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Borders, *batos locos* and *barrios*: Space as Signifier in Chicano Cinema.

Chicano cinema emerged as a tool for social and cultural change at a pivotal moment in both North American and Latin American history. The first Chicano films were screened as the Chicano Movement gained impetus, following the foundation of the Farm Worker Press under the guidance of César Chávez and the establishment of the first Chicano Theatre, El Teatro Campesino, by Luis Valdez in the mid-1960s.¹ In his 1975 essay on the early years of Chicano cinema, Francisco X. Camplis suggests that a valuable model is provided by Latin American revolutionary cinema. He cites Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *Toward a Third Cinema* as an important signpost for Chicano filmmakers in its emphasis on creating a counter cultural cinema that represented the experiences of a previously overlooked people.² Luis Valdez established links with Latin American filmmakers that were maintained and expanded by Jesús Salvador Treviño, the director of the first Chicano feature *I am Joaquín* in 1969. These links took on even greater significance when Treviño worked in tandem with Mexican cinematographers to produce his 1977 film, *Raíces de sangre*, which was both financed by Mexican capital and shot south of the U.S.-Mexican border.³

¹ *The Chicanos: Mexican American Voices*, ed. by Edward Ludwig, (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 9-13.

² 'Towards The Development of a Raza Cinema,' in *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance*, ed. by Chon A. Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 284-303.

³ 'Between a Weapon and a Formula: Chicano Cinema and its Contexts', *Chicanos and Film*, p. 146.

The filmmakers that made the first Chicano films came from very different backgrounds and experiences, yet they shared a common goal in their efforts both to represent Chicano life and to overturn years of negative stereotyping of Chicanos in film. As Chon Noriega points out, U.S. films that did not ignore Chicanos entirely portrayed them in rigidly stereotyped ways:

Feature films ‘about’ and ‘with’ Mexican-American characters ... ‘localize’ or delimit them to certain genres: Western conquest, social problem and exploitation film... Filmic discourses on Mexican-Americans are ‘localized’ to violence (and sex) within narratives aimed toward a judgment that determines the appropriate place for the Mexican-American character.’⁴

The appropriate place for Chicanos suggested by North American films was on the margins, with male characters stigmatised as criminals and women portrayed exclusively as sensual objects of desire. Mexican filmmakers, meanwhile, either treated Chicanos as freakish misfits who had betrayed their country and belonged neither to Mexico nor the United States or ignored them completely, as Mexican critic Emilio García Riera observes:

La causa chicana y el cine que la expresaba no tuvieron mucho eco en México. Muy pocas películas se refirieron seriamente a los chicanos, y otras más abundantes, pero menos significativas, trataron el tema con una frivolidad desvirtuadora e impuesta por el cálculo comercial.⁵

Chicanos are not, of course, the only minority group to suffer such racist treatment in cinematic portrayals, and much has been made of the pernicious use of cinema to

⁴ ‘Internal ‘Others’ Hollywood Narratives ‘about’ Mexican-Americans,’ in *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, ed. by John King, Ana M. López, Manuel Alvarado, (London: British Film Institute, 1993) p. 56.

⁵ Emilio García Riera, *México visto por el cine extranjero*, 5 vols (Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1990) p. 16.

disseminate national propaganda and damaging ethnic stereotypes. It is not inevitable that cinematic depictions of the 'other' should be negative, however. Nor is it impossible that racist portrayals be subverted and overturned by opposing or alternative representations, often by the ethnic group in question, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue:

Although film spectatorship can shape an imperial imaginary ... there is nothing inherent in either celluloid or apparatus that makes spectatorship necessarily regressive. The strong "subject effects" produced by narrative cinema are not automatic or irresistible, nor can they be separated from the desire, experience, and knowledge of historically situated spectators, constituted outside the text and traversed by sets of power relations such as nation, race, class, gender, and sexuality.⁶

Chicano activists and members of cultural groups such as El Teatro Campesino were quick to grasp the fact that the very medium that broadcast such degrading images of their people could be a powerful tool in communicating a positive image of Chicanos to the wider world.

