have reviewed a vast corpus of dime and other popular Hispanic-focused novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a corpus that includes a Joaquín Murrieta novelistic cycle and numerous “greaser” and “yaller-skin” novels. One conclusion that can be derived from this research is that the conventions of the border evident in early American cinema (followed by American sound films and more contemporary cinema) were inherited from and based on the pulp novel, and that cinema further elaborated those very conventions of the popular novel.

The Cinematic Conventions of the Border

The cinematic conventions of the border include various dimensions. One relates to the sense of the physical environment of the border itself. Another cultivates the stock characters of the border from both the Anglo and Mexican cultures and their interactions, often sexual or romantic or violent. Finally there are certain subthemes that are *sui generis* such as illegal border crossings and smuggling. Each of these dimensions is briefly re-

viewed, and for the illegal alien subtheme, a brief orientation to Mexican films on this topic is offered.

The Border as Alien

About the border, one is tempted to paraphrase Voltaire's quip about God: if the border had not existed, men and women would have created it. In fact, it didn't and they did. Before the 1896 advent of projection cinema, the border region was characterized by a mostly homogenous Hispanic culture on both sides of the Río Bravo (in English, Río Grande) as well as in Arizona and California. Even after the Mexican War of 1846-1848 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), the physical setting of the border remained, in the interpretation of American culture (and in fact), virtually identical on both sides. Certainly it was primarily inhabited by the same populations although some were designated as Mexicans and others as Mexican Americans, some as American Indians, and others Mexican Indians.

I have pointed to the American novelistic and filmic technologies of mass culture as key to the establishment of the border conventions. Now we need to look at some of the salient features of those conventions. The key components of the border that eventually became the primary icons of that area in American popular culture were not developed in one stroke. Far from it: they evolved over decades, beginning around the Civil War, and in fact an elaboration continues to this day. These icons or motifs are primarily the creations of authors, and subsequently scriptwriters and filmmakers, either largely forgotten or unacknowledged publicly in the first place. Nevertheless, by the turn of the century about 50 production years of popular Western novels had established a United States-Mexican border milieu which the film industry inherited. The features of this highly remote "place" were rarely to be found in fact but they were constantly frequented by the collective American mind's eye, first through the novel and subsequently as mediated by the lens of the camera.

One of the unique functions of the border and one of its great sources of film popularity was that it functioned both to accent and assimilate otherliness. It was a "no man's land" (the

neologism “no person’s land” functions well inasmuch as otherly women are frequent filmic habitués of the border) where Puritan moral codes were severely relaxed. The image of the physical environment was developed to bolster that sense of otherliness. The Mexican elements provided the unique qualities of the setting against the backdrop of a vast, deserted, barren landscape. As Emilio García Riera has pointed out, the “profusion of edifices such as churches and missions, haciendas and adobe houses, and even plants that one might claim as a natural conspiracy on behalf of Mexicanness, like nopals and magueys, all established an often undetermined domain for a great quantity of Westerns within an extensive territory that once was Mexico proper and which generally maintained its names from Mexican times (I:20-21, translation mine).

The Toll of Fear (1913, Lubin Co.), directed by Romaine Fielding, evokes the nefarious qualities of the physical place itself. The brash younger brother of the local sheriff pursues Mexican rustlers south of Nogales, Arizona. He becomes disoriented and when he discovers a note pinned to a tree that warns: “Go Back or You Die with the Sun,” this warning grows on him until “worn to a raw edge by the fear which the words signify” he shoots himself in the head. When his older brother goes looking for him, he has a similar reaction.

The border was where Anglos often “went native,” and anything was possible in the way of sex or romance, violence, drugs, conspiracy, desertion, or hideouts. Both the filmic characters and the Anglo audiences understood that it was necessary for Anglos to take the law into their own hands and adapt it to the particular situation that various problems required. Similarly, Latins of both sexes were depicted as great lovers, hot and fiery, and both sexes were usually good with a knife. Mexicans lived in a wild and woolly environment and were eminently capable of betrayal, or, on the other hand, self-abnegating fidelity to Anglos. These stereotypes were and to this day still are the received wisdom of film.

On the Border (1909, Selig), the first border story film of record, sets the tone for this type. It depicts an Anglo “Vigilance Committee” that takes law into its own hands, frees the town

from the badmen, and secures the Mexican border. As Richard observes, “. . . it was probably the first production to present Mexico as the refuge for those hardened criminal types of any nationality or breed that required a place to hide out for a while until things cooled off” (*The Hispanic Image* 16) So from the very first flickers, one might read an intertitle that told the boys to “head for the border.”

