Returning to Aztlan:

How Chicano Films Challenged Hispanic Stereotypes

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**Returning to Aztlan…**

*Domination of a people by a foreign system principally involves human labor, material resources, and political hegemony. Domination interrupts the creation and continuity of culture, the process of development. Domination stifles the interaction between creation and continuity. It suppresses the people through force and control as it negates the historical process of the people. The historical culture is displaced by an ersatz culture, a counterfeit culture, a superimposed culture of domination*

*Juan Gómez-Quiñones, On Culture*

**1. Introduction**

From the 1981 crime drama *Fort Apache, The Bronx* to recent popular shows such as *On My Block*, Hispanics have been represented as criminals, drug dealers, gangsters, and “second-class citizens.” That is if they are represented at all. Without a doubt, media has played a huge role in the development of a negative identity for the members within the Hispanic community.

When it comes to identity construction, representation in media is accomplished through apparatus theory. Apparatus theory is described as the “model of spectatorship and institutions […] Cinema is ideological [based on ideas] because the films are created to represent reality (Ponsford, 2012).” However, the reality that is represented sometimes is not completely true because most of these depictions are being written from a non-indigenous perspective. As a result, the Hispanic identity is distorted to fit the viewpoint of the society that utilizes the apparatus. Taking this into consideration, it is the filmmakers’ responsibility to challenge this apparatus by utilizing critical theory. In doing so, the present negative image can be abolished.

To achieve this, both the filmmaker and the characters they depict should embrace their indigenous roots. Throughout cinematic history, there have been many films that accomplish this. Nonetheless, the films that played the most crucial part in changing the depiction and representation of the Hispanic in cinema were Chicano films such as *Zoot Suit*, *La Bamba*, and *Selena*. But before we analyze the content of these films, we must talk about and important aspect of embracing indigenous roots- indigenous decolonization.

**2. Indigenous Decolonization**

Nearly five centuries ago, the first ships from Spain crossed the Atlantic Ocean and landed in the coastal state of Veracruz, Mexico. In a span of two years, Hernan Cortes and his men were able to lay waste to the Aztec Empire- killing off most of the Mexica and their culture. As the nation of Mexico developed, the native roots that it once proudly held eroded. In its place, European influence shaped the country up until the election of Benito Juarez as President in 1858. This was a turning point in Mexican history considering that Juarez became the first indigenous President of Mexico. He would go onto fight for the rights of an oppressed indigenous people and openly praise his heritage.

It is critical to understand the history and development of Mexico to accurately discuss cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is defined as “things that contribute to the sense of identity of a particular population or community of people. [This would include] a sculpture, painting […] or anything important because of its […] artistic value (‘Defining Culture, Heritage and Identity,’ 2011).” For purposes of this paper, we can safely infer that films are artistic reproductions that are a part of a culture.

### When the Spaniards eradicated the indigenous people that occupied present-day Mexico, not only did they wipe away the culture of the Aztecs. They created a counterfeit culture that took the place of the one they did away with. The consequences of this conquest would not be reversed until Benito Juarez went into office. As [Juan Gómez-Quiñones](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan_G%C3%B3mez-Qui%C3%B1ones) goes on to state, “Domination is contested by people because they reject exploitation […] the[y] [reject] […] cultural domination (Gómez-Quiñones, 1977, pp.8).” To successfully fight against stereotypes (a counterfeit culture of sorts), the Hispanic filmmaker should embrace their indigenous roots in their craft.

### By embracing indigenous roots, the filmmaker partakes in indigenous decolonization. This process is achieved by “understanding the history of [one’s] colonization and rediscovering […] ancestral traditions and cultural values while considering the future simultaneously (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).” In effectively going through this process, inaccurate representation and depiction- whether intentional or not- is defeated, thus, resulting in a) the decolonization of the medium and b) the successful challenging of stereotypes.