Even before the emergence of Chicano cinema, the space occupied by Mexican-Americans in the United States was a central preoccupation of Chicano and Chicana writers. Juan Bruce Navoa defines Chicano literature as 'the production of a space of difference, an intercultural synthesis between dialectical forces, be they United States vs. Mexico, urban vs. rural, English vs. Spanish or even rock 'n' roll vs. polkas.'⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal text *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* vividly conveys the central importance of the border as a place between two cultures and the physical

⁶ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentricism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, (New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 347.

⁷ Juan Bruce Navoa, *Retrospace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature*, (Texas: Arte Público Press, 1990) p. 31.

embodiment of the traumatic and unbridgeable division between Mexico and the United States:

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it haemorrhages again, the lifebloods of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.⁸

The violent nature of the language Anzaldúa uses here captures the very real dangers faced by Mexicans who attempt to cross the border illegally and are at the mercy of both the Border Patrol and the *coyotes* who transport them to the United States for a fee. The often cyclical nature of Mexican migration to the North means that this pattern of attempted exclusion by the North American authorities and exploitation by Mexicans who profit from human traffic is repeated again and again.

While the continued movement north by Mexicans is of course largely due to the desire to achieve a better standard of living and to escape poverty and unemployment at home, the real impetus is an often unrealistic belief that North America offers advancement and security for all, regardless of one's origins or disadvantages. The lure of the American Dream cannot be overestimated and remains virtually undiminished despite much evidence that it is just that, an ill-defined cultural myth that is unlikely to be realised. Thus, even as David Mogen points out the tenuous and even pernicious nature of the American Dream, saying, 'The term "dream" suggest unrealised ideals...perhaps even a

⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999) p. 82.

potentially destructive habit of escapism,' he acknowledges its enduring appeal to people far beyond the confines of North America:⁹ In his analysis of the way in which frontier literature creates a myth of the United States, he notes that the components of this myth are sufficiently adaptable to define the Dream "in any time or place, from any historical, regional or ideological perspective."¹⁰

Securing a presence in the United States that makes the achievement of the Dream possible is not straightforward, however, nor are the events of the past easily forgotten. In a recent essay entitled 'The Hispanic Challenge,' Samuel P. Huntington discusses what he sees as the threat that the persistent arrival of Hispanic immigrants presents to the American Dream. He acknowledges that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans have a particular right to feel ambivalent about their subaltern position in U.S. society:

No other immigrant group in U.S. history has asserted or could assert a historical claim to U.S. territory. Mexicans and Mexican Americans can and do make that claim. Almost all of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah was part of Mexico until Mexico lost them as a result of the Texan War of Independence in 1835-1836 and the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848.¹¹

With some understatement, he recognises that the aftermath of the Mexican-American War is still something of a problematic issue for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, noting that Mexicans have not forgotten the events of the past and believe that they have special rights in these territories.

⁹ *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream*, ed. by Mark Busby, David Mogen and Paul Bryant (Texas: Texas and A & M University Press, 1989) p. 22.

¹⁰ *The Frontier Experience*, p. 24.

¹¹ Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Hispanic Challenge,' *Foreign Policy*, March-April 2004, p. 36.

Notwithstanding his acknowledgement that Mexicans were converted into second-class citizens in their own land and still suffer the consequences of this displacement, he insists that Mexicans can only be part of North American society if they are willing to assimilate. He concludes by asserting that ‘There is no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society.’¹²

While the views espoused by Huntington are extreme, they suggest a lack of tolerance towards Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in U.S. society and illustrate the difficulties faced by those who are seen as aliens, even though many of them have always lived in what is now the United States. It is not surprising in the light of this contentious situation that many Chicano writers have emphasized the importance of land and of the creation of a home in their writings. In her novel *So Far From God*, Ana Castillo chronicles the fortunes of Sofia, whose estranged husband Domingo returns after an absence of two decades only to gamble her home away: ‘...the house, that home of mud and straw and stucco and in some places brick – which had been her mother’s and father’s and her grandparents’, for that matter, and in which she and her sister had been born and raised – that house has belonged to her.’¹³

Castillo’s account stresses not the personal betrayal experienced by Sofia but her outrage at being displaced from a property that represented her belonging to the society in which she lives, a belonging that is emphasized by the chronology of the generations of the

¹² ‘The Hispanic Challenge’, p.45.