Most of the themes and conflicts of the border emphatically were (and are) interracial. Sex and romance were evoked in terms of both their fascinations and fears, including the fear of miscegenation. By the second decade of film (during the 1910s), the conventions of the popular Western had been established in Hollywood as film-conflict formulas. These included:

(1) The establishment of an exotic, forbidding, wild, but also sexually or romantically appealing physical locale. In *Brand of Cowardice* (1916, Rolfe/Metro), the border provides the setting for a rite of passage to manhood. Starring Lionel Barrymore as a “pantywaist” and a “he butterfly,” the film shows the weakling become a man by saving his commandant’s girl who has strayed across the border and been captured by the Mexican bandit chief. Similarly, *The Taint of Fear* (1916, Universal) governs the moral rehabilitation of a dispirited Anglo. Young Bob suffers because he has had the spirit beaten out of him by his cruel father. He joins the National Guard is sent to the border to capture Lopes, the bandit leader. Now finding himself in the Mexican desert, at first he seems too much for the spiritless coward. But when he realizes that his company is threatened by annihilation, he rediscovers his manhood and although mortally wounded, the new found hero rides for rescue. The last scene shows his ghost appearing before his grief-stricken parents and his father too late lamenting his brutality.

(2) A plot line that often had Anglo heroes fall in love with “local” or “native” women (to this day simply called señoritas with no further refinement of their identity seemingly needed) or which had Anglo heroines defeat local evildoers.

(3) A plot that depicted the evildoers as members of outcast, low-status, non-Anglo groups such as Mexicans, halfbreeds, and Indians.

Sex and romance were the first elements that were cultivated by Hollywood, very quickly followed by violence, either in the form of banditry or as a result of the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

The two fundamental components of the Hollywood formula for making border films were wish-fulfillment and Americanism. Often the earlier dime novels and later the films combined both notions—nationalism and hedonism—at the deleterious expense of out-groups. However, both the fiction factories and the filmic ones brought new and liberating elements, particularly for white women.

White Women versus Brown and Red Men

Generally, the American post-Civil War popular novel reflected and reinforced the emancipation of women by contributing to the decline of the domestic novel and its ideology and introducing fictions depicting female professionals such as sleuths, Western heroines such as Calamity Jane, and working women. Similarly, while negative racial and ethnic stereotypes abounded in film, the medium also greatly expanded the emancipation of women, and even, to a small extent, of out-groups.

The most interesting dimension of early silent border films is the emergence of courageous white women who foil the evil-doers. It is reasonably well documented (see Musser; see also Peiss) that early cinema fundamentally and permanently gave white women and even children a measure of freedom from the kinds of strictures that characterized pre-cinematic entertainment. Of course, the liberating effects did not extend to the out-cast groups. Those beyond the European pale were marginal. Blacks, non-European Hispanics (Mexicans, etc.), Asians, and Native Americans were usually not depicted positively and usually not even welcomed into the movie theater. So much the case for Blacks that they began to operate their own movie theaters.

In contrast to Victorian and Edwardian restrictions on women's activities, the opening of movie theaters around the country and the mass attendance on the part of both males and females, either singly or as couples (married or unmarried), represented a new form of freedom for American women (Peiss 152). Moreover, not only was the *environment* of the movie theaters either morally provocative, or liberating, depending on one's viewpoint, the *content* of the films themselves was quickly mobilized to acutely interact with that environment. Film audiences

could enter the darkened movie theater and privately and with little of the normative social controls characteristic of the non-filmic environments experience a wide range of events and actions related to sex, violence, the suffrage movement, other women's causes, and other behaviors with an intensity not available in any other medium.

The emergence of strong women characters who were successful in unfamiliar roles and who imposed themselves over their enemies, in part reflected the expectations of female customers in the movie theater and the fact that women were a critical element in the filmmaker's and film exhibitor's perceived financial success of their product. Naturally, film as well as all story forms depend on conflict. The foils against which the early film White heroines imposed themselves were usually ethnic out-groups including Indians, Mexicans, and halfbreeds in border movies. The courageous White women depicted in these films successfully defend themselves against thieves and other evildoers, win a man's hand in marriage despite great obstacles, nurse a savage back to health, take on the role of sleuth, and bring a murderer to justice, working productively with posses as the case may be. They also participate in illegal activities such as smuggling and rustling, albeit as kinder, gentler, and more considerate outlaws. *The Arizona Cat Claw* (1919, World Film Corp.) depicts Blossom Ruggles, the fiercely independent daughter of an Arizona cattleman and "one tough woman" who is accosted by a Mexican bandit while she is riding alone on the range. She overpowers him and delivers him to a neighboring rancher and his cowboys who do the "right thing," throwing the bandit off a cliff.

We do occasionally see films where white women collaborate with minorities as well, either to vanquish yet other minorities (e.g., a white female and Indian female against another Indian and a Mexican) or to confront a white male. For example, in *The Red Girl* (1908, Biograph), an American Indian woman and a white "girl miner," Kate Nelson, boldly and courageously foil a "Mexican Jezebel" and her American Indian half-breed partner. (Quotes are from contemporaneous advertising.)