### 3. *Zoot Suit*

### This drama/musical film takes place in 1940s Los Angeles where we see the main protagonist, Henry Reyna, dealing with being a Hispanic in a hostile America. After a misunderstanding and altercation, a young man by the name of Jose Williams is killed. Despite insufficient evidence, Henry and his friends are wrongly convicted and sent to jail. Meanwhile, the Zoot Suits Riots are rampant fueled by a widespread fear following the death of Jose. Eventually, Henry and company are released and- in one of the three unique endings- he goes off to World War II and becomes a war hero.

### Although this film does depict its characters as “chucos” (gangsters), it goes into discussing the race relations between Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans during the Zoot Suit Riots. We see the struggle of being a Chicano during those tumultuous times. Regardless, the character of Henry Reyna is redeemed when he becomes a war hero in the Korean War. In a way, it is as if the filmmaker is saying that even people that are considered as “bad people” in the eyes of the media can go off to better their selves and become good.

### *Zoot Suit* remains one of the most impactful Chicano films as it is one of the first films to embrace the idea of being Hispanic. Through musical numbers and Spanish dialogue, it celebrates the Mexican-American culture of the 40s. In promoting a sense of cultural pride within the characters depicted and the viewer watching, this film invites other Chicano films to follow suit.

### 4. *La Bamba* and *Selena*

### When talking about Chicano films, the two most commonly known are *La Bamba* and *Selena*. This is not without reason as these films are about two of the most influential Mexican-American musical artists in United States history, Ritchie Valens and Selena Quintanilla. Both films discuss the “cross-over” status of these artists. In other words, it depicts their ability to appeal to a pre-dominantly white population while being “brown.” But it does not leave out the struggles that come with this. It chronicles their lives in a well-known “rags-to-riches” manner. In both films being written in this manner, it changes how Hispanics are depicted. Long gone are the days of being “chucos” as previously mentioned in *Zoot Suit*. Now, we are met with the stories of two individuals who sought to live “The American Dream” and accomplished it.

### *La Bamba* is about Richard Steven Valenzuela, better known as Ritchie Valens. This film details his life from high school up until his tragic death. Throughout the film we see him rise to the top. Nonetheless, in the middle of the movie he hits a creative plateau. This is resolved when he embraces his roots. Ritchie, along with his brother, take a trip to Mexico. It is here where Valens hears the song“La Bamba” and decides that he wants to cover it. When he returns to the United States, Ritchie meets with his manager, Bob Keane. They then have the following exchange:

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### *BOB KEANE*

### *How are you going to handle the lyrics? You said yourself that you cannot speak the language.*

### *RITCHIE VALENS*

### *Hey! If Nat King Cole can sing in Spanish so can I, right?*

### Eventually, Ritchie Valens is able to convince Keane to let him perform “La Bamba.” As a result, his popularity skyrockets. This can serve as a message to other artists- especially filmmakers- that a Hispanic can transcend beyond the stereotypes that society has created about them when they embrace their roots.

### *Selena* explores this same idea. Coincidentally, she is confronted with a similar problem. Whereas Ritchie could not speak nor sing Spanish, Selena could sing Spanish although she could not speak it. In this movie, we see this struggle and her father says the ever-so-famous words that every Hispanic (of Mexican heritage) knows by heart:

### *ABRAHAM QUINTANILLA*

### *We have to be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time! It's exhausting!*

### Nonetheless, as we can see towards the end of the film, Selena succeeds in becoming the Selena that we have grown to know. She embraces her roots and becomes the standard bearer of the Hispanic community. Unfortunately, as we all know, both individuals pass away fairly young and in a tragic manner. Though, their lives and deaths were not in vain. Their stories and the filmic depiction of these stories effectively broke the stereotypes of their time and continue to do so today.

### 5. Conclusion

### As analyzed, Chicano films have successfully challenged the stereotype of what it is to be Hispanic in the United States. Despite what modern media says about Hispanics, the Hispanic is an individual able to improve their self despite the obstacles they’re presented with like Henry Reyna in *Zoot Suit* and they can succeed in chasing “The American Dream” like Ritchie and Selena in *La Bamba* and *Selena*. Meanwhile, they have been unified by the common link of embracing indigenous roots- by returning to Aztlan.

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