¹³ Ana Castillo, *So Far From God*, (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 215.

family that had lived in it and their right to be owners of this land in Tome, New Mexico. Similarly, in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, the narrator, a young girl called Esperanza, longs for a house that her family owns, so that she can feel the security of belonging to a community and can have a home to be proud of, unlike the rented properties her family inhabits. Having been humiliated by a nun who forces her to point out her decrepit house, she longs for 'a house a real house. One I could point to.'¹⁴ Esperanza's shame at her substandard temporary home illustrates the gap between the American Dream and the reality faced by many Mexican-Americans.

Even the realization of the American Dream of owning one's own home is fraught with difficulties. In Jose Antonio Villareal's novel *Pocho*, the decision by the narrator's father to finally buy a house in the United States, despite his longing to return to Mexico, leads to the breakup of the family as they embrace the American way of life and lose their values and culture.¹⁵ A similar cautionary note about the dangers of becoming too Americanised by buying property is sounded by Sandra Cisneros in her most recent novel *Caramelo*.¹⁶

Chicano cinema echoes the concern with space found in Chicano writing. Although the films referred to here are very different, they all use *mise-en-scène* to great effect to represent the Chicano experience, as well as dealing with sites that are pivotal to Chicano identity and its representation in film. As Rosa Linda Fregoso notes, two very different films that engage with the border, *La Bamba* and *Born in East L.A.*, focus on "the spatial

¹⁴ Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), p. 5.

¹⁵ José Antonio Villareal, *Pocho*, (New York: Random House, 1989).

¹⁶ Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

movement of border crossing, and border crossing as the mixing of cultural forms and subjectivities.”¹⁷ The *batos locos* referred to in the title of this paper are the gang members or criminals who form the bulk of U.S. media representations of the Chicano male and who inhabit marginal spaces associated with crime, particularly prisons. Finally, the *barrio* is a key setting for Chicano films, both as a testament to lives lived within the wider North American community and as an alternative to the sexualised or criminalised portraits of Chicanos so prevalent in U.S. cinema.

Before the 1990s, very few Mexican films featured Chicanos. One notable exception is found in the *pachuco* character created by burlesque comedian Tin Tan in the early sound period. The humour in his act derived from the linguistic peculiarities of Mexican-American *pachucos*, whose Spanish was liberally sprinkled with English words. The appeal of this comedy soon wore thin, however, and the deep ambivalence felt by Mexicans towards Mexican-Americans, even the comic, fictional one created by Tin Tan, led him to change his character.¹⁸ His greatest career success was in the 1949 film *El rey del barrio*, in which he appeared as a streetwise Mexican slum dweller rather than a *pachuco*.¹⁹ Alejandro Galindo’s much-lauded 1953 *Espaldas mojadas* does feature a sympathetic portrayal of a Chicana who falls in love with a Mexican immigrant called Rafael. She shares her sense of isolation as a person who is accepted by neither North American nor Mexican society with him, a concern he brusquely dismisses by saying that she could pass as Mexican, so it is not a problem as she would not be recognised as a

¹⁷ Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 67.

¹⁸ Carl J. Mora, *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 82.

¹⁹ *Mexican Cinema*, ed. by Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (London: British Film Institute, 1995), p. 167)

pocha. The real focus of the film is on Rafael and on the hazards of illegal border crossings. This message is underlined by repeated depictions of border crossings as fraught with danger and as possibly fatal.

Far more problematic is the depiction of border crossings in Arturo Ripstein's 1979 *La ilegal*. This lurid narrative centres on the character of Claudia, who leaves Mexico to be with her married Mexican lover, the father of her child. When his wife persuades him that Claudia is a prostitute, she is deported and the couple takes her baby. She is forced to hire a *coyote* to help her cross back into the United States to recover her child. This illegal border crossing takes place after she and a group of illegal immigrants distract the Border Patrol then cross the Rio Grande. The fact that Claudia is dressed in a yellow cocktail dress and stilettos to make her crossing points to the fact that the film was conceived as a star vehicle for its actress, soap star Lucía Méndez, as Ripstein later admitted.²⁰ Clearly, the issue of illegal border crossings is not taken seriously here, and the border serves merely as a dramatic backdrop for a sensationalist maternal melodrama.