Brown Women: Pervasive Sex Objects

In previous research analyzing over 2,000 Hispanic-focused films, I was able to distinguish three broad, often interrelated categories of Hispanic female characters: the cantina girl; the faithful, self-sacrificing señorita; and the vamp. All three of these types appear in border films, but the cantina dancer is the most common. In addition, all three character types incarnate the most pervasive feature of the filmic depiction of Mexican or Mexican American border women: that they are developed exclusively in support of Anglo viewpoints. Beginning with the 1913 *On the Border*, with rare exceptions, the cantina girl serves an ancillary function as the love interest of the Anglo hero. She seems either to be waiting for the Anglo to enter her life, or is quick to discard her Latin suitor in favor of the Anglo. In overwhelming instances, the cantina girl falls head over heels for the Anglo. Quite often she does a seductive dance that is a peak scene in the film. With the easing of the Production Code and its attendant censorship restrictions, the type evolved—perhaps “devolved” is more appropriate—to a harsher portrayal, sometimes as a prostitute, often as a drug addict supporting herself and/or her children by selling her body. The formula for creating the cantina girl was so uniform that an extraordinary number of these characters are called “Chiquita,” as in *Scarlet Days* (1919, Famous Players-Lasky Corp.), *Last Trail* (1921, Fox), and *The Ne’er-Do-Well* (1923, Famous Players-Lasky Corp.). In *On the Border* (1913, American), an Anglo cowboy falls in love with a señorita, “as Chiquita danced merrily to the sound of her tambourine and the soft twanging of guitars.” The Mexican waiter who is also in love with Chiquita tries to poison the Anglo’s drink but he is foiled. This interracial formula is repeated constantly. In *The Masked Dancer* (1914, Vitagraph), an Anglo mining engineer is smitten by the local cantina girl, causing his Anglo wife to learn how to dance like the Latina in order to win back his affections. The contemporary review in *Moving Picture World* commented that “George Cooper who is the greaser divekeeper [is] in as convincing a role as any we have seen.” Unfortunately, Hispanic actors were usually barred from even doing the greaser roles that presumably, by the

attitudes of the period, would be their natural forte. Chiquita appears again in D. W. Griffith's *Scarlet Days* (1919, Famous Players-Lasky) in a supporting role, standing by her man, the good/bad Mexican bandit Alvarez (loosely modeled on the exploits of Joaquín Murrieta).

Percy (1925, Pathé) provides the opportunity for a cantina girl to make a "real man" out of an Anglo. A "sissy" who has been raised by his mother in an unmanly fashion while the father runs for political office is sent to the border area by the father's friend, who has offered to make a true man out of him. Introduced to "demon rum" and heavy drinking (in Mexico, during the Prohibition, this was an added subversive, titillating quality of the film) and taken in by the more than willing Lolita, the lovely Mexican cantina dancer, he is soon boldly challenging the local cacique who is mistreating the peasantry. Percy's father arrives and is so pleased that he permits him to marry Lolita, despite her past. A 1937 film, *Border Café*, essentially tells the same story with only slight variation.

The salient characteristic of the self-sacrificing señorita is the woman's willingness to faithfully sacrifice herself to her Anglo love interest. Quite often, as in *Bonita of El Cajón* (1911, American), *Carmencita the Faithful* (1911, Essanay), or *The Greater Love* (1913, American) she is killed or maimed by having intervened at the last moment, taking the bullet or knifing intended for her Anglo lover. The vamp was originally modeled on the Carmen archetype (more Hispanic-focused films internationally have adapted this iconic character than any other that I am aware of, including the Latin Lover). Often the vamp is also a cantina dancer, as in *The Test of Love* (1911, Yankee) and *The Last Dance* (1914, Picture Playhouse Film Co.).

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 on the Border

The United States film industry enthusiastically covered the Mexican Revolution as it affected the border. Several hundred U.S. films were produced between 1910 and 1919, the end of the Revolution. In fact, the Revolution tangibly helped the U.S. to make and internationally distribute films during this period before America dominated the mass marketing of the medium.

There are many film examples, beginning very early and including Pancho Villa's role as an actor playing himself as well as functioning as a choreographer in Raoul Walsh's *The Life of General Villa* (1914). Pancho Villa, "a hog for publicity" according to Walsh, was so accommodating that he helped restage the Battle of Durango (1913) in order for the filmmaker to get more dramatic footage. The enhanced version included whores recruited to function as a welcoming entourage strewing flowers under the hooves of the *dorado* cavalry, *dorados* dressed in the uniforms of the *federales* that they had just killed, swarming and comporting themselves better than the real *federales*, and a mass release of prisoners from the penitentiary, paying homage to the Atila del Norte.