Jesus Salvador Treviño's 1977 *Raíces de sangre* was a watershed for two reasons. It was the first film to represent the meeting of cultures at the U.S.-Mexican border and it was the first film made by a Chicano director that seriously engaged with the harsh realities of border life. Critic Chon Noriega has noted that an important function of the *mise-en-scène* in this and other films is the projection for the first time of a screen space "filled not just

²⁰ Emilio García Riera, *Arturo Ripstein habla de su cine con Emilio García Riera* (Mexico: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1988), p. 239.

with Chicano ‘images’ but with the aural and visual texture of our culture: the music, languages, home altars, food preparation, neighborhoods.”²¹

Treviño perfectly captures the hybridity of life on the border as the camera pans through the border landscape, where a Kentucky Fried Chicken logo hovers over humble Mexican dwellings in a symbolic representation of the inescapable influence of North America. The film charts the fates of both Mexican and Chicano workers in a *maquiladora* owned by the North American Morris Company. Although Alejandro Morales rightly criticises the film for being over ambitious with its ‘quagmire of themes’,²² Treviño does not lose sight of his main subject, the spaces of exploitation and dominance that exist at the border. This central idea is emphasised right from the start of the film, as the establishing scene shows U.S. Border Patrol guards discovering the bodies of attempted illegal immigrants who have been left to die by a *coyote* in an abandoned truck. This scene becomes even more chilling when the viewer realises that it is a flashback and that Rosa, who decides to leave Mexico to build a new life in the United States, is one of the illegal immigrants to have died here.

The film then moves to the factory itself, where the lack of light and air are clearly detrimental to the health of workers, who do not dare to complain about their conditions because of their precarious financial positions and the difficulty in obtaining even poorly paid, hazardous work. The accident suffered by Rosa exposes the harsh working conditions she endures, as her manager shows little concern and forces the other

²¹ Gary D. Keller, *Hispanics and United States Film: An Overview and Handbook* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1994), p. 209.

²² *Chicano Cinema: Research, Reviews & Resources*, ed. by Gary D. Keller, (Tempe: Bilingual Review/Press, 1985), p. 128.

machinists to return to work. The abandoned truck that features in the opening scene underlines the tragic sequences of the lawlessness embodied by human traffickers at the border. As Rosa Linda Fregoso comments, ‘Coyotes’ livelihoods depend not just on their ability to live on the border of two cultures, but more precisely on the fact that they exist beyond the legislative frontiers of both.’²³

Despite the film’s uncompromising depiction of exploitation at the border, it does offer some hope for the future. It concludes with a protest by both Mexicans and Chicanos about conditions at the factory. Although there is little suggestion that this protest will lead to meaningful change, it represents the culmination of each group’s efforts to overcome their prejudices about the other and points to a solidarity that creates a space for mutual understanding and cooperation.

Gregory Nava’s *El norte* features a border crossing from Mexico to the United States undertaken by a brother and sister from Guatemala who are fleeing political oppression and attempting to build a new life. In a blackly ironic twist, the events that propel this journey are set in motion by a U.S. intervention in Guatemala that the film fails to adequately explain, as John King notes:

El norte does indeed fail to address the role of the US in Guatemala since the CIA-backed counter-revolution of June 1954 or the bloody regression of the last decade that would have been the main cause for its protagonists to quit the largely spiritual protection of their sacred hills.²⁴

²³ Fregoso, 1993, p. 85.

²⁴ King, 1993, p. 100.

The naivety of Ernesto and Rosa's quest to realise the American Dream is thus clear from the beginning, as they flee a situation largely created by U.S. support of a repressive regime in the hope of finding a better life in the United States. Their innocence is further underlined as they pay rapt attention to their *comadre's* fantastic accounts of the promise offered by North America, which will remain elusive for them. Rosa's death at the film's conclusion is a direct result of the hazardous border crossing she has endured, while Ernesto is left penniless and alone in a situation where he is valued only for the cheap labour he provides.