A few of the relevant films include: *Along the Border* (1916, Selig), *The Americano* (1915, Komic), *The Aztec Treasure* (1914, Eclair), *The Battle of Veracruz* (1914, Sawyer), *The Caballero's Way* (the first Cisco Kid film [Eclair, 1914]), *The Clod* (1913, Lubin, directed by Romaine Fielding), *Colonel Heeza Liar Captures Villa* (1916, Paramount-Bray Animated Cartoons), *Following the Flag in Mexico* (1916, State Rights), *The Gringo* (1916, Overland Feature Film Corp.), *In the Land of the Tortilla* (1916, Beauty), *The Life of General Villa* (1914, Mutual, Raoul Walsh co-directing and starring), *The Mexican Joan of Arc* (1911, Kalem), *The Mexican Hatred* (1914, Warner), *The Mexican Revolutionist* (1912, Kalem), *Patria* (1916, International, sponsored by William Randolph Hearst), *The Patriot* (1916, Triangle, directed by and starring William S. Hart), *A Romance of the Border* (1912, Lubin, Romaine Fielding, directing and starring), *Soldier of Fortune* (1914, All Star), *Stars and Stripes in Mexico* (1916, Powers), *Uncle Sam in Mexico* (1914, Victor), *Under Fire in Mexico* (1914, Warner), *Villa—Dead or Alive* (1916, Eagle Film Mfg.), *Villa of the Movies* (1917, Mack Sennett), and *War in Mexico* (1914, Al Dia Feature Co.)

Illegal Border Crossings

United States illegal border crossing films from or to Mexico date from 1909, the first known such film. *On the Border*, 1909, depicts an Anglo "Vigilance Committee" that takes the law into

its own hands to secure the border. Until the end of the Mexican Revolution, U. S. films focused on illegal border crossings by Mexican revolutionaries, usually categorized as “bandits.” Securing the border and committing illegal but morally justified retaliation were the principal elements of American films produced during the period, including *Brand of Cowardice*, 1916, and *The Taint of Fear*, 1916.

Later, in the 1920s through the 1940s, the concern became the smuggling of people and drugs. However, Asians (e.g. *Sky High*, 1922; *On the Border*, 1930; *I Cover the Waterfront*, 1932) and Europeans shared billing with Mexicans and South Americans as villains or as the groups who were smuggled across the border. The World War II film *Hold Back the Dawn*, 1941, dramatized the desperate efforts of European immigrants living temporarily in Tijuana to enter the US.

A couple of films of this period stand out. One is *The Pilgrim* (1923, First National). It features Charlie Chaplin leaving prison, getting into various complications, and being found out by the sheriff who takes him to the border and kicks him across to the Mexican side. He is pictured in the final scene walking in his usual gait toward the horizon with one foot on either side of the border; on the Mexican side bandits are having a shootout with each other. This film, along with Douglas Fairbanks’s *The Bad Man* prompted a complaint by the Mexican government and an ineffective attempt at embargo, as described in a brief article in *Motion Picture World*, “Mexico Bars Any Film of Charlie’s or Doug’s [Fairbanks], Punishing for Kidding Country in Past Pictures” (1/27/23).

A second film is *Bordertown* (1935, Warner Brothers, starring Paul Muni in brownface). This film does not depict an illegal border crossing but a psychologically determined one by a Mexican American lawyer to the Mexican side of the border. It qualifies as the first Hispanic focused social problem film (see Keller, *Hispanics and United States Film* 127-35); another notable Hispanic-focused social problem film is *Viva Zapata!*, 1952, directed by Elia Kazan. The filmic creation of Johnny Ramírez was a more complex one than the standard Hollywood border type. Relative psychological complexity aside, the soothing conventions

of the formula determined the finale. The film ends with Johnny, disillusioned over the corruption and meanness of success, returning to his barrio home. He says his confession to the priest, prays with his mother, and all three walk down the church aisle. The padre asks, "Well, Johnny, what are you going to do now?" and Johnny gives the expected reply, "Come back and live among my own people where I belong." *Bordertown* hypothesizes that for a Chicano true virtue lies in accepting life as it is. *Bordertown* celebrates stoic acquiescence to the status quo and denigrates the aspiration for social change.

After World War II and continuing into the present, border crossing films have focused on illegal Mexican immigration and/or drug running. Numerous films in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s were produced with the border conventions described earlier in this study, among them *Border Incident*, 1949; *Borderline*, 1950; *Wetbacks*, 1956 (starring Lloyd Bridges); *Dangerous Charter*, 1962; and *Sol Madrid*, 1965. *Wetbacks* was an uninspired depiction of the immigration service's capture of a band of Mexicans smuggling "wetbacks" into San Diego by sea.

Over the last three decades, we have witnessed the production of a number of films that have dealt with the *indocumentado* (undocumented worker) phenomenon. As undocumented immigration has become a more widely debated public issue, this new wave of films emerged. Nevertheless, the theme of passive Mexican immigrants being saved by noble Anglos continued to dominate. None of these Hollywood treatments have ever risen above the mediocre. The films of the 1980s have scarcely improved upon the first of the lot in terms of veracity, character development, or esthetics. Hollywood *indocumentado* pictures have never surpassed the limitations of the social problem genre as originally conceived in the 1930s and 1940s. *Blood Barrier* (1979, British production, originally titled *The Border*, starring Telly Savalas and Danny de la Paz) is the usual fare of a maverick border patrolman who hates and stops the exploitation of poor Mexicans being trucked into California as day laborers. *Borderline* (1980, ITC/Martin Starger) stars Charles Bronson stalking a deranged killer, a former Vietnam veteran, on the border, against the subplot of drug-smuggling villains and defenseless victims

who are undocumented workers. In *The Border* (1982, Universal, Jack Nicholson, Harvey Keitel, Valerie Perrine, and Elpidia Carrillo), the patrolman, spurred on by his money-hungry wife, begins taking payoffs from illegal Mexican aliens he's supposed to be arresting, eventually becoming emotionally involved with a young mother played by Carrillo.

Beginning in 1987, the term "Hispanic Hollywood" was coined and entered the discourse of general interest, business, and industry magazines such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Advertising Age*, *Variety*, and other publications, focusing not only on film products but on the potential of the Hispanic market. The "Hispanic Hollywood" phenomenon was a long time in incubation before it broke open with a vengeance and became readily apparent. Hispanic Hollywood could not have occurred without the Civil Rights movement that provided in the 1960s and 1970s two essential preconditions. One was the training of U.S. Hispanic filmmakers who in the 1980s would take positions of authority and leadership in the creation of a few but highly significant U.S. Hispanic films. The second was the sensitivity toward and acceptance of U.S. Hispanic story lines, character depictions and plot conflicts from a Hispanic point of view, which the Civil Rights movement gradually facilitated. Hispanic Hollywood originally referred to 1987 films including *La Bamba* (1987, Columbia), *Born in East L.A.* (1987), and *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1987, Universal), but the term has had staying power and now incorporates a long list of films. Hispanic Hollywood films are viewed as a hybrid which combine Hispanic expertise and some level of control with Hollywood production values and distribution. While it is difficult to demarcate the borders of Anglo Hispanic-focused productions, the hybrid Hispanic Hollywood productions and independent Latina/Latino productions, at the extremes the films are easy to categorize. In contrast to *The Border* (an example of the first) or *El Norte* (an independent), we have the Hispanic Hollywood *Born in East L.A.* (1987, Cheech Marín).

Born in East L.A. marked Richard "Cheech" Marín's debut as director and also his first film without former partner Tommy Chong. The film, based on a video parody of Bruce Springsteen's

song "Born in the U.S.A." also parodies past United States policies toward immigrants, including the deportation of Chicanos, most of whom were either born in the U.S. or legal residents.

Not only U.S. Hispanics got an opportunity to create "Hispanic Hollywood." Luis Puenzo, director of the remarkable Academy Award-winning Argentine film *The Official Story* (1985), was able to break into Hollywood as the director of *Old Gringo* (1989, Columbia), an intense, beautifully filmed epic about a young revolutionary Mexican general (Jimmy Smits), Ambrose Bierce (Gregory Peck), and a spinster (Jane Fonda), set against the background of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The film, based on a screenplay by Carlos Fuentes, was not financially successful but it provides a much more realistic view of Mexico and the border area than most Hollywood films. Its depiction of Pancho Villa is probably the most sophisticated that has been achieved to date by American film.

The Mexican film industry has also produced scores of illegal border crossing films from the 1930s with the introduction of sound, and continuing through the present. Mexico produced its films with radically different sets of heroes and villains. The differences are a good index of distinct political conditions and social concerns in the U.S. and Mexico over time. Most of the Mexican films are cautionary tales, titillating the Mexican public with the "American Way of Life" at the same time that they evoke all of the disasters that befall vulnerable illegal immigrants. Such films include: *La china Hilaria* (*Gorgeous Hilaria* [1938]); *Adiós mi chaparrita* (*Goodbye my Little lover* [1939]); *Pito Pérez se va de bracero* (*Pito Pérez Becomes a Bracero* [1947]); *Primero soy mexicano* (*I'm Mexican First* [1950]); *Espaldas mojadas* (*Wetbacks* [1953]); *El bracero del año* (*Bracero of the Year* [1963]); *Mojados* (*Wetbacks* [1977]); and *La jaula de oro* (*The Golden Cage* [1987]). The heroes of these films are not Hispanic drug kingpins, but "little guys" who are confronted by the Anglo mafia that controls the border or the "migra" and other, often corrupt border control officials. The Mexicans survive by their wits, and usually return, after a spell, to Mexico, wiser and more worldly about the ways of, to use José Martí's phrase, "the Colossus of the North." While most of these films are filled with negative stereo-

types of Chicanos (e.g. *Soy chicano y mexicano* [I'm Chicano and Mexican] 1986), a few, such as *El chicano justiciero* (*The Chicano Avenger* [1976]); and *Mojado Power* (1979), establish partnerships between Mexicans and Chicanos.