The border crossing presented in Cheech Marin's 1987 *Born in East L.A.* could not be more different from the one at the heart of *El norte*. Marin first made his mark as a streetwise stoner in the film *Up in Smoke* (1978) with his partner Thomas Chong. His solo debut drew on his former experience, for although he uses humour in this film to reveal serious issues, to his credit he does not tone down the bawdy comedy that marked his earlier cinematic output. Instead of presenting the protagonist of his film, Rudy, as a saintly character who is instantly sympathetic, Marin portrays him as a rather ambivalent figure.

As the narrative action begins, Rudy is heard singing the film's eponymous theme song. The camera then pans through the Los Angeles cityscape, from skyscrapers, which denote public space, to the domestic space of a neighbourhood and a well-maintained, attractive house that is revealed to be Rudy's home. Rudy's belonging to the city is underscored both by the repetition of the lyric 'Born in East L.A.' and by the visual representation of

his home as part of a wider community. This establishing shot is significant not just in suggesting that Rudy is part of Los Angeles society but also in overturning stereotypical presentations of Chicano neighbourhoods, as Noriega notes:

...the home, with its fence, well-kept yard and a tree becomes a defining unit for the barrio, rather than ... a montage of graffiti, gangs, drugs deals and so on that signify problem space. In essence, East L.A. is identified as an appropriate location for the American Dream²⁵

The dual identity of the home is revealed in its North American setting and the recognizably Chicano atmosphere inside. The occupants of the house are the members of an extended family that spans three generations. The religious devotion of Rudy's mother and her use of phrases like *m'hijo* indicate her connections with Mexican culture. The U.S. entrepreneurial spirit is also an aspect of her character, however. She tells her son that she has rented the house across the street and asks him to lodge the money. In this scenario, then, achieving prosperity by owning property is not a betrayal of one's roots and is seen as being entirely compatible with the maintenance of Mexican customs.

In fact, it is Rudy at the outset of the film who displays considerable antipathy towards his Mexican heritage. Although he and his mother have an affectionate relationship, the divisions between them are clear. Instead of appreciating the deeper significance of the garish picture of the Crucifixion his mother proudly displays, Rudy is concerned that it is blocking the telephone. He is also comments derisively on his cousin's inability to speak

²⁵ Chon A. Noriega, 'Waas Sappening?: Narrative Structure and Iconography in *Born in East L.A.*,' *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 14 (1995,) p. 111.

English, despite the fact that he admits that his Spanish is poor, and he is flippant in his attitude towards his illegal status.

After this scene, Rudy is accidentally deported as an illegal alien when he goes to collect his cousin, the real illegal immigrant, at the factory. Although this situation is highly comic, it also refers to historical events during the 20th century, where people of Mexican origin were rounded up and forcibly deported at times of economic crisis in the United States, regardless of whether they were U.S. citizens. When Rudy experiences the difficulties involved in a border crossing, he learns to respect the very immigrants he had previously been quick to joke about, as he is now one of them, albeit temporarily. He also learns to rethink his *machista* ideas about women and to have a sense of solidarity, which is most clearly shown when he allows an elderly Mexican couple with no money to take his place in a *coyote*'s truck. By far the most successful aspect of *Born in East L.A.*, however, is its subversion of negative stereotypes about Chicanos and Mexicans. In a key scene, Rudy stows away in a camper van driven by a middle-aged couple. Here, Marin inverts the viewers' expectations, for it is the seemingly respectable couple, and not their Chicano stowaway, who are the drug smuggling criminals. This scene completely reverses the usual cinematic depictions of good and evil as racially determined, as Fregoso argues:

As opposed to the barrage of media images, not all drug smugglers are of Latino extraction. The film forces viewers to engage dominant codes of valorization and, in so doing, positions viewers in the unsettling role of questioning hegemonic racist signs.²⁶

²⁶ Fregoso, 1993, p. 59.

Overall, Marin's approach is extremely effective at highlighting the problems of identity faced by Chicanos through his protagonist while stressing their resilience, resourcefulness and sense of humour. Rudy's odyssey, which culminates in a successful mass border crossing, is seen as a positively transformative experience that leads him to value both sides of his heritage.

A similarly positive transformation occurs in the 1987 Luis Valdez film *La Bamba*, which is based on the true story of musician Ritchie Valens. The tension in this film springs from the conflict between Ritchie, who identifies strongly with North American culture and aspires to be a rock and roll star, and his half-brother Bob, an archetypal rebellious greaser. Early in the film, Bob takes Ritchie to Tijuana in an effort to, as he puts it, 'get him some tail.' This trip has a profound effect on Ritchie, who hears the song 'La Bamba' for the first time and on his return, in an act that metaphorically represents the perfect fusion of North American and Mexican cultures, uses it as the inspiration for his first crossover hit.

Although Bob is a problematic figure throughout the film, as he combines elements of Chicano identity with a criminal slant that is dangerously close to North American stereotypes, he is nonetheless consistent in his insistence on the importance of Mexican culture. Thus he admonishes Ritchie for changing his name from Valenzuela to Valens and he combines a trip to a brothel with a visit to a *curandero* the following day. Ritchie's experience of hearing 'La Bamba' in the brothel leads him to move from the mainstream

ballad he croons to his WASP girlfriend Donna to a far more inventive and Mexican-inspired style of music.

Following the model established by the hugely successful *La Bamba*, Ramón Menéndez's 1987 *Stand and Deliver* is based on the true story of Jaime Escalante, a Chicano professional who leaves a well-paid job to teach mathematics at a high school in East Los Angeles. This film also features a border crossing, although here the division lies between the leafy suburb that suggests Escalante's prosperity and success and the deprived East Los Angeles *barrio* where he teaches. As the film opens, Escalante makes his first journey to the school.

The river he crosses symbolises division but also his ability to move from a middle-class environment to a marginalized community. The *mise-en-scène* captures the poverty and ethnicity of the *barrio* through images of street vendors, labourers riding in a pickup truck, a shop front filled with *piñatas*, and a group of Mariachi musicians. Crucially, however, the community is also depicted as colourful and vibrant, a sense that is reiterated in the camera's focus on a mural that depicts Che Guevara with the slogan 'Not a Minority.' The content of this mural foreshadows the events of the film, which focuses on the way in which Escalante's devotion to his students helps them to overcome considerable difficulties and advance in society through education. It also reflects a desire to establish a distinctive Chicano presence in public spaces. As Eloy Méndez Sáinz observes, murals serve to:

...represent images that are less sacerdotal than figures displayed on temples, than those of the war on drugs. In the same way that gangs of cholos make claims on territory through encoded scrawl, these paintings seek out a large public and are intended to communicate messages of identity, solidarity, and brotherhood to the local community.²⁷

Indeed, Escalante's character proves that Chicanos are not a minority in that he has achieved the American Dream but has not forgotten his roots and uses his skills to enable others to achieve financial security and social mobility.

My Family, Gregory Nava's 1995 follow-up to *El norte*, has little of the appeal of its predecessor. A multigenerational drama, it spans the period from the late 1920s to the present. Lucy O'Brien is harshly critical of the film:

Spanning three generations, the story is a simple study of the squishy heart of 'La Familia', narrated in a Mexican John Boy Walton style by the eldest living son, Paco. Although three decades are covered...there is little sense of the complexities of American immigrant experience.²⁸

It is hard to disagree with the first point made here, as the film is relentlessly sentimental. However, the film is not simplistic in its depiction of the immigrant experience but over ambitious in attempting to tell so many stories in such a limited timeframe. What is notable about the film is that it examines the difficult subject of gang membership and criminality through two of the sons in the family at the centre of the film. Chucho rejects his family's moral code and work ethic, becoming a drug dealer and gang member who is eventually killed in a scuffle with police. His younger brother Jimmy also falls into

²⁷ Eloy Méndez Sáinz, 'Transitional Architecture or Espacios de Paso y Simulacro,' *Journal of the Southwest*, 45 (2003) 165-201, p. 178.