Drugs Across the Border

The Border Detective (1912, American) is the first film discovered by this research that depicts drug smuggling and the interception of drugs on the United States-Mexico border. The story describes the work of the Secret Service and border customs officers in stopping opium from crossing the border. In *On the Border* (1915, Selig), a Mexican is caught bringing opium across the border in the tire case of an automobile. Things changed little in this time-warped locale. The same title was used fifteen years later, *On the Border* (1930, Warner), this time featuring Rin-Tin-Tin sniffing out Chinese aliens and foiling the Anglo smugglers who are attempting to get them across the border using Don José, the owner of an impoverished Mexican hacienda, as their dupe.

The Border Runner (1915, Kriterion-Navajo) has a Mexican smuggling opium in water canteens and using his guardian, an Anglo girl as his unsuspecting "mule." The Anglo ace government agent brings the evildoer to justice and saves the Anglo girl. *The Perilous Leap* (1917, Gold Seal), has Mexicans, half-breeds, and Chinese running the fruit of the poppy into Texas from their headquarters in Mexico. As in *Ah Sing and the Greasers* (1910, Lubin), two (or three, depending on your perspective) bad ethnic groups are brought in together as an efficiency of scale. Some nine years later, *The Border Sheriff* (1926, Universal) is notable for having Jack Hoxie as the sheriff break up not only illegal traffic flowing out of Mexico but out of San Francisco's Chinatown as well. This might have been another example of batching the villains together, or perhaps the film is the first with an inkling of drugs as a reflection of international cartels. *The Loaded Door* (1922, Universal) has Hoot Gibson find that his former employer has been killed by Tex-Mex Blackie López and his gang, who are running a drug smuggling operation on the border. When Gibson begins to interfere, López captures his woman and threatens her

life. Gibson stops the drug flow, cleans up the bad *hombres*, and gets back his girl.

Quicksands (1923, Paramount Famous Lasky Corp.), produced and written by Howard Hawks, was notable in that it already had Hollywood extolling how the “government troops were waging an incessant battle against the insidious traffic” of drugs. It appears that the United States has been winning the war on drugs at least since 1923! The film itself is the usual cliché depicting an Anglo who foils an evil drug dealer with the help of the daughter of a U.S. Customs official whom at one point he thinks just might be a drug dealer herself, but who turns out to be a secret agent. *The Drifter* (1929, Radio) had Tom Mix on the scent of drugs. The film was also a vehicle for Mix, an accomplished pilot, to capture the smuggler, an aviator, by literally forcing him out of the sky. The first film identified by this research that moves the locus of drug traffic from Mexico to South America is *After Many Years* (1930, Metro/Goldwyn) premised around the son of a murdered police officer uncovering the killers and their drug-smuggling operation. In the 1930s, the number of drug and other smuggling films increased. *Soldiers of the Storm* (1933, Columbia, starring Regis Toomey) has an Anglo thwarting smugglers and saving the daughter of a politician who was involved with these desperados. As in *The Drifter*, the film is notable for combining the border, smuggling, and stunt flying. *Riding Speed* (1934, Superior) featured silent film star Buffalo Bill, Jr. (Jay Wilsey) in one of his last film roles, neutralizing the customary border smugglers. *Lawless Frontier* (1935, Mono) features John Wayne clearing his name when he is falsely accused of smuggling guns across the border. The actual smuggler was a bad Mexican who also had evil designs on the señorita that honest John was protecting. A similar plot appears in *Paradise Canyon* (1935, Mono) where Wayne slays a government agent who foils counterfeiters operating on the Mexican border.

The “cult classic” by Orson Welles, *Touch of Evil* (1958), stands out among the films of the period; its depiction of drugs administered on the character played by Janet Leigh qualifies it as a drug film, but it greatly transcends the genre. While this film

is visually very exciting, at the level of characterization, from a Hispanic point of view it is a disaster. Charlton Heston's wooden portrayal of a Mexican-American detective, together with Glenn Ford as Don José opposite Rita Hayworth's tempestuous Carmen (*The Loves of Carmen*, 1948), is among the worst character depictions of Hispanics in a long and infamous record by the United States film industry.

More recent conventional drugs-across-the-borders films include *Dangerous Charter* (1962, Crown International Pictures) about foiling dope smuggling emanating from La Paz, Mexico. *Sol Madrid* (1965, MGM, starring David McCallum and Telly Savalas) has Mexican agent "Jalisco" (Ricardo Montalbán) helping U.S. narcotics agents foil drug smuggling by the Mafia originating in Mexico, particularly Acapulco. *The Candy Man* (1969, Allied Artists) has Mexican actor Manolo Fábregas foil drug dealers and kidnappers in his role as Mexican Lieutenant García. *Free Grass* (1969, Hollywood Star Pictures, later changed to *Scream Free*) depicts murder, abduction, spiking drinks with LSD, and motorcycle gangs against the backdrop of marijuana smuggling across the Mexican border. *Extreme Prejudice* (1987, Carolco/Tri-Star, starring Nick Nolte and María Conchita Alonso) focuses on boyhood friends who are now on opposite sides of the law, as Texas Ranger and drug kingpin on the Texas/Mexico border. The trophy for Nolte is María Conchita Alonso. The poorly done but financially successful *Scarface* (1983, Universal, directed by Brian de Palma), starring Al Pacino and launching Michelle Pfeiffer's career, plays Hollywood's oldest and eminently successful box office game, building up a fabulous fable around the illicit, in this case promoting drug running as profitable, glamorous, sexy, immoral, and doomed at the same time.