²⁸ Lucy O'Brien, 'My Family,' *Sight and Sound*, 5 (1995), p. 54.

criminality, but he returns to his family and to his young son. Significantly, the reunion between Jimmy and his son takes place in the cornfield that surrounds the family home. The rather incongruous placing of this field around a suburban home has a metaphorical dimension that stretches back to the *Popul Vuh*, a book that describes the genesis of the Maya people.²⁹ In this myth of creation, the emergent Mexican peoples are symbolised by figures made of corn, which in turn represents life and renewal. In the film, therefore, the cornfield denotes the possibility of new life and even redemption for the family members, regardless of their past mistakes.

The portrayal of gangs involved in criminal activity in Edward James Olmos's 1992 *American Me* marks a radical departure from the sentimental portrait of Jimmy in *My Family*. Olmos's film is based on the real-life story of Rodolfo "Cheyenne" Cadena, the leader of a Chicano gang. Whilst in prison, Cadena educated himself and became a fierce advocate of Chicano empowerment and cultural unity. He devoted the rest of his life to educating Chicano youths about the futility of gang involvement and was killed in a hit while attempting to broker a reconciliation between rival Latino gangs.³⁰ In Olmos's film, the central character, called Santana, is rejected by his father and creates an alternative family through his gang. He and his friends inhabit the margins of society, symbolised in the film by dives, bars and, of course, prison. The existence of gangs in Chicano culture is a sensitive issue for Chicanos, as the earlier objections to the appearance of Chicano gangsters in North American films would suggest. Certainly, in *La Bamba* and *My Family*,

²⁹ Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez, *Border Visions: Mexican Cultures of the Southwest United States*, (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1996) p. 251.

³⁰ Nonny De La Peña, 'In the Line of Fire,' *Premiere* 5 (1997), p. 62.

the criminal activities of the gang members Bob, Chucho and Jimmy are not the main focus of the film, and these characters are generally normalised and rehabilitated by the influence of their families. A further indication of the sensitive nature of the subject is seen in the widespread condemnation of Allison Anders' film about Chicana gangs, *Mi Vida Loca*. Although this film is in many ways very similar to *American Me*, it provoked vitriolic responses from Chicano critics.

Olmos's film is a uniquely revealing account of gang life that explores the darkest elements of Chicano prison culture. He changed crucial details of the real-life story on which his film is based in order to create an explicitly cautionary tale that demythified gang life and exposed its rebelliousness to be directionless and utterly destructive. Santana does attempt to change his life towards the end of the film. After being imprisoned once more, he finds solace in books and seeks to educate himself, withdrawing from the gang, with the result that they turn against him and kill him.

The juxtaposition of Santana's death with a scene depicting extremely young boys from his *barrio* taking drugs and shooting aimlessly at pedestrians in an empty gesture of Raza defiance suggests a cycle of violence that is inescapable and self-perpetuating. Critics have praised the film's production values but have expressed reservations about its content. David R. Maciel and Susan Racho argue that the film does not achieve its objective of communicating an anticrime message to Chicano youths:

Intended to "scare straight" its young male audience, the film instead conveys a message of hopelessness in breaking the cycle of violence and revenge. The narrative also reinforces the charge

that Chicanos fault Hollywood for, making films that depict only one aspect of the Chicano experience – gangs.³¹

It seems to me that this analysis of the film is overly defensive, as Olmos's focus on gang life does not suggest that other forms of life are not possible, nor does he ever glamorise or sensationalise violence. His film is undoubtedly excessively bleak, but it remains the only example of a Chicano film that tackles the issue of gangs in an uncompromising, hard-hitting fashion.

If the space symbolised by the family provides a refuge for Chicano males, the same is not necessarily true for Chicanas. The children of immigrants face unique family pressures that can lead to deep generational conflicts. As Carola and Marcela Suárez Orozco note:

Children of Latino migrants become the repositories of their parents' anxieties, ambitions, dreams and conflicts. They are often vested with responsibilities (such as translating and sibling care) beyond what is culturally normative for their stage of psychosocial development... at the same time... Latino migrant parents typically over restrict the activities of their children and attempt to minimize the host country's influence.³²

The restrictions outlined here are far more onerous for women, as the mention of childcare would suggest. This is a reality confirmed by Gloria Anzaldúa:

The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my

³¹ *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends*, ed. by David R. Maciel, Isidro D. Ortiz and María Herrera-Sobek, (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2000), pp. 112-3.