Hispanic drug lords have appeared in *Code of Silence* (1985, Rank/Orion), a Chuck Norris vehicle, *Stick* (1985, Universal, starring Burt Reynolds and Candice Bergen with a supporting role by José Pérez), *Running Scared* (1986, Paramount, starring Gregory Hines and Billy Crystal with Jimmy Smits in a supporting role) and *8 Million Ways to Die* (1986, Tri-Star Pictures, director Hal Ashby, script cowritten by Oliver Stone).

New to the drugs-across-the-border film subgenre were films, particularly by Cheech and Chong, which promoted the use of drugs for its good feelings (including camaraderie) and which depicted the total incompetence of narcotics officers. The slapstick comedy *Up in Smoke* (1978, Paramount), the first of this kind, marked a major volte-face in drug films; the film was enormously popular. The Cheech and Chong films took drug films into a new direction, one notable not only for their promotion of drug use but for their standing on its head the convention of Hispanics and Orientals as the primary smugglers and demons of drug smuggling, victimizing "good" Americans. The value system of traditional drug films, which meant essentially law enforcement, interdiction of drugs, and capture of villains, including outcasts such as Hispanics and Orientals, was radically subverted. Everything was turned topsy-turvy.

Cheech Marín and Thomas Chong began by adapting their nightclub act to film in *Up in Smoke*. The film featured two calabaza heads in search of "good grass," and included slapstick routines such as smoking a reefer the size of a baseball bat, crossing the border from Mexico in a van entirely made of marijuana, and seeing incompetent narcotics agents go through their silly routines. The film became the highest grossing film of the year and spurred a number of 1980s sequels including: *Cheech and Chong's Next Movie* (1980, Universal), *Cheech and Chong's Nice Dreams* (1981, Columbia), *Things are Tough All Over* (1982, Columbia), *Yellowbeard* (1983, Orion), *Cheech and Chong: Still Smokin'* (1983, Paramount), and *Cheech and Chong's The Corsican Brothers* (1984, Orion). The Cheech and Chong films brought the marijuana smoking, hippy and stoned counterculture into the Hollywood fold as paying customers.

The Chicano/Latino Counterpunch to Hollywood Conventions

The emergence of Chicano, Puerto Rican, and other U.S. Latino cinema followed as a natural, even inevitable consequence of the Civil Rights movement, particularly the introduction into and training of a cadre of Hispanic professionals in the industry who worked both within established channels to create more

genuine Hollywood Hispanic-focused films and outside of them to produce independent U.S. Latino cinema. As Chicano/Chicana and other Latino/Latina actors, filmmakers and other professionals began entering the industry and particularly receiving their apprenticeships through the production of documentaries on varied subject matter, their sensitivities inevitably turned to the Hispanic experience, primarily because the Hispanic story was there, beckoning and untold. As Treviño put it with respect to the Chicano cinematic phenomenon, "As a by-product of this 60s activism and organizing it became increasingly evident that if a truer story was to be told then Chicanos would have to be the ones to tell it" (Treviño 171).

Noriega has suggested that from the very first introduction of U.S. Latinos into the film and television industry, the situation that those individuals faced taught them a most crucial lesson, namely "how to subvert the discursive parameters for mass media so that Chicano filmmakers could work within and yet against the industry and its conventions" (142).

Attempting to define the corpus of Chicano features is not a unidimensional task because some films traditionally considered as Hispanic Hollywood products share many aspects of Chicano features. This research includes the following border films or related films as Chicano features: *Alambrista!* (1977, Robert M. Young), *Raíces de sangre* (Jesús Salvador Treviño), *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* (1982, Robert M. Young), *El Norte* (1983, Gregory Nava, independent production in association with American Playhouse), *Break of Dawn* (1988, Isaac Arstenstein), and *El Mariachi* (1993, Robert Rodríguez, released by Columbia Pictures). To this list, we should add *Born in East L.A.* (1987, Cheech Marín) precisely because of the level of Hispanic control and its subversion of the border conventions of mainstream Hollywood cinema.