³² *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict, and Accommodation*, ed. by George De Vos and Lola Romanucci Ross (California: AltaMira Press, 1995), p. 333.

culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us. As a working class people our chief activity is to put food in our mouths, a roof over our heads, and clothes on our backs. Educating our children is out of reach for most of us. Educated or not, the onus is still on women to be a wife/mother – only the nun can escape motherhood. Women are made to feel total failures if they don't marry and have children. “¿Y cuándo te casas, Gloria? Se te va a pasar el tren.” “Y yo les digo:”pos si me caso, no va ser con un hombre.”³³

The home then can be a further site of oppression for women and an obstacle that complicates their efforts to make better lives for themselves. This situation is alluded to in *Stand and Deliver*, where each of the three female protagonists finds their attempts to complete their education frustrated by their home lives.

The theme of the home as an oppressive space for women becomes the focus of Patricia Cardoso's 2002 film *Real Women Have Curves*. Although the central character, Ana, receives a scholarship to attend Columbia University, her family, and particularly her mother, refuse to let her go, insisting instead that she stay at home to help her sister Estela in her garment factory. The scenes in the factory contrast sharply with those depicted in *Raíces de sangre*, as Estela is a fair and considerate boss and the workers have much better conditions. This initial appearance of progress is called into question, however, as it is revealed that Estela does not own the building her business operates in and is paid miserably by a subcontractor. Furthermore, although the factory has fans, they cannot be switched on because they would cause dust to settle on the evening dresses produced

³³ Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 39.

there. Ana is criticised throughout the film by her mother for being too fat, with the attendant risk that she will not find a man, and for being too rebellious and ambitious. Ana's decision at the end of the film to defy her mother and move to New York is foreshadowed in a scene in which she is helping Estela at the factory but can no longer endure the heat and leads the women in a striptease.

Not only does this scene suggest Ana's increasing frustration with her circumstances, but it demonstrates her growing independence through her assertion of her right to own her body and to celebrate its beauty. This depiction of a Latina body is far removed from eroticised depictions of the sensuous *señorita*. It instead acts as a confirmation of Ana's transition to womanhood and of her right to determine her own fate. The film ends as she emerges from a subway to stride with confidence along a New York City street. This movement from a restrictive, limiting space to a space that represents openness, diversity and freedom completes her journey from the confines of the home to a future in the wider world.

The spaces depicted in Chicano film are extremely diverse. Although the border remains the key symbol of the meeting between cultures, it is conceived of in many different ways: as a site of violence, oppression and exploitation but also as a space where a positive and fulfilling meeting of cultures is possible. The spaces occupied by gang members and delinquents are unequivocally depicted in negative terms, although *La Bamba* and *My Family* suggest that the family home can represent a refuge that will provide an alternative to these spaces of destruction. Similarly, the *barrio* represents Chicanos as functioning

members of society who can move between the worlds of U.S. and Mexican culture without loss or conflict, although, as we have seen, the home still represents repression for many women. Perhaps the final message perpetuated in many of the films is that creativity, represented by music in *La Bamba*, or learning, in the case of *Stand and Deliver* and *Real Women Have Curves*, provides an alternative space where one can grow and realise one's own dreams. To return to Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza's maturity is marked by her realisation that the perfect house for her is not, after all, a physical space but a piece of paper on which to write: 'I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me back with both arms. She sets me free.'³⁴

³⁴ Cisneros, 1992, p. 110.

List of publications to date:

- No. 1.** *The American Dream in Spanish Poetry: Some Early Twentieth-Century Visions of the United States*, **Dr Terence McMullan**, Queen's University Belfast, February 2000.
- No. 2.** *Autobiography and Intertextuality in Carajicomedia by Juan Goytisolo*, **Dr Stanley Black**, University of Ulster, November 2000.
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