In contrast to the conventional Hollywood pap of the border, Chicano productions such as *Raíces de Sangre*, *Alambrista!*, *El Norte*, and *Break of Dawn* (about a radio announcer and singer deported to Tijuana) have all evoked the situation at the border with sociological depth and creative distinction. *Alambrista!* is the story of Roberto, a migrant worker who crosses the border

illegally and soon discovers that the United States is not the land of opportunity he thought it was. *Born in East L. A.*, despite the criticism of it by the mainstream as loosely strung together skits, has been rightly acknowledged by Noriega and by Fregoso as an authentically Chicano evocation and subversion of the immigration issue as well as California's English-Only initiative. The quality of Latino verisimilitude, heightened by the bilingual (or in the case of *El Norte*, trilingual) script, have caused these movies to stand head and shoulders of their Hollywood contemporaries such as *Blood Barrier*, *The Border*, or *Borderline*.

Chicano/Latino films that treat the border have in common a number of elements that include the following:

- The deconstruction and subversion of Hollywood genres and formulas. Many Chicano films turn established formulas and genres on their heads. *El Norte* is the not merely the alternative, but in fact the antithetical border immigration film; *Raíces de Sangre* and *Born in East L.A.* function in a similar capacity.

- The innovative use of Spanish and English (and sometimes indigenous languages), what linguists call code switching. Films such as *El Norte*, *La Bamba*, *Raíces de Sangre*, *Born in East L.A.*, and numerous others incorporate this element as a fundamental aspect of the film. In these films, the fullest appreciation of the work, the channel, as it were, at its maximum frequency, can be attained only by the bilingual, multicultural viewer.

- The innovative use of Chicano music. The corrido or ballad as well as other traditional and hybrid forms have been significant expressions of both the Chicano movement and its film. Musical film parodies such as *Born in East L.A.* or films about music as resistance including *Ballad of Gregorio Cortez* and *Break of Dawn* often situate us within a Chicano cultural space, using diverse styles to express both Chicano culture and cultural conflict with Anglo culture.

- The innovative use of *mise-en-scène* and of montage. Noriega has made a valuable analysis of Chicano filmic techniques, noting that the *mise-en-scène* of Chicano cinema involves for the first time a screen space "filled not just with Chicano 'images' but with the aural and visual texture of our culture: the music, languages, home altars, food preparation, neighborhoods." Similarly, Chicano montage has often served to temporally extend the *mise-en-scène*. For example, numerous Chicano documentaries "begin with a montage sequence that outlines the history of the Chicano experience, starting at some point between the Conquest and the Mexican Revolution, and leads up to the particular moment to be documented.

These films acknowledge the de facto horizon of expectations for films about Chicanos and attempt to resituate the text—but not without a sense of irony. (Noriega, “Café Orale” 176)

Thus, Chicano/Latino feature films have contrasted greatly with contemporaneous films about Chicanos made by Hollywood directors and producers, even as they have shared themes or situations related to the U.S.-Mexico border. In sum, the salient characteristics of Chicano films, not usually seen in Hollywood products, have been a meticulous attention to the actual cultural and social conditions of Chicano life, the use of Spanish to produce a bilingual film with considerable switching between languages, the recuperation of Chicano history (in period pieces), close attention to the political dimensions of the topics that are cultivated on screen, commitment to dealing with issues above considerations of box office, and a willingness to employ considerable numbers of Hispanic actors and Hispanic production people. Chicano pictures feature plots that may or may not appeal to a mainstream audience but are definitely designed for Chicano filmgoers. They feature Hispanic actors in genuine situations, usually filmed on location in authentic settings, and speaking or singing in a natural, often bilingual environment.

Bibliographical Note

The majority of the films mentioned in this article can only be approached by the dedicated researcher through supplementary materials because they have perished since the original nitrate-based film on which they were made was highly unstable. Sources for studying them include: the *American Film Institute Catalogs* (1988, 1995, 1997), Bowser, *Biograph Bulletins*, Johanssen, Keller *Hispanics and United States Film*, Niver, *Biograph Bulletins*; *The First Twenty Years*; *Motion Pictures*, and various other compendia in the Works Cited section of this article, as well as the copyright records of the Library of Congress, and scripts originally submitted for censorship purposes and on deposit at the New York State Archives (Albany, New York). Photographic stills are available in numerous magazines such as *Variety*, and for on-site viewing in the collections at major archives including the Library

of Congress, the Museum of Modern Art (New York City), and at the University of California, Los Angeles. A very small number of these films can be viewed by a properly credentialed researcher knowledgeable about the perishable and fragile nature of film at such archives as the three aforementioned. Finally, I should note one remarkable annual event which has been taking place for approximately the last two decades. As the result of intensive efforts by film archives around the world, each year a program of some 300 films is offered by *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto* for eight days beginning the second Saturday of October in Sacile and Pordenone (the Friuli region of northern Italy in the foothills of the Dolomites). These are a worldwide representation of films but each year a handful are relevant to this topic. Through this event the film recuperation and preservation activities of the world's major archives are showcased. It is important to note that every year a few dozen films are recuperated in part or in totality for viewing through the preservation activities of the archives.

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